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Reinventing the Finnish comprehensive school system through specialisation – reasons, rationales and outcomes for equity and equality of opportunity

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Abstract

The passing of radical educational legislation in the 1990s in Finland has had far-reaching impacts on the comprehensive school system. Along with parental choice, schools were able to specialise by dedicating more hours to different subjects. This thesis discusses the phenomenon of specialisation of the comprehensive school using the analytical lens of equity and equality of opportunity. This has not been sufficiently investigated and analysed in the Finnish context. The key questions are: first, what influences the interpretation of national educational policies regarding choice/diversity and equity/equality of opportunity at the local level; second, why and how schools in the case study city have specialised; and third, what impact this has had on equity and equality of opportunity. A small scale, qualitative case study approach was adopted, focusing on one municipality in Finland. Interviews with staff in four schools and with education policy makers were carried out. These were supplemented with an analysis of policy documents at both national and local levels. The findings emphasise decision-making with regard to specialisation and parental 'choice' at schools, education boards and offices, which reflects the particular economic and demographic circumstances in the municipality as well as concerns about social justice. Decisions on further specialisation were affected by financial constraints on the one hand, and concerns about inequities deriving from the introduction of elements of market-oriented reforms on the other. External factors were important in relation to the initial introduction of specialisms, with the municipality requesting schools to take up specialism; internal motives were less significant. The outcomes of some of the educational decision-making – also manifested as a specific interpretation of national education policy priorities and trends – were found to increase inclusiveness, equity and equality of opportunity rather than exclusiveness and selection.

Preface and acknowledgements

I first became interested in the broad area of education policy reforms in Finland during my undergraduate and graduate studies. My Master's dissertation focused on evaluating the scope of reforms within the comprehensive school in Finland, and further raised my interest and enthusiasm on the subject – I was puzzled over the radical nature of the education reforms of the 1990s and the perceived need for such reforms. One of the questions raised was why Finland would want to reform, what appeared to be, already an excellent education system. Were there external pressures which have had an impact on the reform agenda since the late 1980s? And how, if at all, was the comprehensive school system affected by these pressures? These kinds of questions and considerations initially led me to undertake the research to be described in this thesis.

To get my research into its final form to be unfolded in the following pages was in many ways a rollercoaster ride involving many ups and downs, but also much 'plain sailing' associated with elements of the empirical research and writing up. This process was supported by many people. First, I am indebted for the help, dedication and encouragement received from my supervisor, Prof. Anne West, who over the years provided me with much needed ideas and constructive criticism. Second, I would like warmly to thank all my family and friends who have been with me throughout the PhD project, and for helping me to get my mind off the research. I am grateful for all their help and support which was manifested in so many different ways. I would also like to thank the London School of Economics for the financial support offered and last, but not least, all the people who agreed to take part in my research, or who otherwise helped me with my research efforts in libraries and archives – without them the research would not have been possible. The research process has been in many ways eventful and has taught me a lot not only about my research area and how to carry out large-scale and (frequently) solo research, but also about myself and the world around me.

List of abbreviations

EU	European Union
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
LEA	Local Education Authority
LEB	Local Education Board
LMS	Local Management of Schools
MP	Member of Parliament
NC	National Curriculum
NPM	New Public Management
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OEEC	Organisation for European Economic Co-operation
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SEN	Special Educational Needs
TT	Central Union for Industries and Employers (Teollisuuden ja työnantajain keskusliitto)
UK	United Kingdom

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1. Introduction

The central focus of this thesis is on examining and analysing the changing nature of the Finnish comprehensive school in the 1990s, and particularly, specialisation within the comprehensive school system and whether specialisation supports the broad aim of equality of opportunity. The aim of this introductory chapter is to outline the scope of the research to be unfolded in the following chapters as well as to provide a brief introduction to the main literature constituting the backbone to the research in question.

After a brief look at Finland and its education system in the 1990s and 2000s, focus is directed in section 1.1 to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study and its main results. The following section 1.2 describes in more detail the main focus of the research, in particular, explaining the phenomenon of specialisation within the Finnish comprehensive school system which is of central importance in this thesis. From here attention is moved, in section 1.3, to elucidating what the research is trying to find out and, in section 1.4, to describing how this is to be done through the main research questions informing the empirical part of the thesis. The final section, 1.5, provides the structure for the thesis to be unfolded in the remaining eight chapters.

The 1980s and 1990s brought with them many far-reaching changes to welfare states across Western Europe. These decades were marked by a rise of values such as consumerism and individualisation linked to neo-liberalism, which had gained support in many western countries at the time. The market-oriented ideology injected into welfare services like education and health care was aimed at increasing efficiency, responsiveness and standards of services by introducing diversity of provision together with consumer choice (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). It was believed by the advocates of neo-liberalism that existing welfare services could be improved, since it was unlikely that they could be totally privatised, by subjecting them to elements normally associated with the private

sector: an emphasis on competition, accountability and monitoring (e.g. Hughes 1998, Boyne et al. 2003).

The Nordic countries with their social-democratic traditions and a strong belief in the state as a guarantor of equality and social justice did not escape the neo-liberal wave which entered their shores – although in many respects, in a more diluted form than in countries like Britain thus incorporating only elements of the market-oriented agenda. Finland, the country that is the focus of this study, was also introduced to theories of the market as a way to improve its welfare services. Finland's education system which had been built on the grounds of a comprehensive school ideology since the 1960s was also to be subjected to changes – some of them a far cry from the comprehensive school ethos, which highlighted regional and socio-economic equality of opportunity. Why was there perceived to be a need for such a radical change?

In order to answer this question it is important to consider the wider context in which market-oriented reforms were taking place in Finland in the 1980s and 1990s.

Finland suffered a severe economic recession in the early 1990s which was partly due to a collapse of trade with Russia – an important trading partner of Finland. The recession, which caused the unemployment rate to escalate from 3 to 16 per cent (unemployment among 15-24 year olds went up from 9 to 34 per cent), acutely awakened policy makers to the volatility of national and international economies (Simola et al. 2002: 248). This was used as one rationale for introducing measures to prepare the nation for future upheavals and uncertainties – an increasing emphasis was thus placed on fulfilling the requirements and needs of a knowledge-based economy. Curiously, however, the policy agenda before the recession had the markings of a very strong neo-liberal programme for education policy. This was partly watered down by the onset of economic difficulties which brought into focus the importance of common values and the common school among many Finns (Ahonen 2003). A pilot experiment and a feedback from a number of schools ('aquarium schools')

had shown that schools and teachers still strongly valued uniformity and a common value base for the Finnish comprehensive school system (ibid.). The results of the pilot experiment had an impact on the curriculum reforms in preparation, which did not go as far as they could have done on the road to neo-liberal reforms. However, a watershed had been established in bringing neo-liberal ideas into the domain of the Finnish comprehensive school, which had started under a Conservative-led Government but continued under a Social-Democratic rainbow Government from 1995 (Ahonen 2003).[1]

The economic depression had a severe impact on Finland and it harshly affected the entire society. Large budget cuts were inflicted on welfare services from the national government, and municipalities were left in a very difficult position to decide from where to cut services (Vulliamy and Nikki 1997). Hundreds of schools had to be closed and teachers sacked in efforts to save money (Mäkelä 2000). Indeed, many municipalities have not totally recovered from the economic recession of the 1990s even at the dawn of the 21st century (Kiander et al. 2005).

A general feeling which emerged at the time was one that highlighted several inadequacies of the Finnish comprehensive school system – an added emphasis was placed on improving Finland's economic competitiveness in an increasingly competitive global market-place (e.g. Rinne and Vuorio-Lehti 1996, Volanen 2001, Poropudas and Mäkinen 2001). Traditionally, the comprehensive school had embraced the values of uniformity and equality of opportunity through the 'common school' – a belief that there was no need to separate the talented from the rest, in a system where mixed-ability teaching had been a basic cornerstone. Now, a generally accepted view in policy circles was that the talented should be allowed to receive special benefits too, as advocated by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development)

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[1] The country was headed by a coalition government led by the Conservatives and Social Democrats from 1987 to 1991. Between 1991 and 1995 Finland had a right/centre Government. The parliamentary elections in 1995 resulted in a landslide victory for the Social Democrats, which became the largest party in the Parliament and led the rainbow Government together with the Conservatives.

among others – under a modified conception of equality of opportunity (Council of the State 1990).

Feelings of a need to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the education system at large were also entering the agenda at the time. In this way, a belief that an element of competition introduced within the comprehensive school system would help to ensure the aims of efficiency and effectiveness gained ground. Gradually, legislative changes were introduced, bringing several far-reaching changes to the level of schools – more freedom was given to schools and municipalities to enable them to design basic education services based on local needs and priorities. By the mid-1990s, schools were encouraged to become different from one another by allowing them to design their own curricula and specialise (see sections 1.2, 2.3 and 2.4). Towards the end of the decade, the concept of parental choice within the comprehensive school had become a part of the new educational legislation after a long debate in the Parliament in which the issue of equality of opportunity also entered the agenda. It has been argued that a surprising consensus has governed the adoption of market-oriented education policy in Finland where there has been 'an unshaken belief in the functioning of market mechanisms and their blessings also in the field of education policy' (Kivirauma 2001: 87). The parliamentary debate in 1997 and 1998 ensuing the implementation of the Basic Education Act 1998 showed, however, that not everyone accepted the need to introduce elements of market-oriented reforms within the Finnish comprehensive school system (Finnish Parliamentary Papers 1997, 1998) (see section 2.5). The early 2000s have brought with them more changes in the form of a reformed National Framework Curriculum of 2004, and perhaps surprisingly, the effect of some of these changes has limited freedoms given to schools during the 1990s. It is clear that the national education policy in Finland has been marked by an almost continuous need to change and reform, at times in a rather contradictory fashion.

But, how then, has Finland fared in international student evaluations of performance and achievement? And what, if anything, do these trends tell about

the Finnish comprehensive school system at large? This issue will be looked at next, since it helps partly to explain the paradox present within Finnish education policy priorities.

1.1. Finland and PISA

It is interesting to note that Finland has recently been modelled as a country with an exemplary education system and has been visited by foreigners wanting to understand the Finnish comprehensive school system. This interest has followed the publication of the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) studies in 2000, 2003 and 2006.[2] The results from the OECD PISA studies carried out in 2000 with a special focus on reading literacy, and in 2003 focusing on mathematical literacy found that Finland was among the best performing countries on all of the assessed areas (reading, mathematics and sciences). Indeed, Finland improved its ranking among the 41 countries that took part in the 2003 assessments (OECD 2004c). The PISA 2006 results found that Finland was the highest-performing country on the science scale, and yet again, among the top in reading and mathematics (OECD 2007a). The Finnish success in the PISA studies has firmly placed the country in the spotlight of much international attention. Finland's results in PISA will be further discussed in Chapter 3.1.

Following the success of Finnish children in the PISA studies, attention has been directed at analysing reasons behind Finland's success. What has Finland been doing in its education policies enabling its high performance, achieved with only moderate expenditure on education services, yet producing highly equitable results between all children throughout the country (OECD 2004b)? Researchers have concluded that the reasons for Finland's success are complex – there are no simplistic explanations but rather a web of various indicators that

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[2] The PISA aims to evaluate standards of 15-year-old school children in various areas (e.g. reading literacy, scientific literacy and mathematics).

combine to produce the specific favourable outcomes (Välijärvi et al. 2002). Some of these explanations are outlined briefly below.

The PISA 2000 study on reading literacy skills of 15-year-olds revealed that Finland had the highest achieving readers of all the countries that took part in the study. There was also a small gap between the low-performing and high-performing Finnish children, the least successful performing at high proficiency which is a factor helping to explain Finland's overall high performance (OECD 2004b). Finland had the smallest between-school variation of all OECD countries, which was found to be an important predictor of high performance (Välijärvi et al. 2002).

The results of the PISA 2003 study (with a special attention on mathematics) indicated that Finnish students had improved their overall performance levels from the 2000 results. Finland came on top alongside such OECD countries as Korea, Japan, and the Netherlands (Kupari et al. 2004, OECD 2004c). Furthermore, the number of weak students in mathematics literacy was low in comparison to other OECD countries and the gender gap was found to be relatively small.

The above findings suggest that the Finnish comprehensive school system in its entirety has managed to produce effective and successful educational outcomes without compromising equity issues when compared to other Western industrialised countries. The system, which was founded upon the principles and aims of high equality of opportunity (e.g. Lampinen et al. 1982, Ahonen 2002, Aho et al. 2006), appears to have worked out in producing highly equitable results between children, schools and regions (see Chapter 2.1).

While Finnish children's success in the PISA studies has warranted much interest in the country's education system as suggested above, questions are at the same time being raised concerning the creation of differentiation and inequalities within the comprehensive school. The introduction of market-oriented reforms, in some way echoing those in a number of other countries

such as England, has been a radical departure from previous priorities. Parental choice and differentiation within comprehensive schools are now part of the educational landscape in Finland, and there are no certainties as to which way the comprehensive school system will develop in the future. What is known, though, is that inequities within the Finnish comprehensive school system have recently risen in certain parts of the country reflecting the development of school markets (e.g. Jakku-Sihvonen and Kuusela 2002, Seppänen 2003).

One question this raises is whether the rise of inequities is negatively going to affect the chances of Finnish children of doing well in future PISA studies as well as more generally. As has been suggested 'the picture given by the PISA study can easily be shattered during one school generation' (Suortti 2002: 336). Indeed, this is one question which has fuelled interest in the research to be described in the following chapters focusing on the extent of the changes taking shape at the local level – how the changing comprehensive school ethos has affected municipalities and their schools and children. The next part describes how this research is aiming to do just that.

1.2. About the research

This research focuses on analysing Finland's comprehensive school system through the relatively recent phenomenon of specialisation. The comprehensive school system in Finland provides an interesting subject to study since it has gone through a number of major reforms and adjustments in a relatively short period of time, as seen above. The possibility of schools specialising represents one of those reforms, which has affected the basic foundations of the old comprehensive school ideal. The main aim of this study is thus to shed light on the phenomenon of specialisation within the Finnish comprehensive school system in an attempt to find out what has been happening at the local level and what impact the reforms of the 1990s have had in practice. This is to be done by focusing on empirical evidence from one case study municipality in Finland.

One reason for carrying out research in this area related to the fact that there did not seem to be many scholars researching the area in the Finnish context. It became clear that there are still only a handful of scholars in Finland actively researching and writing about the changes taking place in the basic education system in Finland with a focus on market-oriented reforms and their implications. This is curious and raises the question as to why this might be the case – is this area generally seen as unimportant, uninteresting or unchallenging? It appears not. This field is of great importance – one only has to look at the fascination raised by the publications of the PISA studies to see that the field of compulsory education is generally met with enormous international and national interest (Isotalo 2004).

Furthermore, the variety of different approaches to education services used at the local level across municipalities in Finland – due to municipalities having considerable autonomy – is another factor which makes this field an important as well as interesting area to study. It is important to find out more about the overt and covert functioning of specialist classes within the Finnish comprehensive school as well as its wider operating context – this study aims to provide some of the answers to these important questions.

But, what does specialisation of schools actually mean and what are 'specialist classes'? Since this is of central importance to the research described here further attention is warranted at this stage to throw some light on these questions – and this is turned to next.

1.2.1. What are specialist classes?

The strategy of schools specialising or 'taking profiles', as the practice is also often called in Finland, only entered the policy arena in the 1990s and was made possible by the introduction of the less prescriptive National Curriculum in 1994 (see section 2.4). The National Curriculum reforms introduced more flexibility and choice into the curriculum, which resulted in a shift towards more variable school-based curricula (Norris et al. 1996). Schools were encouraged, albeit

often indirectly, to take steps to move into the direction of specialisation and to become different from one another.

Specialisation of schools can take various different forms which highlights the inherent freedom within the National Framework Curriculum 1994. The allocation of lesson hours, which the National Curriculum incorporated, had stipulated only the minimum number of lesson hours per subject without the maximum – this allowed schools to have more lesson hours in subjects they wished to highlight in their own curricula and enabled schools to introduce 'specialist classes'. The specialist classes could be in various subject areas such as mathematics, languages or art and could be based on specialist expertise or interest of school staff in these areas. Children can start specialist classes at different stages – at the age of 7 when a child starts school, the age of 9 or at 13 at the beginning of the secondary stage (Seppänen 2003). If a child starts a specialist class early this normally continues at a secondary stage at a feeder school, which offers the same speciality (Seppänen 2001).

Not all schools went as far as having distinct specialist classes, however, which again shows how much freedom and scope there was within existing guidelines for schools and municipalities to decide themselves in which direction they wanted to go. Some schools decided to focus on 'key areas' which covered the entire school and were thus much broader than distinct specialist classes (Kivipelto 1995). These key areas could cover as diverse areas as a focus on international education and relations, healthy lifestyles or an effort to increase tolerance and self-confidence of students. These types of specialisms differ from specialist classes in one crucial respect: they are non-selective. Significantly, educational legislation of the 1990s allowed schools to have admission policies to select children for the specialist classes, which normally function alongside 'normal' non-specialist classes at schools (Finlex 2004). This was a radical change allowing schools to be partly in charge of admissions and selecting children into the specialist classes rather than children automatically entering a local school as previously (Seppänen 2006). As international evidence has shown, admissions policies can be subject to inequities, for example if

interviews are used (e.g. West et al. 1998, 2006) – in the Finnish context this area needs much further investigation to show how transparent admissions policies used by schools are, or are not, as the case might be.

One consequence of the specialising trend has been that diversity of schools has increased. Indeed, this has been argued to be one underlying aim of the new legislation, providing more choice for parents (Seppänen 2003). Diversity has dramatically increased within some larger cities in Finland, including the capital Helsinki where the educational market place has become well-established. Interestingly, it appears that municipalities in the large cities in the south of the country have assisted the development of competitive state school markets by encouraging specialisation – subsequently some schools with strong specialist ethos have become very popular (Seppänen 2006). As some schools have gained popularity and are thus in great demand by parents, and as some schools at the same time have become less popular, polarisation between schools has taken place. Research evidence has shown that a hierarchy of schools has formed which is strongly correlated with the location of schools and the extent of selective specialist classes in these schools (Seppänen 2003, 2006).

The development of specialist programmes represents a threat to the very values and underpinning principles of the comprehensive school. The move towards a proliferation of 'gifted and talented' programmes is not neutral, but is governed by economic and political considerations and concerns. It also has to be remembered that introduction of league-tables is a possibility. If policy makers decided that league-tables could be made public, as they are in England for example, this could accentuate the polarisation of schools and social inequalities. Equality, as it existed previously, can be seen to have been sacrificed for the goal of enhanced economic competitiveness in the international market-place.

As this short analysis has shown there is a broad scope for a multitude of different types of schools and specialisms to emerge within the national

guidelines, and municipalities are able to steer the development of specialisms and 'key areas' of schools within their areas of jurisdiction. Evidently, municipalities have adopted very different approaches to developing educational services. This is an interesting phenomenon itself and demonstrates how much municipalities can differ in the scope of their comprehensive school networks – and how much autonomy individual municipalities possess. Indeed, this realisation constitutes one rationale for the research in question.

The main methodologies and research questions framing the research are considered next.

1.3. What is the research trying to find out?

This research takes the form of a small-scale case study approach focusing on one municipality in Finland. The main aim is to shed light on what goes on in the case study municipality in terms of specialisation of schools – underlying reasons and rationales for specialisation, and the consequences of specialisation on schools in the area.

The first main area of interest relates to the wider operating context for educational decision-making in the municipality – in other words, how are the national and local levels linked in terms of the development of policy? Of particular interest is the question of whether the municipality context can have an influence in the way schools develop their own policies and specialisms. A question this poses is whether the municipality through its education officials and policy-makers encourages or hinders development at schools through interpretations of national education policies, and whether financial issues play a significant role in these interpretations.

Secondly, the underlying reasons for schools to specialise are of interest – what are the main motives used by schools to introduce specialist classes or specialist areas, why have changes occurred and who are the key people behind the

changes? Attention is thus focused on both external and internal factors. Through external factors, emphasis is placed on analysing pressures which are imposed on schools from outside, for example in terms of requirements by educational legislation and/or national and local education priorities. Internal factors, on the other hand, relate to schools' own development priorities and concerns which can be linked to the external factors discussed.

The final broader interest area affecting this research is linked to the consequences of specialisation on schools and students in terms of possible selection for the specialist classes and issues relating to equity and equality of opportunity. Has the specialisation trend in the municipality negatively affected equity and equality of opportunity – the opportunities of all students regardless of their backgrounds and a place of residence to have high quality education of equal standards in equally good schools? And furthermore, how do key people in the local education decision-making scene interpret changes which have taken place in Finland over the last few decades affecting equity and equality of opportunity issues? Are they broadly in favour or against the various reforms? Of special interest here is the broad question of values held with respect to the education system, the comprehensive school and the myriad of ways in which the Finnish comprehensive school has changed over the last decade and a half. Among the questions asked is whether people believe there to be a need to reform the existing system, and why. And furthermore, do people have faith in the comprehensive school system, or do they believe that changes at the core, for example through specialisation, are necessary or, indeed, inevitable?

1.4. Research questions

There are three separate research questions with a number of related sub-questions which constitute the framework for the literature review and the empirical part of this research project. These questions are linked to the three main areas of interest as described above.

The first main research question focuses on the broader context of the educational decision-making arena in the municipality in terms of the ways in which national education policies are interpreted at the local level. The role of financial constraints is also considered in relation to the development of local education policies, and how people at schools and at offices interpret these issues.

1. What factors characterise the interpretation of national education policies at the local level?

    1.1. How have national education policy priorities regarding specialisation/ diversity/choice policies and equity/equality of opportunity been construed at the local level?

    1.2. How important is the impact of financial factors in these processes? How do the key decision-makers and principals/teachers at schools perceive challenges deriving from financial issues/constraints?

The second research question focuses on analysing and evaluating the various reasons and rationales for the introduction of specialisation in the case study municipality, in particular, why and how have schools that have introduced specialist functions in the city done so – what are the underlying motives for specialisation?

2. What external and internal policy drivers exist to motivate comprehensive schools to introduce specialisms?

    2.1. How significant are external influences that derive from rapidly changing education policy trends at national and local levels, namely extension of market-oriented reforms such as choice and diversity?

    2.2. How significant are internal influences, namely enhancement of popularity and image? What role do schools play in this?

The final research question focuses on explaining, evaluating and assessing the consequences of specialisation on equality of opportunity and equity. Has equality, as it existed previously, been sacrificed as a result of specialisation? In addition to actual consequences of schools introducing specialist classes in the municipality, the ways in which people interpret the changing educational landscape in Finland and at the local level are also considered.

3. **What impact have the changes in education policies had on equity and equality of opportunity?**

   3.1. What impact has specialisation of schools within the comprehensive school system in the municipality had on schools in terms of equity and equality of opportunity; what has happened to those schools that have introduced specialisms?

   3.2. How do key players in the municipality interpret changes in terms of equity and equality of opportunity?

1.5. The structure of the thesis

The thesis is in three distinct parts – the first part focuses on the literature underlying much of the research while the second part focuses on explaining and analysing the empirical side to the research. The final part summarises and discusses the main findings of the research.

The aim is, in the first part, to present the relevant background literature and debates which cover various types of literature. This includes historical background context for the emergence of the comprehensive school in Finland, the radical legislative changes of the 1990s, and equity and equality issues as related to the field of education together with background to market-oriented reforms in Finland and by the way of contrast, in England and Scotland. Chapter 2 focuses solely on Finland and the formation of its education system from the early 20th Century to the present day. Chapter 3 analyses and evaluates the

concepts of equality, equality of opportunity and equity as applied to compulsory education and to market-oriented reforms in state education – these concepts are central to this research. Although these concepts are frequently used and referred to in literature, it is often less clear how the concepts are interpreted. Equality of opportunity, particularly, is often used as a broad umbrella term, possibly having as many meanings as it has users.

Of particular interest for the literature review part of the research were academic writings investigating the Finnish educational landscape in the 1990s – legislation, policy, politics and various research studies and theses. In addition, the English experience of marketisation of education proved invaluable for informing the background context for a review on the debate on education, equity and equality of opportunity. It has to be noted, though, that there is a distinct gap in the *Finnish* literature of studies examining the impact of educational reforms that have taken place since the 1990s. More specifically, the number of studies directly linked to my research interests on the impact of marketisation of compulsory education on equity and equality of opportunity was limited to only a few studies.

The second part will focus on outlining the empirical part of the research and is divided into five different chapters. The first of these empirically oriented chapters is Chapter 4 which outlines the methodological approach informing the research. Following this, Chapter 5 is dedicated to outlining the policy context in the case study municipality and schools. This is followed by three separate chapters focusing on each of the research questions. Attention in Chapter 6 is placed on looking at the national education policy context and how this is reflected on the local level, particularly in terms of issues of finance, demography and formation of education policy priorities. Chapter 7 focuses on analysing the external and internal policy drivers motivating schools to introduce specialist classes. Finally, in Chapter 8 attention is directed towards evaluating the important issues of equality of opportunity and equity and whether specialisation of schools in the case study municipality can be seen to be supporting these two aims.

The final part, in Chapter 9, provides a conclusion for the research described in the earlier chapters by focusing on a number of main findings and their implications for policy-related areas in terms of diversity, choice, equity and equality of opportunity, and pointers for possible future research in the area.

2. The birth and rebirth of the comprehensive school system in Finland

Finland has been traditionally classed as representing the institutional or the social-democratic model of welfare state provision alongside its other Nordic neighbours (Esping-Andersen 1996, Timonen 2003). This type of welfare state model embraces the ideals of equality and social justice through universalism and comprehensiveness in service provision, and thus has a high degree of 'decommodification' (Esping-Andersen 1996). Social solidarity is important if income redistribution and high taxation are to remain accepted realities. Although the ideal-type welfare regime typology has received criticism on the grounds that it does not represent the reality whereby welfare states are often hybrids rather than mere ideal-types, the typology still offers a simplified baseline model to which modifications can be made (Arts and Gelissen 2002).

In the field of education, the Finnish comprehensive revolution can be seen to provide an example of a social-democratic policy agenda in practice: the 1968 Comprehensive School System Act transferred the majority of the private sector schools into municipality ownership making the system in practice almost totally comprehensive. This can be seen as a highly radical reform that has been argued to be possible only because of the commitment and trust of the Finnish people in social justice (Lampinen et al. 1982). Arguably a rapid industrialisation process, and with it, a transition from agriculture to industry and service sector-based employment also played an important role (Ahonen 2003). Bearing in mind the comprehensive reforms implemented throughout the country in the 1970s, it may seem ironic that only two decades later the system was going through another radical change of direction – this time embodying very contrasting ideals, namely those of the neo-liberal ideology highlighting choice and diversity. What happened and when did this start?

In order to understand the background for the educational legislation of the 1990s when the phenomenon of specialisation within comprehensive schools entered the domain of state education, it is necessary to begin with a brief

historical account. The chapter thus begins with section 2.1 which focuses on describing and analysing events in the Finnish welfare state and its education policies from the early 20th Century onwards, which led to the introduction of the comprehensive school system in the late 1960s and 1970s. In the following sections 2.2 and 2.3 attention is moved to analysing the underlying circumstances which led to a 'rebirth' of the Finnish comprehensive school system in the 1990s. Section 2.2 focuses on increasing internationalisation of the Finnish society and identity and the introduction of New Public Management influenced reforms in which the role of organisations like the European Union and the OECD can be seen to be crucial. Section 2.3 focuses on analysing the reforms in funding in relation to education and the importance of the economic recession in the early 1990s. Following this, sections 2.4 and 2.5 focus on describing, in more detail, the changing comprehensive school agenda emerging in the late 20th Century: section 2.4 explains and analyses the legislation and practice of specialist classes while section 2.5 focuses on the far-reaching Basic Education Act of 1998. It will be seen that educational legislation and policy priorities have dramatically altered in 20th Century Finland – the reasons and rationales for this oscillation will be seen to be wide-reaching. Finally, section 2.6 offers some brief concluding comments to the chapter.

2.1. Towards the comprehensive school system, 1940s to 1970s

The basic education system in the early 20th Century in Finland can be characterised as being patchy, diverse, complex as well as inequitable. Basic education had been made compulsory in Finland in 1921 for children aged 7-13. There existed, however, a great number of different avenues for education some of which led to an 'educational cul-de-sac' by making it difficult, or impossible, to progress to secondary education after the age of 13 (Ahonen 2003). These children were often destined for early employment in the vocational sector since the 'continuing classes' from the age of 13 to 15 on top of the compulsory elementary education only existed in cities.

Although the number of both private and state grammar schools increased rapidly from the early 20th Century to the late 1960s halting at the setting up of the comprehensive school system, the number of grammar schools was not enough to meet growing demand.[3] Parents were demanding better and longer education for their children for social advancement in the spirit of rapid social change (Aho et al. 2006). It is not surprising that competition for grammar school places was fierce when the number of applicants exceeded the number of available places (Nikki 2000). According to Sarjala (1981), the fact that the number of children entering grammar schools gradually grew between the 1940s and 1970s acutely demonstrated that both need and desire for educational improvement among the Finnish people had strengthened. In the 1930s there were over 200 grammar schools in Finland – in 1960 there were about 500 and the numbers grew until 1970 when there were in excess of 650, over half of which were private (Nurmi 1982, Lappalainen 1991).

There were more fee-paying grammar schools in towns and cities, which greatly reduced the opportunity for those children living in more isolated rural areas to benefit from private grammar school education. Geographic inequities in provision were apparent. Private preparatory schools that existed in cities were designed to provide primary education for 7-11 year-olds and to prepare them for grammar school entry at 11. This was the most certain route to academically-oriented studies in grammar schools, and hence, for further studies in upper secondary schools and universities (Ahonen 2003).[4] The route to continued secondary education through elementary schools was much less certain and the existing practice disadvantaged many children (Lampinen et al. 1982). Private grammar schools were also entitled to grants from the state, but since schools in more expensive areas received more money, this further

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[3] During the post-Second World War period (1945-1950) there was a 'baby-boom' in Finland along with many other Western countries (Kiuasmaa 1982).

[4] This echoes a similar system used across most of England and Wales whereby children took 'the 11-plus', comprising intelligence and attainment tests, results of which were used as the main means of allocating children to either grammar schools designed for those deemed to be academically-oriented, technical schools for those deemed to be more technically-oriented and secondary moderns for the remainder (it is important to note that this system was not specifically prescribed by legislation (the 1944 Education Act), see Chitty 2004).

accentuated inequities between wealthier urban and poorer rural areas. Evidently the financial inequities based on geographic divisions were also reflected in teachers' salaries, and this may have impacted on enhancing attractiveness of city-based teaching jobs (Kiuasmaa 1982).

Between 1950 and early 1970s Finland was going through a rapid industrialisation and there was an exodus of people moving from agricultural rural communities to more urban cities and towns (Rinne and Vuorio-Lehti 1996, Ahonen 2003). The percentage of the working population getting their living from agriculture was 46 in 1950 – by 1970 this had reduced to approximately 15 per cent (Ahonen 2003: 111, Statistics Finland 1993: 77). With the growing size of industries and the service sector, it became apparent that the existing educational system was not sufficient to produce the needed workforce for a growing economy (Nyberg 1970). There was an influx of people applying for the limited spaces in secondary education in the popular grammar schools. Reform was necessary, but what would be the best solution to reform the existing inequitable and inadequate system of state and private education?

2.1.1. The comprehensive revolution – conflict within consensus

The 1960s saw much heated and often ideologically based debate in the Parliament and various committees that deliberated on the possibilities for educational reform (Kivinen 1988, Rinne and Vuorio-Lehti 1996, Lampinen 1998). 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 (Syväoja 2004). This group was thus endorsing a reform that would extend existing provision further, but would maintain diversity and the grammar schools (Kiuasmaa 1982). The idea was to develop the system of state owned

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middle schools that constituted the earlier part of the grammar school structure and to make them free (for children aged 11-16) as well as to develop the 'continuing classes'. The grammar school route would thus remain as the avenue for more academic studies aiming for entry to further and higher education.

Social Democrats, on the other hand, were advocating the introduction of one uniform comprehensive education route for all children, which, since it would mean an amalgamation of the existing state and private middle schools with the elementary schools, threatened the existence of the private sector. As the private sector relied on financial help from the state, the proposed comprehensive reform would put the whole existence of grammar schools in doubt – it is therefore not surprising that grammar school representatives alongside the Conservatives in the committees were against any such reform (Kiuasmaa 1982). Importantly, a shift in the general opinion of the centrist Agrarian Party in the early years of the 1960s proved important for the comprehensive school movement (Lampinen 1998, Aho et al. 2006). Previously, the Party's representatives in Parliament were against the introduction of a comprehensive school system, for example, on the grounds that it was feared to increase taxation for the farming population (Ahonen 2003). However, as a result of industrialisation and with it, a massive move of people from rural areas to cities, a comprehensive school system would guarantee children living in the countryside similar opportunities for basic education as those living in urban areas (Lampinen et al. 1982). The issue of regional equality thus entered the political debate (Ahonen 2003, Aho et al. 2006).

It was not until in the mid-1960s, however, that the comprehensive school issue after years of debate and disagreement in Parliament and its committees finally steered towards more of a consensus and a resolution. What made this possible was a left-leaning parliamentary majority elected for four years in 1966, and a gradually melting opposition of the political Right towards the issue of a common school. An argument that the proponents of the comprehensive school used to further their cause was evidence of the existing wide pool of talent

among children (Ahonen 2002). While in 1930 only 12 per cent of the age group went to grammar schools, by 1963 the percentage had risen to over 50 – this, it was argued, necessitated the introduction of comprehensive schools since due to a lack of grammar schools a great number of children were not given the opportunities they deserved to progress on the basis of their abilities (Ahonen 2003: 102, 136). Evidence of human capital was thus turning the Right towards comprehensivisation although there were those who feared a socialist backlash if the Right put down its defences and agreed to the comprehensive principles. But the winds of change were blowing, and 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 an overarching consensus was achieved – the comprehensive revolution was given a go-ahead (Kiuasmaa 1982, Nurmi 1989).

2.1.2. The reforms in practice

What did the Comprehensive School System Act 1968 stipulate in practice? The Act was very 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. Lampinen et al. 1982, 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 (Report of the Education Committee 1974). The Comprehensive School System Act of 1968 can thus be characterised as a great victory for advancing social democracy in Finland – it unified a previously patchy and inequitable basic education system (Lampinen et al. 1982).

The issue of private grammar schools had divided political parties for decades and had proved to be an ideologically volatile dilemma. The 1968 Act gave

private schools the option to either transfer to municipality control and become comprehensives – an option which a large majority of private schools chose – or to remain private and so-called 'replacement schools' with increased oversight from the state (Lappalainen 1991). Importantly, though, the law made the setting up of new private institutions very difficult. Later, in 1974, the law was changed so that it was left up to municipalities to decide whether or not they wanted to include any 'replacement schools' in their school networks (Ahonen 2003).

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. In practice, this meant an amalgamation of state-run elementary schools and continuing classes with municipality and private middle schools of the grammar school sector. 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 can be suggested that perhaps the greatest beneficiaries of the reforms were children living in rural and semi-rural areas where provision had previously been inadequate. Indeed, the reforms were first implemented in the northern and eastern areas of Finland in the early 1970s where educational disadvantage had been most acute for decades (Ahonen 2002, Aho et al. 2006).

In the early 1980s the Comprehensive School Act 1983 resulted in the dismantling of ability setting in mathematics and foreign languages. Although the issue attracted fierce debate, it became apparent that the setting system had inbuilt inequities based on regional, gender and social factors in a way that students 'chose' courses at different ability levels (Rinne and Vuorio-Lehti 1996). Thus, the dismantling of ability setting increased equality of opportunity for all children. Another change introduced by the 1983 legislation was the

'time resource quota system' – a step towards decentralisation. The new system was used to calculate the number of hours used for teaching at each school (Jokinen and Mehtäläinen 1992). The basic idea behind the time resource quota system was that schools themselves, through teachers, could decide how and in what ways teaching groups could be formed (e.g. by making some groups smaller or larger) thus increasing flexibility and decision-making powers at the level of schools (Jokinen and Mehtäläinen 1992, Rinne and Vuorio-Lehti 1996).

The birth of 'music classes' or specialist classes, where special emphasis was given to music teaching, was a development which came about at a time when the comprehensive revolution was taking place. The phenomenon of music classes – which have continued to this day and have significantly grown in numbers – has relevance to the comprehensive school ideology. It could be argued that this specialist music teaching available to a small number of children who are selected to these classes through ability-based tests undermines the comprehensive reform ideology by having maintained selectivity within the comprehensive school system. But how did these classes first come about and why were they allowed to flourish?

The history of music classes dates to the early 1960s when this type of teaching was first experimented with in one school in Helsinki (Vähälä 1996). Although the experiment lasted only three years, in 1966 similar classes were set up in the City of Lahti from where they soon spread across other Finnish cities and municipalities. In 1977 there were approximately 4400 students attending music classes in Finnish cities, in 1984 the figure was just over 12,000, and in 1996 15,000 (Vähälä 1996: 15). In effect, the comprehensive school legislation 1968 allowed music classes to exist since there was no *obligation* for students to attend a school in their school district, and neither an *obligation* for all schools to take students from a particular district (Seppänen 2006). Prior to the 1968 legislation, the governing bodies of elementary schools were allowed to decide on the allocation of lesson hours in their schools, which enabled music classes to have more teaching hours of music in the curriculum (Vähälä 1996). The issue of school districts was only clarified in school legislation in 1983 – the

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new legislation stipulated that school districts can overlap for a specific reason, although no mention was made what these reasons actually were in practice (ibid.). In a similar fashion, only in the 1998 Basic Education Act was the issue of selection through admission policies clarified – the educational legislation of 1968 through to 1983 did not address selection through competitive admission policies (Seppänen 2006) (see section 2.5 for discussion on the 1998 Education Act).

A specialist working group was set up by the Ministry of Education in 1977 with a task of investigating music teaching in various institutions and conservatories, and also in music classes (Working group for the teaching of music 1979). The deliberation by the working group provides some clues to the nature in which music classes among other music institutions have emerged, and how music classes were allowed to exist within the new comprehensive school system. It was suggested that: 'music institutions in our country have not emerged out of a coherent overall plan, but institutions have been set up where there has been interest, expertise and resources to begin these functions' (Working group for the teaching of music 1979: 1.2). It is clear therefore that the issue of specialist music classes was initially a local phenomenon unrelated to national education policy priorities. Following the Report by the working group, the National Board of Education drafted a National Curriculum for music classes in 1978 which set requirements for all music classes to follow a uniform curriculum (Vähälä 1996). This move brought the functioning of music classes closer to central planning and influence although in terms of admission policies local authorities retained their previous control.

All in all, it appears that the history of music classes presents a clear example of path-dependency in action suggesting that once introduced it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to reverse particular courses of action (Pierson 2000). Music classes initially came about at a time when massive changes were being drafted and introduced in the provision of state education – among the tumult of changes the yet very small-scale phenomenon did not receive attention in the educational legislation. The timing of the emergence of music classes together

with the comprehensive revolution was a co-incidence, but may have been important for the phenomenon of music classes to flourish. Once established, they became a permanent feature of the Finnish comprehensive school system spreading across municipalities with more students attending these specialist classes. As Pierson (2000: 263) has argued 'relatively small events, if they occur at the right moment, can have large and enduring consequences'. This can be argued to be the case with the history of the music classes in Finland.

What the implementation of the 1968 Comprehensive School System Act did to equalising opportunities cannot be over-emphasised – the Act radically altered existing education provision by constructing a new education system around the ideal of social justice. Although the existence of music classes can be seen to partly undermine the comprehensive ideology, the reforms improved provision and access to state education for a great number of students. Furthermore, the birth of music classes was not based on an aim to increase diversity between schools – it was initially a small scale phenomenon beginning at a grass-roots level in one city (see sections 2.4 and 2.5 for a discussion on the emergence of specialist classes on a larger scale in Finland in the 1990s).

It may seem surprising therefore 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 (see parts 2.2.2. and 2.2.3 and section 2.3) found their advocates and started to build up a case for another reform in state education (Rinne and Vuorio-Lehti 1996, Rinne et al. 2002). The next section will unravel the reasons for the perceived need to change and the various different actors that had a role to play in creating a fertile ground for changes to get rooted.

2.2. Opening doors to the market

The Finnish comprehensive school system has had to adapt to various pressures from outside under the slogan of modernisation. The roles of such bodies as the OECD and the European Union alongside the movements of neo-liberalism and New Public Management have been significant. Furthermore, the nature of Finnish foreign policy and a style of policy-making, which has been shaped by the country's historical past and problematic relations with its powerful neighbours, the Swedish and the Russians, were built around adaptive politics and a policy of neutrality (Brodin 1975). The concept of a national identity therefore also enters the picture, and has a role to play in explaining the changing comprehensive school ideology from the 1980s onwards.

Sweden ruled its Eastern neighbour from the 12th Century to the early 19th Century, when Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia. The Swedish constituted both the governing and the cultural elite of Finland – they were the upper echelons of the Finnish society. This did not change even when Finland became nominally part of the Russian empire, as the legislation and social system from the Swedish era were maintained (National Board of Education 2000). The influence of Sweden in the formation of Finnish national identity has been of greater importance than that of the former Soviet Union. Finland and Sweden, as a result of their long common past and heritage, are in many ways similar in their social and political structures and institutions (Novack 2002). Finns have always associated themselves more with their Western neighbours than with the Russians in the East with whom relations have tended to remain reserved.

The Soviet Union posed a genuine threat to Finnish independence[5] throughout the early and mid-20th Century, and Finland has had to defend its independence against the Soviet Union with military force twice (1939-40 and 1941-44) resulting in heavy loss of life and territory. The Wars created a unique fighting

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[5] Finland declared its independence from Russia in 1917.

spirit among the nation, which helped the Finns to cope with the battle and hold on to its independence (Vehviläinen 2002). As a result of these confrontations, foreign policy between Finland and Russia has been tense and difficult, and Finnish politicians have had to adapt their regime values and make special allowances in order to keep relations calm (Mouritzen 1988). Hence, 'Finlandization', as Mouritzen has termed the concept of adaptive politics, has been a crucial aspect of Finnish policy development up to this date. It has been argued that only after Finland joined the EU in 1995 did foreign policy become more open – discussion and debate about foreign policy were finally allowed to enter the public domain from behind closed doors (Raunio and Tiilikainen 2003). Furthermore, EU membership has presented an opportunity for Finland to raise its profile and image as an open nation (Novack 2002). This could be interpreted as a step away from the long-term policy of neutrality.

This section begins with a look at Finland's relations with the European Union and the OECD. The influence of the EU membership and the OECD will be described both in relation to the Finnish comprehensive school movement and the nation at large. It will be seen that the European Union membership, which was gained in 1995, has had a profound impact on the search in Finland for a more open, more internationally aware identity and position. From here attention will move to analysing the increasing influence of managerial reforms within welfare services, and to far-reaching changes within the Finnish society which have in many ways legitimated fundamental ideological shifts in education policy alongside other social policy provision.

2.2.1. Finland, the European Union and the OECD

The rationales of Finland for joining the European Union are interesting. It has been argued that in addition to economic rationales, membership offered Finland an opportunity to open up and become one of the key players in the European front (Ollikainen 1999). The issue of identity could be argued to have been one of the underlying issues which had a role to play in the generally favourable view of the consensus Government towards a fully-ledged EU

membership. A full membership would strengthen Finland's identity as a modern and forward-looking European country concerned about issues of social justice, human rights as well as open and competitive economy.[6]

The European dimension through 'Europeanisation' has become an integral part of social policy development and priorities (Ollikainen 1999). Europeanisation has been defined by Ollikainen (1999: 32) as the actual or expected adaptation of national institutions and policies to European integration. In the field of education policy, Europeanisation has had an impact on the aims and objectives of compulsory education, further and higher education (Virtanen 2002). For instance, an emphasis given to internationalisation of curricula, improving linguistic and cultural skills of students and to improving quality of education elucidate Europeanisation of Finnish education in practice (Ollikainen 1999). According to Ollikainen, during the 1990s Finland was keen to adopt European education programmes for reasons that included enhancement of international competitiveness and promoting the image of Finland and Finnish education abroad. Economic rationales alongside identity and image concerns are therefore deeply interlinked into attempts to bring Finnish education closer to the European and international arena. The concepts of a knowledge-based economy and the associated idea of life-long learning have been widely used buzzwords in the EU and the OECD, and are seen as areas which are likely to present challenges for nation states and their education systems across the developed world (Brine 2006). These concepts have also been keenly adopted within the Finnish educational discourse and policy development.

What about Finland and the OECD – what is the relationship like between these two parties? The relationship Finland has had with the OECD could be described in terms of respectful mentorship – Finland seeking the approval of the OECD through taking its advice and recommendations very seriously, and dutifully implementing many of its recommendations on education policy.

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[6] A referendum was held in 1993 to determine whether Finland should join the EU. Finland became a member in 1995.

Indeed, it has been argued that in this respect Finland represents a 'model country' among the OECD member countries (Rinne 2004). The reasons for this are interesting – as shown below.

The OECD was formed in 1961, but its foundations date back to 1948 when its predecessor, the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), was set up to help to bring back stability after the devastation of the Second World War. One of the most important founding principles of the OECD based on the Paris Convention in 1960 has been an attempt to enhance economic growth of its member countries (OECD 1995: 2). Finland joined the OECD in 1969, and was at the time implementing the comprehensive school legislation. It was not until 1982, however, that the first inspection of Finland's compulsory education system was carried out by the OECD.[7] The Education Committee highlighted both strengths and weaknesses of the Finnish education system in a manner that at times appears to be both patronising and aloof (e.g. by describing Finnish 'arctic or sub-arctic' climate as 'a handicap'), but which also predicted facets that would soon gain in importance. These predictions included recognition for a need to create a more flexible and adaptable labour force as well as a need to more fully embrace internationality – both politically and technologically (OECD 1982: 14, 16).

It is interesting to note how the OECD's advocacy for equality of opportunity has changed over the decades. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s there was an emphasis on extending equal opportunities through non-selective practices and uniform standards – a fact also expressed by the OECD inspectorate visiting Finland in the early 1980s. It was thought that by extending educational opportunities for all children economic efficiency and growth would also follow (Papadopoulos 1994). In this respect Finland received criticism from the OECD since in the secondary level of education differentiated courses were the norm in some subjects through ability setting. The OECD had rejected the idea of a

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[7] The OECD's Education Committee visited Finland in 1981 and assessed the entire education system alongside the comprehensive school sector with reference to the contribution of the system to economic, social and cultural aspects.

fixed pool of talent, and endorsed a view that ability can be developed through appropriate education policies (Papadopoulos 1994). This view, however, changed by the latter parts of the 1980s and early 1990s when emphasis was increasingly placed on a view highlighting individuality and competitiveness (Rinne 2004). More recent OECD studies have focused on equity in education in the member countries, albeit for concerns which highlight economic growth and competitiveness following the original founding principles. According to an OECD report reviewing equity in education in Finland, 'equity...is more than an issue of fairness and distributive justice...unequal education implies that human potential is being wasted' (Grubb et al. 2005: 8). The report *No More Failures – Ten Steps to Equity in Education* (OECD 2007b: 9) argued for the development of education systems that are 'fair and inclusive in their design, practices, and resourcing', and subsequently, that academic selection alongside school choice can pose risks to equity. The results of the PISA studies have undoubtedly had an impact on the OECD's renewed focus on equity – after all, countries like Finland that have largely non-selective and uniform comprehensive school systems have been found to achieve higher results (OECD 2004c, 2007a). These changes will be further discussed in the next chapter when the concepts of equity and equality of opportunity are placed in the spotlight.

In explaining the close relationship between the OECD and Finland it is evident that Finland's interest in becoming more European by separating itself and its identity from its past with Russia constitutes one clear rationale (Rinne 2004). By endorsing the OECD's market-oriented agenda of the 1980s and 1990s, Finland has overtly expressed a desire to belong to the capitalist world rather than to post-communist Russia. In terms of education policy, this has meant the welcoming of many initiatives aiming at improved economic efficiency in the guise of New Public Management and other neo-liberal initiatives (Rinne and Vuorio-Lehti 1996, Volanen 2001, Poropudas and Mäkinen 2001). Undoubtedly, the OECD has powers, albeit indirect, to influence countries' economic and welfare policies in a considerable way.

2.2.2. Market principles into practice

The role of the OECD can be seen as one of encouraging Finland to become a modern competitive state in the European arena. The OECD has been influential in guiding the debate on public sector reform and has also been keen to advocate efficiency-enhancing reforms in member countries (Lane 2005). Indeed, the OECD project on public management reform (PUMA) has placed the creation of a 'new paradigm' in public management at centre stage by emphasising, among other things, management by objectives and performance measurement, the use of markets and market-type mechanisms, competition and choice as well as devolution (OECD 1998: 5). This approach highlights the creation of internal markets by separating purchasers of services from public and private providers and thus requires 'the creation of competitive environments within and between public sector organisations and non-government competitors' (ibid: 13). In terms of education and training policies, the OECD report (ibid: 47) noted that 'the application of the public management reforms is, or will be, very appropriate to this area of policy', suggesting that competitive educational market places were seen as the future for all forms of education policy.

Internally in Finland, due to the tradition of adaptive politics, there has also been an inherent tendency to change and transform. When in the 1970s the Ministry of Education argued that 'education has to follow general development, and adapt itself to development, in order to meet the needs of a changing society' (Nyberg 1970: 9), this echoed very similar concerns that emerged two decades later. Concerns for adaptation re-entered the policy arena in the 1980s and 1990s, but ironically, for almost opposite reasons than was the case in the 1970s: the focus had changed from increasing equality of opportunity for all children to one that accepted the need to make education policy more individualistic.

In line with policies in the rest of the world throughout the 1980s there was an interest to increase effectiveness and efficiency of welfare state policies, which

would help making economies more competitive. Increasing pressures were placed on nation states stemming from rapid technological and demographic changes and globalisation among other things (Hughes 1998). New Public Management (NPM) emerged as a way to help countries to cut down bureaucracy and waste by streamlining existing practices, and to make public sector organisations run better (Dawson and Dargie 2002, Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). The NPM theory has attracted much broader appeal beyond the mere ideological divide and eventually led to 'the resurgence of neo-liberalism in a globalised world economy in the 1990s' (Lane 2000: 3).

Christensen and Loegreid (2003: 17) provide a neat summary of these developments:

> 'Since the 1980s the international tendency in administrative reform has been a neo-liberal one, encompassing managerial thinking and a market mentality. The private sector has become the role model, and public administration has come to be seen as a provider of services to citizens who were redefined as clients and consumers…These new administrative doctrines came to be known collectively as New Public Management'.

It is generally agreed that New Public Management is underpinned by public choice theory, private sector and markets assumptions as well as market-driven management (Nolan 2001). Thus, there exists a division into market-based elements and management-based elements both of which constitute types of managerialism. In general, public management reforms can offer means to multiple ends which perhaps explains the world-wide popularity of such reforms (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). Public choice theory consists of a multifaceted set of assumptions aiming to enhance efficiency, effectiveness, quality and responsiveness of public services including education provision (Boyne et al. 2003, Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). It is believed that in order to achieve the best possible outcomes for public services, the role of market forces has to be emphasised while giving a minimal role for government (Hughes

1998). This can be achieved, for instance, through introducing more competition into the public service arena through marketisation of services and through providing performance information to customers enabling them to choose (Boyne et al. 2003, Hughes 1998). It is likely that changes in public sector management along the lines of New Public Management, such as those described above, are here to stay and that there is no going back to the old ways of public administration and management (Hughes 1998).

The introduction of market-oriented reforms in the field of compulsory education has emerged in western countries as a way intended to make education systems more efficient, effective as well as improve the quality of services, and has been inspired by the NPM philosophy (Lane 2005). In the Anglo-Saxon world, particularly in England and Wales under the Conservative governments in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the aim has been to create quasi-markets or education markets in education whereby diversity between schools is increased in an attempt to stimulate competition between schools for children and parents (Edwards et al. 1999). One basic principle of market-oriented reforms in education in these two countries is that funding has been linked with the number of children enrolled at schools – children bring with them resources to schools though a 'paperless voucher' system (Simon 1992, Feintuck 1994). At the same time individuals' right to choose is emphasised and they have become customers 'choosing' between different providers in the market-place in search of quality (Ranson and Stewart 1994). Schools can compete with, for example, quality of teaching and teachers, the school environment and various specialist features of teaching and curricula (Hilpelä 2004). Schools which gain popularity will flourish while less in-demand schools will decline, and can eventually be closed down if improvements in results and quality cannot be achieved (Simon 1992). The creation of competition through the separation of supply from demand is therefore central. This is endorsed, partly, by auditing and monitoring of results which also act as an accountability test for schools for their performance (as measured by exam results for example) (Ranson and Stewart 1994).

Quasi-markets operate under certain constraints like the number of schools in a certain area and, for example, the existence of a national curriculum, which can constrict choice in practice (Nyyssölä 2004). This is one difficulty of consumerism in education – choice is not available equally to all since there can be a lack of information, of motivation to choose as well as of provision. In addition, prevailing social class biases affecting how individuals choose is a factor which has a negative impact on choice policies in education – these issues are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Public management reforms in different countries are most likely affected and shaped by, as authors such as Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004: 16-17) argue, 'the local preoccupations and priorities of the politicians and private actors most concerned'. It has been noted that most countries introducing public management reforms are aiming for state modernisation and not for the introduction of market mechanisms on a large scale (Lane 2005). Therefore the so called 'NPM countries' which include New Zealand, Australia and United Kingdom are distinct because they rely on 'an entirely new philosophy of public sector governance' (ibid: 8).

In the Nordic countries importance has been attached more on management-type reforms such as a move into results-based management, decentralisation and devolution (Loegreid 2001, Dawson and Dargie 2002). NPM reforms have been claimed to be less extensive in the Nordic countries than elsewhere as a result of the prevailing social democratic tradition (Loegreid 2001). It is clear that in some areas reforms have been far-reaching, however. In Sweden, for instance, there was a noticeable shift towards the creation of marketisation and privatisation of compulsory education alongside social service provision and health-care, with very little social democratic tradition being left intact (Blomqvist 2004, Daun 2003). In compulsory education, school markets have been created with funding following pupils on per capita basis (Blomqvist 2004). This change in the Swedish welfare service sector has been termed as representing 'significant policy re-orientation' (ibid: 151).

In Finland managerialist welfare reforms have been less extensive than in neighbouring Sweden; however, the overall change of direction has been dramatic. The creation of pressures to reform the social-democratic welfare state stemmed from a number of interlinked factors. Research investigating the possibility of introducing more market-oriented reforms within the Finnish welfare state identified several such factors, which could be seen as rationales justifying a new reform agenda along the lines of NPM (Government Institute for Economic Research 1995). These factors included changing values of individuals towards more consumer-orientation, and to reflect this, pressures to increase quality and flexibility of services to satisfy demands for choice (ibid.). In addition, it was argued that the public sector financial crisis necessitated a re-evaluation of how welfare services are produced and financed which reflected the ongoing economic recession (ibid.) (see part 2.3.2).

But what were the conditions under which the changing agenda started to emerge? And which elements of the market-oriented agenda were introduced into the domain of education in Finland? These issues are considered next.

2.2.3. 'Marketisation' of education in Finland

From the 1980s onwards there was a rapid growth of the middle class section of society in Finland. The percentage of the working population earning their living from the service sector increased from 44 per cent in 1970 to 60 per cent in 1990. As for the agricultural sector and the industrial sector, the picture was very different. The percentage of those earning their living from agriculture reduced from 20 to 9 per cent in the same period, and those in industry went down from 34 to 29 per cent (Statistics Finland 1993: 77).

The aspiring middle classes had distinct ideas about the 'good life' underpinned by aims for growing individuality and self-interest (Ahonen 2003). The rising popularity of the leading political right-wing party, the Conservatives, throughout the late 1980s to mid-1990s can be seen to reflect the concerns of the new middle classes (Ahonen 2003). The Party had gained a considerable

parliamentary election victory in 1987 and had several ministers represented in the Cabinet. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the neo-liberal ideas that began to circulate more prominently in the policy arena among the Conservatives were keenly received by the newly formed middle classes.

There were other interest groups too which expressed their desire for neo-liberal inspired reforms in the welfare state sector. The Central Union for Industries and Employers (the TT) was among the first which began making explicit requests to reform education policies on the grounds of the needs of the economy and employers (Ahonen 2003). What started as an encouragement to introduce more entrepreneurial education in schools in the 1980s turned into a direct critique of comprehensive schools by the early 1990s. The TT criticised comprehensive schools on the grounds of their outdated foundations and inflexibility – the inability of the comprehensive school to push the talented forth from the masses. Many ideas of the New Public Management such as the desire to increase 'quality' and accountability of educational services governed thinking of the TT in its publications criticising the Finnish school system. Importantly, representatives of the TT were present in the National Board of Education, the body in charge of devising development plans for the compulsory education system at large. It has been argued that the TT exerted considerable influence on the discussion regarding updating the comprehensive schools system and introduced the language of the markets into the previously highly welfarist sector (Ahonen 2003).

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, Varjo 2005). 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 (Council of the State 1990). In addition, the Report highlighted that improving the quality of education and increasing the efficiency of the education system on the whole were starting points for developing education policy in the 1990s (ibid: 3). 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 other worlds, decentralisation and growing individualisation, for example in terms of the rights of individuals to develop themselves more freely and without restrictions, can be seen to be central aims of the Report, which marked a change of direction for the Finnish comprehensive school system.

It has been argued that when the Report was debated in the Parliament in 1990 the aim of developing individualisation and choice within the school system was considered largely positively across party political lines (Varjo 2005). However, as noted by Varjo (ibid: 344), representatives of the centre-left parties raised doubts about the underlying value-base of the Report which they criticised as being 'narrow, materialistic and even neo-liberal-utilitarian' and subsequently, one whereby the student was primarily seen as an object for the future workforce in the international competitive environment. Despite some disagreements, the vision expressed in the Report was allowed to materialise (Ahonen 2003). The outcome of the Report of the Cabinet and the ensuing debate is discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Several authors have argued that the education policy which emerged in Finland in the 1990s was in many ways neo-liberal (e.g. Rinne and Vuorio-Lehti 1996, Volanen 2001, Poropudas and Mäkinen 2001). Emphasis was placed, as noted in the Report of the Cabinet discussed above, on increased flexibility of the education system, choice for students to choose courses and/or schools, and the rights of individuals to receive education suited to their specific needs. Whether the idea was ever to create education markets is debatable, however. Although

competition between schools for students was encouraged by allowing parental choice (demand) and by encouraging schools to become different (supply) and by altering the funding system from the central government to the local authority level by making it largely dependent on the number of students (see the next section for details) these reforms still were marginal in comparison to market-oriented reforms in other countries in the Anglo-Saxon world (see part 2.2.2. and Chapter 3). It might be therefore more suitable to call the phenomenon 'school markets' (Seppänen 2006) or 'the Nordic welfare state model of education markets' (Poropudas and Mäkinen 2001: 26). What is evident, though, is that when comparing the comprehensive school system in existence prior to the reforms to the situation in the 1990s the change of direction has been significant. In the Finnish context these reforms can be seen to entail elements of market-oriented reforms by referring to attempts to increase diversity between schools through allowing specialisation and admission criteria, and allowing consumer choice – the right of parents and children to choose other than the allocated local school. Furthermore, because of the high level of autonomy at the local authority level, municipalities are in practice able to introduce school funding systems that would encourage the development of stronger school markets – indeed this has happened in the capital Helsinki (see section 2.3). Some of key features of the emerging neo-liberal inspired education policy are highlighted in the Table 2 below and are further elaborated on in the remaining sections of the chapter.

Key features of education policy before the 1990s	Key features of education policy in the 1990s
Traditional liberalism (equality of opportunities)	Neo-liberalism (choice)
Detailed guidance and control by the state	School markets (right to choose for parents and students) – local/school autonomy
National focus highlighted	European perspective highlighted
Basic education	Education for the talented
Equality of access	Admissions policies
Detailed/prescribed National Curriculum	National Curriculum Framework

Table 2.1 Key features of education policy before and after 1990s - emergence of neo-liberalism in Finland (adapted from Volanen 2001: 184)

2.3. Education policy u-turn

In the late 1980s there was a shift from highly centralised planning to more decentralised planning. The change reflected concerns, on the one hand, about excessive bureaucracy, inflexibility and inadequate implementation of state planning and, on the other, about a need to increase efficiency and effectiveness of services (Rinne et al. 2002). This section addresses two major changes which affected the Finnish education system in the 1990s: reforms in financing and the severe economic recession resulting in welfare state restructuring.

2.3.1. Funding issues

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 and 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 become student number based (see below for details).

At the same time, the main sector grants for education and culture and for health and social care became formula-based (Moisio 2002). The state subsidy system in operation since 1997, when the latest adjustments were made, comprises of four distinct elements: a general state subsidy, a subsidy for health and social care, a subsidy for education and culture and a levelling of the state subsidy (revenue sharing)[8] (Iivarinen 2007). In addition, discretionary grants are available to those municipalities in temporary or exceptional economic difficulties (Ministry of the Interior 2007). A brief explanation follows of how the state subsidy works in practice with a specific focus on education.

The state subsidy for operating costs in education services is calculated and confirmed annually (Mäkelä 2000). The most important factor which influences the amount of state subsidy is the number of students (ibid: 17). Each municipality has been granted their own 'unit price' which reflects a number of municipality-specific factors including population density and numbers of disabled and special educational needs students. These unit prices constitute the other essential element when calculating the state subsidy for each municipality (Pirhonen and Salo 1999: 76). In simplified terms, the number of students is multiplied with the municipality unit price which constitutes the basis of the state subsidy for basic education services in each municipality (Iivarinen 2007). From this figure, the share paid by municipalities is subtracted (calculated by multiplying the population size with a confirmed financial share per resident

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[8] The levelling of the state subsidy either increases or decreases the amount of subsidies given to municipalities from the first three components, and is based on the amount of local taxes (i.e. whether these are lower or higher than average) (Iivarinen 2007).

which is the same for each municipality) which gives the total state subsidy for education and culture (ibid.).

The current state subsidy system was reformed in 1997 (Iivarinen 2007). In education services the greatest change was from 1997 when the state subsidy was delegated directly to the education provider (normally municipalities) whereas before it was paid to a municipality where a student was ordinarily resident (Pirhonen and Salo 1999, Mäkelä 2000). One consequence of the per-capita system is that 'state money follows the pupils and students at a state-defined unit price' and that the increased efficiency of this new system has encouraged 'local governments...to compete for students and to keep class sizes cost-effective' (Aho et al. 2006: 105). In other words, if a student attends a school outside the municipality where he/she is ordinarily resident, the state subsidy follows him/her to this educational provider (i.e. municipality or school) (Mäkelä 2000: 18). Another change introduced to the state subsidy system in 1997 was that the revenue sharing system was altered with the aim of equalising the tax bases of municipalities (Moisio 2002). As Moisio (2002: 18) explains: 'The revenue sharing started to be financed among municipalities so that municipalities above the equalisation limit pay a fee and those below the limit receive funding'. In practice, this has meant that the education and culture state subsidy for some municipalities has been negative (ibid.).

In the capital Helsinki, the Local Education Board reached a decision in 2007 to begin per capita funding to schools whereby each student brings with him/herself a certain amount of resources to a school (The Board of Education of the city of Helsinki 2007). This has meant, among other things, that 'schools are given the right to use the calculated total resources according to their own wishes for basic education and special education' (ibid: 2). 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.

2.3.2. Economic undercurrents

The year of 1993 is important in understanding what was happening in Finland politically, economically and socially. After a referendum held in the early 1990s, the Government was given the go-ahead to join the European Union (EU) and Finland gained its official membership at the beginning of 1995. What this decision did to education policy trends cannot be over-estimated. One can argue that it legitimised the redefinition of education policy as economic policy and as a commodity (Rinne 2004). EU membership was seen to lead to increasing economic competition with other member states. Internationalisation was therefore inevitable, and as a small country of just over five million inhabitants, it was feared that the effects of this change would be dramatic. From this point of view, changes in social policy and its underlying principles were warranted and legitimate. Equality was redefined as equality to pursue individualistic aims, and to reflect this, a way to achieve equality was to direct attention to the talented and gifted individuals – the leaders of the future (Ahonen 2001, Hämäläinen and Jakku-Sihvonen 2000). According to a report published by the National Board of Education in 2000 focusing on how to improve quality of education policy within the European context, 'one form of achieved equality is that the most talented and creative individuals are given the opportunity to full development...securing the possibilities for the development of the talented is one of the prerequisites of international competitiveness' (Hämäläinen and Jakku-Sihvonen 2000: 18-19).

Between 1990 and 1993 Finland suffered the worst recession for decades and unemployment rose to unprecedented figures (Rinne et al. 2002, Aho et al. 2006). This setback had a momentous impact on welfare provision, and set a trend, which even after a recovery has continued. In 1995 the block grant from the state was reduced by 17 per cent, which left many municipalities with very difficult decisions to be made – where to cut services and by how much (Vulliamy and Nikki 1997: 4). Inevitably education services suffered in many areas as corners were cut in order to save money: teachers were made redundant and small village schools were closed at a rate of approximately 100 primary

schools a year throughout the 1990s because of a lack of funding (Mäkelä 2000). The total number of schools closed during the period reached almost 700 and schools in the more sparsely populated northern and eastern parts of the country were particularly hard hit (Nikki 2000). It has been argued that the new state grant system enabled cost-cutting exercises to be offloaded from the centre to municipalities, a phenomenon that could be described as an abuse of decentralisation (Kivirauma 2001).[9]

At the level of school decentralisation, measures had an impact on increasing the autonomy of teachers in curriculum planning, and of principals in decision-making (Laitila 1999, Nikki 2000). Although this is often seen as a positive change, it has meant that teachers and principals' workloads have increased and they spend more time on paperwork. Furthermore, the role of principal has become one of manager rather than a teacher – principals are expected to be innovative leaders and developers of policy (Kääriäinen et al. 1997, Rinne et al. 2002). The roles and responsibilities of principals in budgeting at the school level have increased and in many municipalities the local education authorities have delegated the school budget to each school (Nikki 2000: 16). It has to be remembered, though, that practices used by different municipalities can vary considerably because of local autonomy in educational decision-making (European Commission 2000). Furthermore, the new freedoms of principals have been curtailed by a general lack of resources and subsequently one of the responsibilities assigned to principals has been 'to organise savings procedures at the level of schools' (Taipale 2005: 191).

There has been 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). This move encapsulates the general trend in Finnish education policy in the 1990s. An increase in local decision-making powers highlights flexibility and diversity that a more state-

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[9] Other authors have estimated the total number of school closed during the 1990s to be closer to 1000 (Aho et al. 2006: 92).

controlled system is unable to deliver – these important issues are further elaborated in the section below.

2.4. Specialist classes – legislation and practice

What are specialist classes and what does the term specialisation mean in the context of the Finnish comprehensive school system? This section will outline the important legislation and policy context related to the phenomenon of specialisation in Finland, which is crucial for understanding the context of this study. The question arises as to why there has been such an emphasis on specialisation and what consequences this has had on the education system as a whole.

2.4.1. On terminology

The terms specialisation, specialist classes and 'schools taking profiles' are often used interchangeably. The use of various terms linked to the concept of specialisation in the existing literature can be somewhat confusing, however, as there are no clear definitions to separate the terms from one another. Hence, there can be some overlap between the terms, and it might not be entirely clear what is meant by the use of such terms as a profile, specialisation, ethos, and weighted-teaching which is a specific method of teaching and learning foreign languages[10] (Kivipelto 1995). What unites all of these concepts, however, is the underlying emphasis placed on the values of choice, liberty and individualisation (Kivipelto 1995), which can thus be interpreted as being a part of market-oriented reforms in Finland (see section 2.2 and Table 2.1).

Closely linked to the idea of specialisation and schools taking profiles is the creation of an ethos within schools to promote their uniqueness. The aim of schools that decide to focus on their unique strengths is to highlight their

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[10] Weighted-teaching is based on language immersion techniques or 'Content and Language Integrated Teaching (CLIL) designed to teach children foreign languages as a part of every day school context rather than specific lessons (Rasinen 2006).

difference vis-à-vis other schools in the area (Kivipelto 1995). One way for schools to do this is to undertake various projects – local, national or international – or to take part in development projects. There is evidence to indicate that this type of differentiation through ethos is relatively widespread across municipalities in Finland, and can be argued to constitute an element of specialisation, although not as extreme as introducing distinct specialist classes (Kivipelto 1995). It is possible, for instance, for schools to describe themselves as having an international ethos when they have been forming links with schools in other countries, exchanging teaching materials, and organising visits to and from these institutions.

It is apparent that there is elusiveness and confusion surrounding the various terms used to refer to the phenomenon of specialisation, since the practices used by schools under this broad umbrella can be very different from one another. Therefore it may be more coherent to separate the two broad types of specialisation by calling the subject-specialisations that often function as separate streams within normal schools 'external specialisations' and the school-wide ethos type specialisations 'internal specialisation'. Selection is an important factor that separates the two types of specialisation. Schools that have external specialisations normally also have distinct admissions policies, for example through various entrance tests, and entry is therefore selective. Schools with internal specialisations, however, do not normally select an intake, but all children who enrol at the school will participate in these school-wide specialisations.

2.4.2. Legislation

The strategy of schools 'taking profiles' as the practice is often called in Finland, only entered the policy arena in the 1990s. In theory, it was possible for schools to emphasise one specific subject, namely music, before and even after the radical comprehensive revolution in the 1970s (see part 2.1.2). However, it was not until the implementation of the National Curriculum in 1994 that the policy on specialist classes and schools taking profiles was given a new lease of

life. 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. Table 2.2 below charts the main educational legislation and accompanying National Curricula since the introduction of the comprehensive school system in 1968.

Main Educational legislation	National Curriculum
SA467/1968 Comprehensive School System Act	1970 National Curriculum for the comprehensive school
SA476/1983 Comprehensive School Act	1985 National Curriculum for the comprehensive school
SA511/1988, SA171/1991, SA261/1991, SA707/1992, SA682/1993 (Laws to make changes to the 1983 Comprehensive School Act)	1994 National Framework Curriculum for the comprehensive school
SA628/1998 Basic Education Act	2004 National Framework Curriculum for basic education

Table 2.2 Main educational legislation and National Curricula since 1968 (adapted from Seppänen 2006 and Johnson 2007b)

Specialist classes take various forms in different subject areas, and they are often clearly focused on specific subjects such as mathematics, languages, art or music. Specialist classes start when a child starts school at the age of seven, in the third year (aged nine) or in the seventh year of schooling at the beginning of secondary level (aged 13) (Seppänen 2003). In practice children from the specialist streams at primary level, particularly in case of language specialisms, move directly to secondary schools that have specialised in the same areas to enable a seamless transfer (Seppänen 2001, Board of Education of the City of Helsinki 2008a). Entry to specialist classes at secondary school level is

therefore to a large extent governed by a precondition of a child having attended a specialist stream at primary school level.

Most commonly the specialist classes have more hours dedicated to studying a certain subject area than is the minimum requirement as approved by the Council of the State (Seppänen 2004, 2006). Each municipality through local education boards has been given powers to decide on the allocation of lesson hours in all schools in their areas – the national guidelines are flexible and can be moulded to suit individual municipalities. Indeed, flexibility is one of the key words in the legislation and warrants the development of diverse practices between municipalities (Luhtanen 1999). Schools taking profiles by introducing specialist classes in various key topic reflects the new national policy of flexibility and diversity as shown below.

The 1994 National Curriculum signified a shift from a previously more nationally prescribed curriculum to a more flexible school-based curriculum system encouraging the creation of diversity within the state sector. One of the underlying aims was that municipalities and schools should be able to take into account local conditions and local needs in decision-making powers and functions. Although the 1985 Framework Curriculum which the 1994 National Curriculum replaced was built on a municipality-based design, it was found to be too detailed and too fragmented – exactly the same problems as with the 1970 Comprehensive School Curriculum (Nikki 2000, Johnson 2007b). The objectives and aims of the 1994 Curriculum were thus designed by the National Board of Education to direct, but not to control or restrict schools and teaching (Laitila 1999). In practice, only broad aims of the National Curriculum across all subjects were specified – the contents of the curriculum could be drafted by schools themselves autonomously (Ahonen 2001).

The impact of the National Curriculum reforms of 1994 on municipalities and on schools was investigated soon after their implementation in the mid-1990s (Norris et al. 1996). It was found that many of the municipalities examined gave extensive freedom to schools without direction – subsequently there was

significant variation in the way in which schools carried out the curriculum reforms. The researchers concluded that while some schools fully and enthusiastically embraced the potential to reform, others suffered from a lack of vision within their organisations, or in the worst case scenario, were 'left out of the train' due to a lack of capacity to undertake reforms at the school level (Norris et al. 1996: 54). These are interesting findings and suggest that not all schools were able to take advantage of the increased freedoms given to the local and school level for one reason or another.

The 1994 National Curriculum incorporated an earlier decision by the Council of the State in 1992 on the allocation of lesson hours.[11] According to this statute only minimum weekly hours per subject were set at the primary school level, and at the secondary level there was only an upper limit for 'optional' courses (Finlex 2006a). Previously, in the 1985 Framework Curriculum for Comprehensive Schools, both minimum and maximum hours per subject were specified for each year group (Häkkinen 2000). Furthermore, in primary schools it became possible to teach an optional foreign language in addition to the compulsory foreign language, while in secondary schools the weekly hours for 'optional' courses more than doubled increasing students' possibilities to choose courses they wanted to study (Laitila 1999). All in all, the 1994 Framework Curriculum allowed more choice for municipalities, schools, students and their parents (Nikki 2000). In 2004, however, the existing freedoms were partly restricted with the introduction of the 2004 National Framework Curriculum for basic education – a more detailed curriculum was a response to emerging evidence that the framework of the 1994 National Curriculum had been too loose and uncontrolled (Johnson 2007b). As a result, the 2004 Curriculum reforms brought with them more detailed guidance to schools and municipalities (Nyyssölä 2004) – these changes are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 which aims to analyse the impact of national education policies at the local level (see section 6.1).

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[11] The Council of the State (i.e. the Cabinet/Government) approves the allocation of lesson hours as proposed by the Ministry of Education. The National Board of Education, on the other hand, is in charge of drafting and revising the National Framework Curriculum.

2.5. The Basic Education Act 1998

The early 1990s signified a radical change of direction in Finnish education policy. Legislation on specialist classes discussed above represents one significant step towards creating a new type of comprehensive school system – the Education Act of 1998, however, represents perhaps the single most momentous move towards this aim. As can be seen from Table 2.2 above, the early 1990s was marked with an implementation of a number of small changes to existing legislation, which signalled the forthcoming major legislative reform in 1998. For example, the Acts SA171 and SA261 in 1991 enabled the possibility of teaching in a foreign language in comprehensive schools on a permanent basis, and the possibility of municipalities deciding to have one or more teaching groups in some schools where teaching is given in a language other than Finnish or Swedish (Seppänen 2006: 65).

The Basic Education Act in many ways confirmed that the neo-liberal inspired educational programme was well-rooted in Finnish soil. During the parliamentary debate in 1997[12] the Conservative education minister argued that '...the education system ought to be examined from a new point of view and in its entirety – this point of view has to focus more on aims and results and not on the process by which education services are produced' (Finnish Parliamentary Papers 4.6.1997). 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 new legislation specified that evaluation was to take place at various different levels: self-evaluation of students, schools and teachers, municipality-level evaluation and national evaluation (Hämäläinen and Jakku-Sihvonen 2000). What is of great significance is that the Act provided the theoretical foundations for the most radical of changes using the idea of flexibility as one of its cornerstones.

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[12] The Social Democratic rainbow Government in 1997 was headed by the Social Democrats and the Conservatives.

As in practice in England and Wales since the 1988 Education Reform Act, the notion of parental 'choice' was now also a reality in the Finnish compulsory education system. In fact, this policy dates to the early 1990s when a hundred-year-old school district principle was abolished dispersing the idea of a local school. In the old system a city or a municipality was divided into separate school districts and children were allocated to a school in their own district – normally the closest one to their homes. However, after an amendment to the law in 1993, it was now possible for an entire municipality to act as one district enabling schools to become competitive enterprises if local authorities so decided (Ahonen 2003, Seppänen 2006).

The increasing freedom of municipalities, schools and parents was an area which raised considerable debate in the Parliament during the late 1990s, and the issues of possible differentiation within comprehensive schools and its effect on equality of opportunity were addressed (Finnish Parliamentary Papers 1997):

> 'A relevant question is being raised that if statutes and norms are being broken down too freely then what is going to happen to educational equality of opportunity?' (Vehviläinen, the Centre Party, 4.6.1997)

> '...we must not forget the basic meaning of education: to get resources for life...this point of view is in danger of being forgotten during the time when the laws of market forces are attempting to force their way even into schools' (Isohookana-Asunmaa, the Centre Party, 4.6.1997)

> 'Today's discussion in the Parliament shows that the apprehension about differentiation between schools, competition between schools or fragmentation of teaching worries many of us. We must not, in the name of freedom, allow differentiation between comprehensive schools or raw competition between schools...' (Juurola, the Social Democratic Party 4.6.1997)

The Education Bill was also discussed and debated in the Committee of Education and Culture which published its report in 1998. Although broadly accepting the proposals of the Bill and recognising that there was a need to continue to develop and strengthen flexibility, individuality and freedom of choice in compulsory education, the Committee also highlighted some reservations and concerns about the increasing freedom at local and school levels in that 'differentiation entails a danger of inequality' (Committee of Education and Culture 1998: 15). The Committee argued that it was necessary that this threat to be avoided (ibid.), and went on to suggest that the use of entrance tests should be limited to measuring 'aptitude' and be only used by schools which had a specialist agenda such as specialist classes. This restricted the proposal of the Bill which would have allowed the use of entrance criteria/tests if a student applied to any other than the allocated local school (ibid: 29).

What did the policy of 'parental choice' mean in practice? 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, Ministry of Education 2005). 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 are in effect allowed to by-pass this requirement by relying on entrance tests to select an intake of children (see Chapter 3.2 for further discussion). The 28§ of the 1998 Act specifies, in accordance with the view of the Committee of Education and Culture seen above, that if schools have specialisms, in other words 'have a curriculum in which one or more subjects are being weighted' entrance tests can be used to select students on the basis of aptitude (Finlex 2004: 10). The municipality *can 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: 10).

The 1998 Act also stated that class sizes should not be specified in law – class sizes should remain appropriate for the realisation of aims and objectives of local curricula, essentially granting municipalities the freedom to substantially increase their class sizes (Luhtanen 1999: 300).

Taking the above radical changes into consideration it may seem surprising that the overall aims of education in the 1998 Act still relied on notions of equality of opportunity. As identified by 2§ of the 1998 Education Act, the aims of education are that it should 'promote education and equality in society' and that 'the aim of education is to secure sufficient similarity in education across the whole country' (Finlex 2004: 2). The issues of equality and equity are further considered in the following chapter.

2.6. Concluding comments

The fight for, and the subsequent setting up of the comprehensive school system in the 1960s and 1970s in Finland, represents a rather short-lived victory for the advancement of social democracy through the 'common school'. External economic pressures necessitated far-reaching changes affecting the very foundations of the comprehensive school ethos. Ideas of individualisation and competitiveness, effectiveness and efficiency have crept into the Finnish comprehensive school system, which has had to adapt to a changing word around it. It has been argued that the education reforms in the 1990s eroded the principle of the common school by bringing in the spirit of New Public Management (Ahonen 2003). Although only elements of market-oriented reforms were introduced in Finland, the goal of educational equality of opportunity across comprehensive schools in all areas of the country had been subjected to increasing individualisation.

The next chapter will specifically focus on the area of equity and equality of opportunity as applied to education policy. This constitutes an important context

for the research, which thus warrants a detailed analysis of both the relevant theory and practice. This interesting but challenging area will be looked at next.

3. Equity, equality and market reforms

This chapter focuses on describing and analysing two important issues which are closely related to the phenomenon under investigation in this study – namely, specialisation within the Finnish comprehensive school system with its underlying reasons, rationales and possible outcomes.

The concepts of equity and equality are important considerations in most state provided education policies across the developed countries of the world. States have an intrinsic interest in being involved in providing education for their citizens because of the benefits this will accrue in the form of educated and skilled workforce, and in turn, benefits to the economy (e.g. Ertola and Väisänen 1997). The accepted market failures in welfare service provision, which include problems arising from imperfect information, existence of monopolies and a lack of sufficient competition for example, also contribute to explaining state involvement in compulsory education (Belfield 2000). In redistributing resources through welfare services, including compulsory education, the importance and centrality of the concepts of equity and equality are generally agreed upon. They remain, however, far from easy notions to define and meaningfully apply to real-life contexts. Generalisations regarding equity and equality in relation to education policies are difficult, if not impossible, to construct as education systems even in countries that are in close proximity to each other can be dramatically different in their underlying values and principles, overall provision, and of course, their historical foundations.

Despite the great variety of different types of compulsory education systems in Europe and beyond, and the inherent difficulties associated with the key concepts of equity and equality, they nevertheless feature in some shape or form in most of the official aims and objectives of education systems in the West (Eurydice 1996). Why is this so? Why is it that these concepts continue to have an impact on policies when any agreed definitions and inherent meanings are so hard to come by? Is there much point in even attempting to discuss and define

equity and equality in education policies since they are, by nature, such contested and elusive notions? The answer is, of course, yes – they remain important indicators and devices in assessing continuity and change, permanence and adaptability.

The chapter begins with two sections dedicated to critically analysing the concepts of equity, equality and equality of opportunity as applied to the field of compulsory education. These concepts are widely used in both literature and in practice, but are less often adequately defined. Sections 3.1 and 3.2 attempt to do some justice to this important but complex field in defining and evaluating the concepts of equity, equality and equality of opportunity, in both theory and in practice. Section 3.1 begins with a broad overview on equity and equality – some theoretical devices for evaluating equity and equality are also briefly discussed. Attention then moves, in section 3.2, to analysing what the concepts of equity and equality of opportunity mean and how they have changed in the field of state education over the years, specifically in Finland. Finally, in section 3.3, attention is moved to analysing the impact of 'market forces' in education with evidence from both the Finnish context and from England, Wales and Scotland.

3.1. Equity and equality in theory

What do the concepts of equity and equality mean – how can they be defined, analysed, measured, and applied to practice? Le Grand (1991: 11) has suggested that 'equality does not necessarily imply equity, or equity equality. Equality of various kinds may be advocated for reasons other than equity; equitable outcomes may be quite inegalitarian'.

According to the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1993: 840,843):

Equity. 1. *Fairness, impartiality; even-handed dealing. 2. That which is fair and right.*

Equality. *The condition of being equal in quantity, magnitude, value, intensity, etc.*

Figure 3.1 Definitions of equity and equality

If we accept this distinction, clearly the condition of equality appears stricter than the condition of equity – a requirement for fairness is easier to satisfy than that for equality of being. But who decides what the conditions of fairness and for 'being equal' entail? What types of issues are being measured, and how can these be applied to practice?

A commonly used illustration of these dilemmas is the use of an example of cake-sharing (Bostock 2000, Fitzpatrick 2001). If one imagines that we are attempting to share a cake between a number of people at a party while taking into consideration the criteria of equity and equality respectively, the question arises, should the cake be divided in to pieces that take into account the deservedness of sharers such as their level of need, whether actual or potential, or their effort to ensure fairness? Or, on the grounds of equality, should all sharers be given a portion of equal size regardless of any other intervening factor such as need or personal desire? On the other hand, could the fairness principle dictate that equality principles are indeed unjust as they ignore people's starting conditions? Would it be fairer to give somebody who is ravenous a larger piece than to somebody who has just enjoyed a large meal? And what about people's personal preferences – should the share of somebody who does not want a piece of the cake be given to somebody else instead? And who, then, should decide who gets more than his or her fair share of the cake –

the quickest, the greediest, or the thinnest perhaps? Aristotle's theorising on fair distributions suggests that goods to be distributed have to be divided in proportion to the worth of the recipients (Aristotle 1999). In this way,

> 'equality for the people involved will be the same as for the things involved, since [in a just arrangement] the relation between the people will be the same as the relation between the things involved. For if the people involved are not equal, they will not [justly] receive equal shares; indeed, whenever equals receive unequal shares, or unequals equal shares, in a distribution, that is the source of quarrels and accusations' (ibid: 71).

Problems remain, though, regarding how to measure a person's worthiness (Bostock 2000). Evidently, Aristotle's conception of fairness does not provide a feasible basis for applying in contexts such as state education policies in modern societies. What these types of considerations and questions do, however, is to move the debate into a more philosophical ground of social justice, and to theories of social justice. As important as moral philosophy is in social policy, it also raises many problems such as those highlighted above. Philosophy in its grand scale offers no certainties and no clear solutions to everyday dilemmas, yet the questions of equity and equality will continue to feature in societies and present problems for decision-makers in many areas of life (Young 1994a). It is necessary, then, to employ a smaller scale framework for analysing the meaning of equity and equality in real-life contexts – a framework, which is not aiming to solve the problematic conundrums of moral philosophy, but which offers more practically-oriented ways to apply philosophical questions to real-life situations (ibid.).

Before moving on to considering these aspects further, it is important to note that philosophy is also related to ideology, a value system based on beliefs about right and wrong in societies. According to Stiglitz (2002: 222), ideological sets of beliefs are often held so strongly that empirical confirmation is not needed – the world is seen through a lens, which may only provide a

narrow focus. Ideologies have, of course, great relevance to the political context in societies, and governments in power are affected by their ideological leanings in policy-making agendas. Equality is a notion that has relevance as an ideological concept and a political term – it holds different meaning and value to politicians of differing political leanings. In the social democratic tradition equality is greatly valued as a notion highlighting social solidarity and redistribution of resources whereas the liberal tradition values freedom and individuality above equality. As argued by Callinicos (2000: 37), interrelations between different ideals are complex, and the realisation of one ideal may undermine another.

But, let us move attention back to equity and equality issues at a more practical level.

3.2. Equity and equality in practice

How can the concepts of equity and equality be operationalised to make sense in concrete situations such as in evaluating education policy trends in different countries? One strategy in the field of education is to assess the criteria of equity in terms of access[13], while equality is often thought about in terms of opportunities. Within these two wider strategies different variables can be added, which add further dimensions for analyses. These can include consideration of gender issues, regional issues and socio-economic issues such as distribution of wealth and how an individual's socio-economic background can affect life chances and opportunities. Inclusion and exclusion on the grounds of special educational needs or (foreign) nationality/ethnicity is also an area, which has strong relevance for both equity and equality of opportunity considerations in practice.

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[13] The term 'equity of access' was chosen instead of the often used term 'equality of access' because attention in the analysis is placed on examining *fairness* of admission policies (see Figure 3.1).

3.2.1. Equity of access

Evaluation of equity of access takes into consideration the fairness of conditions that exist prior to allowing entry to schools, classes or courses. This is of special importance in education systems that are characterised by diversity, differentiation and choice – the existence of different types of schools in the state sector, and subsequently, admissions criteria that guard entry to schools. Admissions criteria have been found to be prone to unfairness when, for instance, schools are left in charge of constructing their own admissions criteria. This can happen in response to oversubscription under open enrolment policy like that in operation in England (West and Pennell 1998, West et al. 2004 and 2006). In these instances, schools may employ entrance tests such as written tests, use religion as criteria, or interviews with students and/or parents. Schools that are most likely to employ selection methods as part of their admissions policies include voluntary-aided/foundation schools (former grant-maintained schools). Questions can be raised about the use of 'cream-skimming' – an attempt to select the brightest and most able students in the state sector and not select those who have difficulties of different kinds (West et al. 2004, 2006).

Various entrance tests, and particularly interviews, can be argued to be problematic on the grounds of equity because they highlight social class biases that are covertly present in the tests. This type of 'social selection' is clearly not equitable since it is not children's ability or aptitude, but their background, which determines their fate (West et al. 1998). Furthermore, the current emphasis on quality and standards alongside choice policies in England has highlighted the incentives for schools to select students who are likely to enhance the school's examination results, and subsequently enhance their popularity under open enrolment. Financial incentives are also present since funding for schools is often based on the price-per-head principle – the more students a school can attract the more money it will receive. The issue of admissions policies is returned to later in the chapter (see part 3.3.3).

When talking about equity issues in education services it may be helpful to make a distinction between horizontal equity and vertical equity (Barr 1993). Both types can be applied to analysing the extent of equity in education. However, priority is often given to horizontal equity in terms of access to schools, opportunities and minimum standards. Vertical equity, on the other hand, would focus attention on redistribution of income and/or consumption, and the extent to which resources were flowing from the direction of the rich to the direction of the poor (Barr 1993). This approach is perhaps more useful when analysing broader equity issues in welfare states such as direct and indirect taxation and adequacy of welfare benefits. Focusing on consumption, though, can reveal important information on level of use of services – who, overall, are the main beneficiaries of educational services? There is evidence to indicate that it tends to be the middle classes who reap the greatest benefits of services if assessed in terms of access to popular schools and successfully working one's way through the educational market place (Le Grand 1982).

3.2.2. Equality and equality of opportunity

How then can equality issues be applied to practice? Authors such as Sen (1992) have alluded to the inherent dilemmas of 'equality' in arguing that equality can be seen in a number of ways all of which have very specific constraints to practice. Equality of outcome, for instance, would suggest a requirement to equalise end-result level equality – clearly an unrealistic aim since people's abilities vary – whereas equality of use would take into consideration such background factors as access and opportunities. 'Equality of what?' then remains a question, which has practical relevance in highlighting the multitude of various forms and interpretations of the concept, and its inherently problematic nature. Furthermore, because of human diversity and heterogeneity, the potential achievement of equality in one space would coincide with inequality in another (Sen 1992). In the field of education policies, equality is commonly interpreted and evaluated in terms of equality of opportunity. This is one very specific form of equality, which without narrowing down would remain too broad and too problematic to be employed in practical situations.

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What are the implications of equality of opportunity policies in education services? Before moving on to consider this question any further, it is important to note that in attempting to equalise opportunities, *equality* is not valued for its own sake. The aim is not to achieve equality of outcome or end-result, but merely to ensure that social, economic or cultural factors do not unfairly disadvantage anyone or prevent them from taking part (Goodin 1988: 60). This is thought to provide conditions for providing equal access to education, and it is then up to an individual to utilise his or her talents and apply effort to progress through the compulsory education system (Roemer 1998). It is clear that equality of opportunity does not guarantee fairness – children enter education systems unequal and equality of opportunity policies are not aimed at tackling the existence of 'natural inequalities' but rather to compensate their existence (ibid.). From birth children possess different abilities and aptitudes, which can be developed and maximised through social and economic conditions (Neisser et al. 1996). On the other side of the coin, however, there prevail negative conditions that can hinder children's intellectual development, and are likely to leave their innate potential unrealised (ibid.).

The fact that one's social background has a strong influence on one's future opportunities and options can be interpreted as unfair. Is there, then, much point in attempting to equalise opportunities when so much of the underlying causes for the seeming unfairness lies within the family? Is it just harsh fate that some children are born less lucky than others? Many critics of equality of opportunity argue that because families are so crucial for future opportunities, or a lack of them, equality of opportunity policies fail in theory and practice. Unequal starting conditions in life will always exist, and hence, opportunities cannot be made equal (Goldman 1987: 102). Furthermore, because inherent inequalities in life chances between different people, opportunities cannot be equalised in practice. The fact remains that accurate statistical predictions of children's life chances can be made, at the level of a population, on the basis of knowing father's educational level or income (Fishkin 1992: 32, Haven 1999).

The idea of merit on the grounds of deservedness has been traditionally linked to equality of educational opportunities. Can success be earned on merit? On the surface, the appeal with the idea of merit is that people's hard work and effort together with choices they make would ensure success in life. This appears fair since with determination people can create success despite their circumstances, which can be fortunate, unfortunate or anything in between (Kymlicka 2002: 58). On a closer inspection, however, doubts begin to surface – people's talents (which can be linked to genes) and social circumstances are to a large extent matter of luck, and hence, undeserved. It cannot be argued that somebody born to a high social class family, for instance, would have deserved their fortune. But of course coming from a high social class background provides a more beneficial starting position in the race of life than does coming from a low social class background (Feinstein 2003). Accordingly, 'the principle of merit then becomes a mechanism for generating unequal life chances' (Fishkin 1992: 33). Taken to its extreme end result – as envisaged by Young in his satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1994b) – a truly meritocratic society could lead into a widening gulf between the 'superior' upper and the 'inferior' lower classes separated by their ability, level of effort and achievement.

One's future choices will be affected, to an extent, by one's earlier social and economic background. This is a fact, which cannot be abolished or altered. The 'difference principle' by Rawls developed in *A Theory of Justice* provides an argument that draws on this realisation. According to Rawls, the distribution of natural talents and societal positions can only be warranted if they benefit the position of the worst off in a society (1999). As Rawls has argued: 'In order to treat all persons equally, to provide genuine equality of opportunity, society must give more attention to those with fewer native assets and to those born into the less favorable social positions' (ibid: 86). It could be that in the field of education, the likelihood of the most talented ending up in the best paid and highest status jobs paying more taxes that, in turn, would be redistributed through the welfare state services would justify Rawls's requirement.

Broadly speaking it can be argued that the concept of equality of opportunity has become a widely used umbrella term in official language of education, which may, however, have little weight in practice. Often, 'equality of opportunity' is used in a rhetorical way rather than as a concept that has much connection to real-life situations. As Cavanagh (2002: 1-2) has argued 'the fact we all converge on a certain form of words does not mean we actually agree on anything substantial'. However, it cannot simply be concluded that equality of opportunity, despite all its associated difficulties, is not be a valuable concept as it has influenced the development of education policies in many countries (Eurydice 1996).

3.2.3. Equality of opportunity in change

The 1960s and 1970s saw the introduction of comprehensive schools in a number of countries including France, England and Wales, Scotland and Sweden. These decades reflected a wide consensus among countries and governments of the West on increasing equality of opportunity in education (Kerckhoff et al. 1996). International organisations such as the OECD were promoting the cause of equality by arguing that in order to create stronger, more competitive economies, countries had to pay attention to improving access and opportunities for children of school age (Papadopoulos 1994). This line of thinking was not to last for long, however. Concern soon shifted from equality through comprehensive schooling to individual equality, and the aim of enhancing countries' economic edge by focusing on effectiveness and 'quality' of education policies in member countries as demanded by a shift into a knowledge-based economy by the 1990s (Kivirauma 2001, Rinne 2004).

In Finland the reforms introduced throughout the 1990s have made it explicit that the era of the comprehensive school as it existed for decades is over (see Chapter 2). It has been argued that equality of opportunity has had to make way for a new form of equality highlighting notions of individualism and meritocracy (Rinne and Vuorio-Lehti 1996). This, on the other hand, can be seen to be linked to the rise of neo-liberalism and its anti-welfare rhetoric which

has 'countered the communal ideas of welfare states with a powerful restatement that fundamentally social life is made up of solitary, self-interested individuals' (Culpitt 1999: 16). Indeed, according to the Development Plan by the Ministry of Education (2004), each individual has a right to receive education that takes into consideration his or her special abilities and needs (see Chapter 6 for further analysis of recent developments in Finnish national education policies).

Creation of diversity and enhanced flexibility within comprehensive schools are all part of the new non-comprehensive agenda which have taken meritocracy to a new level – the music classes which can be seen as the early but relatively undeveloped form of specialist classes were, and still are, meritocratic (see Chapter 2.1). It is important, however, to emphasise their small-scale and local nature, which is in contrast to the development of specialist classes which was on a much wider scale in the 1990s.[14] As seen previously, the emergence of music classes was rather sporadic and not related to the aims of national education policies through the comprehensive school system. The music classes did of course, by default, undermine the comprehensive school ideology by being selective, but crucially were not an official national policy development.

According to Rinne and Vuorio-Lehti (1996), political discussion on equality in educational provision in Finland has become almost rhetorical – over three decades sharply differentiated viewpoints and heated discussion have disappeared and a consensus has been achieved. But, has a concern for wide-reaching equality actually lost its prior importance?

Interestingly, with a growing emphasis on individuality, concern for the rights of more marginalised groups in the society has been highlighted. Integration and inclusion of special needs students within mainstream schooling and efficient

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[14] There is a lack of information regarding the music classes, however, based on research by Vähälä (1996) and information by Statistics Finland (Haven 1999), it can be estimated that in 1996 the percentage of children at comprehensive schools attending music classes was approximately 2.6.

inclusion of children from immigrant backgrounds within the Finnish society have become important aims in the current education policy development (Ministry of Education 2006a, 2006b). The Basic Education Act 1998, and later Development Plan (see above), stated that education services should be provided appropriate to each child's age and abilities (Finlex 2004, Naukkarinen 2005). In this way, although the basis of inclusion policies can be seen to be rooted in the culture of individualisation, for special needs children and for immigrant children at least, equality of opportunity has at the same been strengthened – instead of segregation the emphasis is now on the rights of all children to be educated at mainstream schools. In the context of England and Wales, the Warnock Report 1978 investigating provision for SEN children raised broadly similar debates – the integration of SEN children within mainstream schools was advocated as a way to increase equality of opportunity for these children (Warnock et al. 1978). On the other hand, efficiency considerations do undoubtedly also have a role to play in the integration and inclusion debate. As far as special educational needs students are concerned, the inclusion model can provide a cheaper solution to previous practices since municipalities do not have maintain as many properties as with the old 'separatist' model so resulting in financial savings (Naukkarinen 2005).

International student assessment studies have also thrown some light on the issues. The results from the three OECD PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) studies in 2000, 2003 and 2006 showed that Finland has remained a highly equitable country among other industrialised countries while achieving excellent results in various areas assessed. The PISA 2000 and 2003 studies found that the gap between the low-performing and high-performing 15-year-old children in Finland was small (OECD 2004a). Finland also had the smallest between-school variation in performance of all OECD countries (Välijärvi et al. 2002, OECD 2007a).

Engagement in reading and interest in reading were found to be the major single determinants of reading literacy performance of Finnish 15-year-olds (Välijärvi et al. 2002:15). The results showed that Finnish students displayed the third

highest level of engagement in reading while displaying the highest level of interest in reading. In fact, these two factors proved to be more significant than socio-economic background of children in explaining variation of student performance (Välijärvi et al 2002). Socio-economic background factors had an impact in explaining differences in attainment between children from differing social classes, but importantly in Finland even children from the lowest socio-economic quarter performed above the OECD average (Välijärvi et al. 2002, OECD 2004a). Differences between schools accounted for approximately 36 per cent of the variation in students' reading literacy performance in OECD countries – in Finland this figure was only 5 per cent (Välijärvi et al. 2002: 26). Finland alongside such countries as Sweden, Canada, Korea and Japan were found to have higher than the OECD average student performance while maintaining smaller than average impact of family background on performance (OECD 2004b, 2007a). There were, however, more significant gender inequalities in achievement – girls performed better than boys in reading in the PISA 2000 study although the gap had narrowed by the next assessment in 2003. There is further evidence from national studies showing that girls out-perform boys in subjects such as languages and have, in general, more positive attitudes towards education and learning than their male counterparts (Mustaparta and Nyyssölä et al. 2004).

Overall, these findings would suggest that Finland has remained a country which, by international standards, manages to achieve highly equitable results whether assessed in terms of socio-economic or regional factors. This conclusion was also reached by the Council of the State (i.e. the Government) in its report of education policy development to the Parliament in 2002. It is still widely agreed, however, that there are certain groups of children including immigrants and children living in rural areas as well as children from lower socio-economic backgrounds for whom educational inequality remains a problem which should be addressed, as international and national evidence has highlighted (Grubb et al. 2005, Ministry of Education 2002). Furthermore, it can be argued that changes have taken place which may in time affect Finland's high position in the 'equality-league table' – education policy priorities have

gradually been changing since the 1990s. Parental choice and diversity of schools are some of the ways through which market principles have been introduced into education services, which may have detrimental effects on equality of opportunity for children from all socio-economic backgrounds across the regions (see the next section for a further discussion). In this way, a concern for wide equality of opportunity has played a diminishing role since the focus is now on the individual rather than a larger community. As the Committee of Education and Culture has recently commented, 'educational equality of opportunity constitutes the basis for Finnish well-being and for the competitiveness of the country' thus highlighting economic considerations and pressures of globalisation above the more intrinsic benefits of education (2006: 4).

3.2.4. What is true equality of opportunity?

The various philosophical dilemmas and debates as well as the developments in education policies in Finland discussed above raise some perplexing questions about the nature of equality of opportunity. What, for instance, is *true* equality of opportunity? Can it be argued that the conception of equality of opportunity which governed in the 1960s and 70s emphasising the highly inclusive nature of compulsory education, and regional and socio-economic concerns was closer to the ideal of equality of opportunity than the more recent individualistic conceptions of the term? Or, in reality, is the more individualistic notion of equality of opportunity actually more advanced since it takes into consideration children's differing needs through gender, ethnicity and multiculturalism[15], and special educational needs for example? And is it that when focusing on the individualistic model, concerns for socio-economic and regional factors have to be at the same time downplayed? Is it not possible to combine all of these considerations and create a notion of equality of opportunity which is truly inclusive? This model would, then, recognise the importance of regional and

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[15] The term multiculturalism is commonly used in Finnish policy documents to refer to the growing numbers of individuals of immigrant backgrounds living and working in Finland, and the subsequent shift into a more heterogeneous culture and society from the previously highly homogeneous society.

socio-economic considerations as well as the needs of certain sections of the population through gender, ethnicity and special educational needs.

Critics would undoubtedly argue that in this sense the needs of all different learners should be included within the scope of the definition, and hence the more talented children would also require special recognition. But this is, partly, where the difficulty lies – it is impossible to see how the needs of the more talented children could be included within this definition without sacrificing the criterion for inclusiveness under socio-economic concerns. It might therefore be necessary to draw a definition of equality of opportunity, which, in addition to socio-economic and regional considerations, includes individualistic elements *only* on the basis of gender and belonging to a more marginalised group on the basis of SEN or ethnicity/immigration status (which can be linked with socio-economic considerations). Only by this way can true equality of opportunity be achieved as fully as possible.

The definition thus recognises three separate sources of inequality: discrimination (inequality in access), social background inequality (differences relating to family environment and parenting) and natural endowment inequality (inequality in natural abilities affecting the earnings capacity and disabilities which imply special resource needs) (White 2004: 32). The third aspect, natural endowment inequality, does not include the gifted children who are not inherently deserving of extra resources to develop their talents (ibid.). Thus, the vision of equality of opportunity proposed by Young (1994b: 160) can be realised in practice:

> '...equal opportunity for all people, irrespective of their 'intelligence', to develop the virtues and talents with which they have been endowed, all their capacities for appreciating the beauty and depth of human experience, all their potential for living to the full...the schools would not segregate the like but mingle the unlike; by promoting diversity within unity, they would teach respect for the infinite human differences which are not the least of mankind's virtues'.

On this basis the definition of equality of opportunity as applied to compulsory education proposed here rejects all meritocratic elements. Selection and differentiation through the provision of different types of classes (or schools) on the grounds of ability/aptitude is seen as inequitable. Therefore the more talented children and their 'special needs' which could be catered for through selection and differentiation are not included under the scope of the definition. This definition reflects the arguments advanced by Walzer (1983) in the *Spheres of Justice* in that segregation of students on the grounds of 'ability' cannot be agreed upon if justice remains a consideration. As Walzer argued (ibid: 21):

> 'there are neither educational nor social reasons for making such distinctions across the board, creating a two-class system within the schools or creating radically different sorts of schools for different sorts of students. When this is done, and especially when it is done early in the educational process, it is not the association of citizens that are being anticipated, but the class system in roughly its present form'.

Subsequently, most standard forms of ability-based groupings like streaming and setting of students within schools also remain inequitable since they constitute types of selection.[16]

Finally, the definitions of equity and equality of opportunity used in this study are thus manifold. 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, with their often in-built biases as described earlier in the section. Equality of opportunity, on the other hand, has to be applied as a composite definition by referring to regional and socio-economic factors as well as to the rights of children with SEN and children of immigrant backgrounds to equality of opportunity.

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[16] As seen in Chapter 2, ability-based setting was finally abolished in Finnish comprehensive schools in the mid-1980s. Since then, mixed-ability teaching has been the norm in all subjects on the National Curriculum.

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. Broadly speaking, then, the definition of equality of opportunity in this study refers to 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.

The difficulties attached to the introduction of market forces in state education will be looked at in more detail in the next section of Chapter 3.

3.3. Market forces in education – evidence of successful policies?

The aim of this section is to critically evaluate existing research into the impact of market-oriented reforms in state education, and to assess whether the introduction of competition into the field of compulsory education provides a sound basis for a viable state education policy. As seen previously in Chapter 2, market-oriented reforms or market reforms/principles in compulsory education can be defined as attempts to separate supply from demand by encouraging a diversity of schools together with parental choice policies, and linking funding to number of students at schools which thus compete for the custom of children/parents ('paperless voucher'). In Finland the introduction of elements of market reforms within the comprehensive school system has been limited compared with countries like England as discussed previously. However, schools have diversified and parental choice has been encouraged. In this endeavour, research carried out largely in England and in Scotland will provide the basis for an analysis since such research is still in its infancy in Finland. The main question to be asked is whether recent education policy trends with market inspired rationales can be seen as a positive change of direction in Finland from the previous system based on strong comprehensive school values. Do all children benefit equally from choice policies? And what implications, if any, does emerging school diversity have on the ideal of equality of opportunity?

Attention is first directed towards outlining the type of market-oriented reforms that are commonly applied to education systems internationally and the underlying reasons for the introduction of such reforms. Next, research focusing on the impact of market-oriented reforms in state education on equity and equality of opportunity will be elaborated with a special emphasis on research from England, Scotland, and Finland.

3.3.1. What are market reforms in education?

An interest in the possible benefits derived from the introduction of competitive elements into welfare services including education gathered pace from the 1980s onwards. New Public Management (NPM) appeared to provide some answers for increasing effectiveness and efficiency of state provided services, and was important in shaping education reforms in England and Wales under the Thatcher governments in the 1980s (see the discussion on New Public Management in Chapter 2.2). It was thought that by making schools compete for students and for funding, by increasing parental choice and making schools accountable, for example, by publishing examination results, standards would be driven up. Popular schools with good exam results would inevitably be in more demand by parents choosing a school for their children. In addition, an important aim was to increase diversity of provision so that parents would be able to express preferences in terms of schools they would like their children to attend. A type of quasi-market was thus created making education services commodities and children and their parents, consumers (Le Grand 1990).

In England and Wales the reforms culminated in the 1988 Education Reform Act, which represented the coming together of a more neo-liberal (and neo-conservative) education agenda concerned with increasing choice, diversity, competition and standards (Lawton 1994). The 1988 Act introduced such measures as the National Curriculum (NC), Local Management of Schools (LMS), and the possibility of schools 'opting out' of local authority control and becoming grant-maintained. The introduction of LMS meant that schools were given budgets for staffing, premises and services thus increasing their

independence and autonomy (Chitty 1992). By opting out of local authority control to become grant-maintained schools were able to take their independence further as they received funding directly from the central government, via an agency (ibid.). An aim to increase parental choice through 'open enrolment' was also central which had been prioritised since the 1980 Education Act – parents were allowed to request admission to any school they wanted and schools were under obligation to accept students up to their full physical capacity (Johnson 1990, West and Pennell 2002).

Crucially, as the funding of schools was linked to the number of children enrolled at a school ('paperless voucher'), the more students a school could attract the more money it also received. Similarly, under-subscription would lead to diminishing funding for schools – an explicit aim of the 1988 Act since it was hoped that poorly performing schools in terms of 'raw results' would decline in number while well performing ones would flourish, and quality would be enhanced (Simon 1992, Feintuck 1994). It has been argued that the legislation was a curious mix of attempts to increase central control through the NC and compulsory national testing at key stages, while on one hand, increasing the freedom of schools through LMS and diminishing local authority control (Chitty 1992). The overall balance was therefore hanging between part decentralisation and part centralisation (Dunford and Chitty 1999).

The publication of league tables of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and Advanced-level (A-level) results was designed to enhance parental choice as parents would be better able to compare schools and the results achieved by students in public examinations (Ball 1998). A shift into 'privileging of the academic' has subsequently been suggested to have taken place whereby academic achievement of schools has become the dominant discourse of success (Woods et al. 1998:163). However, the limitations of league tables as indicators of success or failure are well documented (e.g. Feintuck 1994). It is not possible to measure success of schools simplistically through focusing on exam results because, as it has been argued, it may be students who make schools 'good' and not schools that make students high

achievers (Lauder and Hughes 1999). Also, by focusing on exam results as a measure of success, the so called 'A-C economy' (Gillborn and Youdell 2000: 198), schools are essentially given an incentive to cream-skim – it makes sense for schools to try to give a priority admission to those students likely to do well in exams, and thus boost the school's success (ibid.). In this sense, the introduction of parental choice (i.e. parents expressing preferences) has been argued to be an attempt to bring in selection through the back door leading to segregation of schools (e.g. Ball 1998, Johnson 1990, Chitty 1992). Popular schools which are responsible for selecting their own intake (in the main current foundation schools and voluntary-aided schools) would be able to overtly or covertly select an advantaged intake of students (West et al. 2004). It has also been argued that parents from middle class backgrounds are better equipped to exercise and take advantage of choice policies since they can commit more time, money and effort to make the most of the system and available policies (Gewirtz et al. 1995).

These claims represent serious criticisms of the introduction of market-based reforms into education services. It would appear that if the opponents to marketisation policies are right to raise concerns and critiques, the introduction of choice and diversity into the state education sector represents a doubtful way to reform education policies in Western countries – at least in the more advanced way such reforms have been implemented. What, then, is the evidence-base used by the opponents of marketisation of state education services?

A considerable amount of research has been carried out in England and Wales, and also Scotland although the system is very different to that in England and Wales, attempting to assess the various outcomes of market reforms in education policy since the Education Reform Act 1988. Many researchers have suggested that there is evidence of cream-skimming of students under certain admissions policies, social class based differences in the way parents use their ability to choose as well as increasing segregation of schools along social class

lines. A brief summary of some of the key research findings will be provided below.

3.3.2. Is there evidence of segregation?

An underlying assumption of much of the market critique in education is that the market favours those with the greatest purchasing power (e.g. Lauder and Hughes 1999, Gillborn and Youdell 2000). Schools have been made to compete for students, and thus have been granted financial incentives to strive for popularity among students and parents. In practice, those with the greatest purchasing power in the educational market place are the so-called gifted and talented children sought after by popular schools and knowledgeable and demanding parents – the rational purchasers of services who are primarily self-interested and equipped to prioritise their own needs (Culpitt 1999). Is there any evidence of increasing school segregation on the basis of popularity and social class segregation between schools?

A study by Taylor (2002) of education markets in England and Wales has found that socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of parents were related to their market activity. Although parents used schools' examination performance as one criterion when choosing in the state sector in a local area, the most active choosers also invested more time and energy in visiting schools. These active choosers therefore gathered more high quality information about the schools relying not only on official information, but attempting to construct a more holistic picture of the local school market. Despite the fact that parents' ability to choose appears to be related to their social class background, Taylor (2002) argued that on the basis of the findings, overall social segregation across the LEAs studied was less than if children were allocated to their nearest school. However, it remained the case that some schools were highly socially polarising, and the most unpopular schools that had intakes of children from a very close proximity had the lowest examination results in the area.

The study also found that parents from more disadvantaged backgrounds tended to choose a local school rather than travel further to another school. In fact, Taylor (2002) concluded that none of the parents in the study chose a school that was recognised as being at the bottom of the local hierarchy of state schools unless it was the nearest to their homes. Overall, then, the findings of this study suggest that social class differences are present when parents are choosing a school with the more advantaged parents being more active choosers while the less advantaged ones more commonly choose a local school. However, it was also suggested that segregation between schools had not been accelerated under choice policies although there were examples of some schools that were highly socially segregated.

Evidence from research done in Scotland provides some interesting findings to the school choice debate. Interestingly, although the system differs from the English and Welsh education system in some respects, it is more similar to the Finnish system in terms of parental choice. Choice is available to parents only if, after allocation of students into their local schools, there are free spaces left (Munn 1997, Croxford 2001). Furthermore, the Scottish system is to a large extent comprehensive – in 1990/91 all pupils attending schools in the public sector were in comprehensive schools (Croxford 2001). It has been possible for parents to place requests for other than the designated school since passing of legislation in 1981 (Willms and Echols 1992), but following the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000 parental choice has been discouraged by increasing powers of local authorities to refuse parents' requests for other than the local school (West 2008).

Adler et al. (1989) focused their research on looking at parental responses to their ability to choose in three education authorities in Scotland. It emerged that although parental choice policies were utilised by both working class and middle class parents, it was largely in urban areas where parents were placing requests for schools in the case study cities. Furthermore, as parents tended to choose a school within the local area on the grounds that it contained fewer socio-economic problems, this had a polarising impact on schools – the popular

schools gained students while the less popular ones suffered losses in their school rolls. This tendency was particularly felt in the secondary school sector where educational inequalities increased as a result of school polarisation and the less popular school having to cope with reduced resources and educational opportunities. The authors concluded that the legislation had led to 'the re-emergence of a 'two-tier' system of secondary schooling in the big cities' (Adler et al. 1989: 219).

Similar findings alluding to increasing segregation between schools in Scotland were also found by Willms and Echols (1992) in their study of Scottish parents, their socio-economic backgrounds and rationales for choice decisions in the 1980s. An interesting finding arising from this research, that was based on a large scale survey and additional interviews of parents, was that those parents who placed requests for other than the designated secondary school were predominantly from higher social classes. This finding is in contrast to the conclusions reached by Adler et al. (1989) in their research which suggested that both working class and middle class parents utilised choice – however, without quantifying the actual proportions of working class/middle class parents who exercised the available choice policies. Both studies reached a similar conclusion on the issue of destination of choice, however. Parents tended to choose a school that had higher mean socio-economic status than the designated school, thus perhaps increasing the likelihood of a child achieving better results at such a school than in other schools in the area due to school composition.[17]

More recent research utilising a simulation methodology in assessing school segregation in England has come to a conclusion that if pupils go to other than the local school this tends to 'increase social and ability segregation' (Allen 2007: 751). The study set out to examine what impact school choice policies had on student sorting by using simulations reallocating pupils to school on the basis of proximity. Data for the study was drawn from the National Pupil

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[17] This is what Willms and Echols call type A effect in comparison to type B effect, which would take into account the school effect rather than student effect.

Database and comprised approximately 460 000 pupils aged 13/14 in 2002/03. Importantly, it was argued that '...as pupils succeed in attending a non-proximity school this mobility raises school segregation relative to residential (or the proximity) segregation' (Allen 2007: 764) and furthermore that 'if school places are highly constrained and proximity is *not* the sole allocation rule, one parent's rational choice to access a 'superior' education father away from home may force a pupil local to the school to make a longer journey to an 'inferior' one' (ibid: 767). The findings of this research clearly indicate that parental choice policies have negative consequences for equality of opportunity – unlike research findings by Taylor (2002) examined above. However, research by Burgess et al. (2007) came to comparable conclusions with Allen's findings (2007) by using a similar methodology: the National Pupil Database. The authors argued that in areas with more school diversity, and thus more opportunities for parental choice, 'school segregation is higher relative to neighbourhood segregation' (Burgess 2007: 285).

3.3.3. The role of admissions policies

Admissions policies have been shown to be important in contributing to overt and covert selection practices of school in many studies (e.g. West et al. 2004). The issue of selection is particularly pertinent for schools that act as their own admission authorities including foundation schools (previous grant-maintained schools) and voluntary-aided schools. It has been noted that in 1988 15 per cent of secondary schools were responsible for their own admissions whereas the figure has risen to close to 30 per cent during the 2000s (West et al. 2006: 622).

The use of interviews as part of admissions policies, for instance, has been found to be particularly problematic and lacking transparency and accountability (West et al. 1998). However, covert selection is also an issue in schools that do not, in theory, use selection in their admissions (Gewirtz et al. 1995). Schools may attempt to portray an image that encourages certain types of parents to apply while discouraging others from applying. There are concerns

that schools are in effect choosing children and parents rather than parents choosing schools (Chitty 1992).

The issue of admission policies and associated problems has relevance also for the Finnish context since, as discussed previously in relation to specialist classes, schools are allowed to use various admissions policies to select an intake of children to these classes.

What types of admissions policies then are fair? Research by West (2005) has suggested that the key to fair and objective admissions policies is that either a local education authority or a non-partisan body should maintain control over admissions procedures in making decisions about allocation as well as the admissions criteria of schools. Furthermore, admissions policies and systems should address issues related to equity and social justice (West 2005). It has been argued that those schools who maintain control over their own admissions are more likely to select and cream-skim certain types of students while 'selecting out' others (West 2005). Admission criteria used by secondary schools in England often include such measures as using distance and whether children live within schools' catchment areas as criteria. Siblings who might already be studying at a school are also used as criteria (West et al. 2004). Out of these three criteria the first two may be inequitable since residential segregation can be a problem. Some form of a controlled choice system whereby parental preferences are moderated in the allocation of school places by taking into account 'factors such as ability/attainment mix or socio-economic mix of the school' could thus help in achieving more equitable admissions policies (West 2006:29).[18]

When looking at admissions policies under the Labour governments since 1997, there exists a line of continuity from the previous Conservative governments' policies. Schools with a specialism are allowed to select a certain proportion of

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[18] In the US context, controlled choice emerged as a way to ensure a balanced racial/ethnicity mix at schools in a number of school districts, while aiming to achieve parental choice, and effective educational outcomes (Alves and Willie 1987).

students on the basis of aptitude in specified subjects. Although current practices are, in part, more equitable than those in use under the Conservatives, for example in the sense that interviews can no longer be used under the Education and Inspections Act 2006, some problem areas can still be identified (Pennell et al. 2007). Importantly, the new academies – the Labour Party's creation of type of schools in more disadvantaged areas that focus on particular subject areas such as technology, arts or languages – are like other schools with a specialism allowed to select up to 10 per cent of pupils on the basis of aptitude (West et al. 2004). There is a question about the extent to which 'aptitude' can, in practice, be distinguished from 'ability' – is aptitude just another name for a type of academic selection favouring those from more privileged backgrounds? As West et al. (2004: 352) have argued, 'the distinction between aptitude, ability and achievement is not at all clear'.

3.4. Creation 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 in Chapter 2, 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 (Kiander et al. 2005, Mäkelä 2000). Obviously, the closure of schools will lead to decreasing possibilities for parents

to exercise choice. On the other hand, the City of Helsinki introduced a per capita funding system for schools in 2007 (see section 2.3). Together with considerable school diversity, it is clear that this represents a further step towards the creation of school markets in the capital area.

But what is research evidence on the development of school markets in Finland alluding to? Research on the actual impact of educational markets is as yet small-scale and mostly limited to evidence from the largest cities where schools have actively utilised the possibility to specialise (Seppänen 2001, 2006).[19]

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 can thus be 'by-passed'. The right to a local school does not apply to specialist classes that have admissions policies and which can select children from outside catchment areas from across the city (Board of Education of the City of Helsinki 2006). This is an interesting phenomenon, and demonstrates that municipalities possess a considerable amount of autonomy and powers at their discretion.

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[19] The capital, Helsinki, was among the first to encourage competition between schools when parental choice became possible in 1994.

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).

In Helsinki in 2002, out of all children entering the secondary stage at the age of 12/13, about a half had requested a school other than the local allocated school as their choice – a rise of 20 per cent from 1994 (Seppänen 2003). Importantly, an overall finding was that parental choice leads to a division of the student population in secondary schools on the basis of parents' education, socio-economic position and earnings-level – to a higher extent than it would if school catchment areas were used (Seppänen 2006: 270). This finding supports some research evidence from English secondary schools in that parental choice policies do not promote the creation of equality of opportunity in society, but instead accelerate social segregation (e.g. Allen 2007 – see 3.3.2 above). It is not known whether in the Finnish case the possibility of parents expressing preferences as to their choice of school also leads to ability segregation as evidence from England appears to indicate (Allen 2007). This is an area which requires much further research across municipalities in Finland.

It is evident that parents have taken their right to make preferences for a school of their choice very seriously in Helsinki. Comprehensive prospectuses for parents of first, second and sixth year students are sent out by the Local Education Board giving information on all schools, curricula, specialisation, and selection tests. In the first year of compulsory education choices include music

and some specialist language teaching. Differences appear in the third year when choices extend to include languages, physical education and dance. At the seventh grade choice covers as diverse topics as arts, mathematics, media studies and natural sciences (Board of Education of the City of Helsinki 2004, 2008a, 2008b).

Parents fill in a simple form if they wish their child to be considered for an entry into a specialist stream – all of those who have expressed interest will then be invited to a selection event. What form these tests take is dependent on the topic of specialisation. However, uniform tests are used by schools in Helsinki that cater for children in the same age group and have same specialist areas in the curricula (Board of Education of the City of Helsinki 2004, 2006). Entrance tests are designed to take into account students capabilities and potential to develop in the topic area (Board of Education of the City of Helsinki 2004, 2006). Interviews are rarely used, but, importantly, are utilised by some schools (Board of Education of the City of Helsinki 2008a, 2008b). Although school prospectuses highlight the fact that it is not possible to prepare or train for the tests beforehand, a question is raised as to whether parents still take some form of action to give their children a head-start at the time of testing.

3.4.1. Recent research

The National Board of Education has been carrying out large scale evaluations of student achievement in different subjects across the country since 1998 when evaluation and assessment gained national and local importance following the implementation of the 1998 Education Act (see Chapter 2). Among the main aims of these studies have been to find out how educational equality of opportunity has been achieved by focusing on regional variations in student achievement, and how the aims of the National Framework Curriculum have been fulfilled (Kuusela 2006). Emphasis has been placed on those students approaching the end of their compulsory education at the age of 15-16.

A study based on data from student assessments (in sciences, mathematics, English, Finnish and Swedish) by the National Board of Education between 1998 and 2001 found that the capital area had the best-performing schools in Finland alongside some very poorly performing ones (Jakku-Sihvonen and Kuusela 2002). Regional disparities were also apparent: 'the proportion of high-performance schools in the capital city area is larger than that of the low-performance schools. In the northern part of Finland the opposite is true, and the proportion of low-performance schools is higher than that of high-performance schools' (ibid: 19). On the basis of the overall findings the authors concluded that: 'polarisation is apparent in the country as a whole, as well as the capital city area and within Helsinki' (ibid: 50).

Later research based on the National Board of Education evaluations between 1998 and 2002 also came to similar conclusions. It was shown that there are statistically significant differences in attainment between the capital area and the north of Finland (Jakku-Sihvonen and Komulainen 2004). The research found that 30 per cent of students in the capital area achieved results in the upper quartile range while in the north of Finland the corresponding figure was 23 per cent. Similarly, 23 per cent of students in the capital region were identified as belonging to the lower quartile – in the north of Finland 28 per cent of students were in the lower quartile. In other regions in Finland the division of students in the lower and upper quartiles was equal with 25 per cent of students in both quartiles. In addition, there were found to be differences between school quartiles within cities examined – approximately 16 per cent variation between the weakest and best performing median (average) of school quartiles (see Figure 3.1). This led the authors to conclude that differentiation based on specialisation of school ('schools taking profiles') or socio-demographic factors had a role to play in explaining the variations. Furthermore, the authors argued that 'the emergence of regional differences is against our national education policy' and that on the basis of educational equality of opportunity this represents 'negative systematic variation' (ibid: 284).
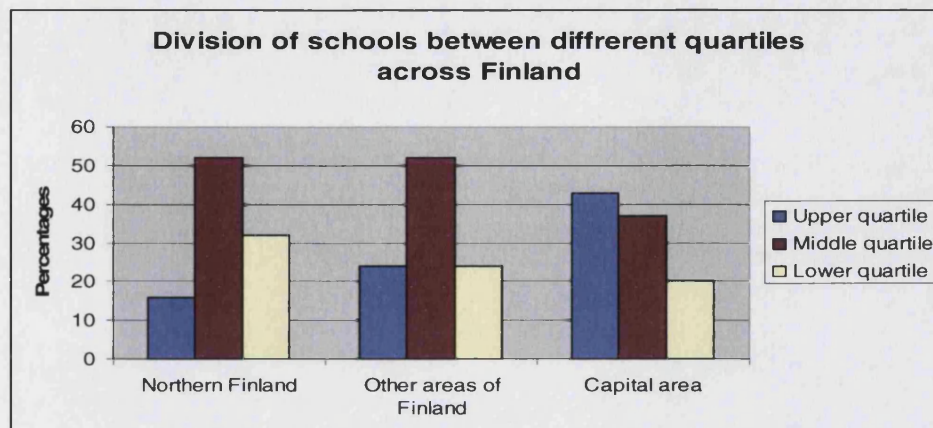
Figure 3.2 Division of schools between upper, middle and lower quartiles in different parts of Finland (source: Jakku-Sihvonen and Komulainen 2004)

Later evaluations have, however, produced slightly different results by using different methodologies from the ones described above. According to the study by Kuusela (2006), the differences between the north and south of Finland are not as large as suggested by Jakku-Sihvonen and Komulainen when the focus was on quartiles and not on *average attainment* as it was in the research by Kuusela (2006). However, a fact remains that there is variation between schools and municipalities in student attainment, evaluation of students and the support given to students which is not warranted, and should be reduced (Kuusela 2006). According to Kuusela, 'although our educational system can be regarded as exceptionally equal internationally, the impact of education policy solutions in municipalities and practices used in schools are being highlighted' (2006: 15).

Indeed, the variation of practices between highly autonomous municipalities and the likely impact of this on equity in education was also emphasised by a recent OECD study. One of the recommendations of the 2005 report was that the Ministry of Education should carry out a study into the variations across Finnish municipalities reflecting the fact that:

'Despite the evidence from PISA that differences <u>between</u> schools in outcomes are relatively small, there could be some significant differences in outcomes, at the municipality level associated with differences in resource inputs. We are particularly concerned whether differences among municipalities may be responsible for differences in which equity...is implemented throughout Finland' (Grubb et al. 2005: 39).

3.5. Discussion

The fact that more highly educated parents in more prestigious occupations tend to utilise the ability to 'choose' a school for their children to a higher extent than parents from lower social classes has been well-supported by the findings of a considerable body of research into education markets in the UK and abroad. This fact points to an in-built social class bias in school choice policies. Higher social class children and parents can be argued to be the winners of choice policies whereas the losers are children often of disadvantaged backgrounds living in more disadvantaged areas where choice is limited and socio-economic problems higher than average. This can lead to accelerated problems for schools as they have to cope with fewer resources and/or more challenging student intakes, and thus has clear implications for equity and equality of opportunity.

Schools' admissions policies are also a cause for concern, particularly when schools can set their own admissions criteria as evidence has indicated. In Finland, admissions policies are used by schools that have introduced specialist classes in some subject areas, most prominently in the largest cities in the south of the county. As these specialist classes have entrance criteria and tests, including interviews, there are concerns about equity issues. The popularity of the selective specialist classes can lead to schools cream-skimming the most able students, thus further increasing schools' popularity. It has to be remembered, though, that in the Finnish context 'school markets' are relatively

undeveloped in most parts of the country outside the densely populated south, and so, empirical evidence is restricted to a small area and to a few studies.

All in all it is clear, however, that Finland is following the footsteps of some other European countries in a manner very distinct from its social democratic tradition in education policy, and from the previous stronger interpretation of equality of opportunity.

4. Methodology

This research focuses on examining the phenomenon of specialisation within the Finnish comprehensive school system with the aim of contributing to existing knowledge on the topic and by producing some answers to questions that have arisen from research already undertaken. Some authors and academics (e.g. Rinne and Vuorio-Lehti 1996, Poropudas and Mäkinen 2001) have raised questions and concerns about the underlying rationales for specialisation as well as the possible direction to which education policy priorities in Finland appear to be gravitating, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. The focal point in this research is hence directed towards developing an understanding of what influences specialisation trends at a local level in schools and municipalities.

The main method of inquiry for this research project was qualitative research, and more specifically, qualitative semi-structured interviews and case studies of schools in one municipality. A qualitative research method was chosen because a basic aim of the research was to 'acquire insight and develop understanding' by getting as close to the data as possible rather than remaining more detached by using quantitative research methods such as surveys (Clarke 1999: 39). To supplement the empirical investigation, an analysis of major policy documents and other literature in the area of education policy was utilised, both at national and local level. Municipality policy documents, which included both more current documents and documents from the 1990s stored in the archives, proved to be an invaluable source of data. Analysis of secondary sources formed the necessary backdrop on which empirical data was built.

This chapter begins with a focus on the main research questions of the study. Following this, a brief explanation of case studies is provided in section 4.2 explaining why a case study approach was thought to be the best method for approaching the research questions. Attention is then moved on to looking, in more detail, the specific case studies chosen for the research purposes – the municipality and schools in particular. In section 4.3 the issue of interviewing is

discussed both in more general terms as well elaborating which groups of people were interviewed for this project and why these particular groups were chosen. The use of secondary sources is discussed next in section 4.4, before moving on to the final section 4.5 which discusses how data from the primary sources were analysed.

4.1. Research questions

The main research questions, which formed the basis for the empirical part of the research and which were designed to fill some of the gaps in related literature, focused on three distinct areas of interest (see below). In general, these questions were formulated to provide data on the development of market-oriented reforms and specialisation of schools at a local level, first, in order to elucidate the role and motives of schools and the educational decision-making sphere, and second, to evaluate what impact, if any, these developments have had on equity and equality of opportunity.

The first question focuses attention on the relationship between the national and the local arenas – in particular, the importance of the national policy context to the municipality context in relation to educational decision-making and specialisation as well as finance. The second question shifts the focus to the underlying policy drivers for specialisation and whether the main drivers are external, internal or a combination of both – in other words, the emphasis is on finding out whether the main motivating factors are located outside or inside of the domain of schools. The external factors are interpreted in a narrow sense of the word thus focusing on the municipality and national levels, rather than the wider global level and its influences. Attention in the third research question is moved to the outcomes of specialisation. Of specific interest here is whether specialisation has impacted on equity and equality of opportunity in either a negative or a positive way.

1. **What factors characterise the interpretation of national education policies at the local level?**

   1.1. How have national education policy priorities regarding specialisation/ diversity/choice policies and equity/equality of opportunity been construed at the local level?

   1.2. How important is the impact of financial factors in these processes? How do the key decision-makers and principals/teachers at schools perceive challenges deriving from financial issues/constraints?

2. **What external and internal policy drivers exist to motivate comprehensive schools to introduce specialisms?**

   2.1. How significant are external influences that derive from rapidly changing education policy trends at national and local levels, namely extension of market-oriented reforms such as choice and diversity?

   2.2. How significant are internal influences, namely enhancement of popularity and image? What role do schools play in this?

3. **What impact have the changes in education policies had on equity and equality of opportunity?**

   3.1. What impact has specialisation of schools within the comprehensive school system in the municipality had on schools in terms of equity and equality of opportunity; what has happened to those schools that have introduced specialisms?

   3.2. How do key players in the municipality interpret changes in terms of equity and equality of opportunity?

4.2. Case study research

> 'Case study research may lead to new perspectives on old theoretical issues, the discovery of new phenomena, and the development of new concepts and theoretical perspectives. Some of this work provides a detailed description of a setting, illustrates important concepts, fills in the dynamic details of how things influence each other, uncovers reasons and meanings behind behaviours or attitudes, and challenges existing theories and stereotypes' (McTavish and Loether 2002: 182)

A case study approach has been chosen to enable a focus on unravelling policy trends and developments in detail in one municipality. As the above quote by McTavish and Loether (2002) neatly illustrates, the research through a case study approach aims to provide detailed description and analysis of interconnected influences and relationships at various levels in the chosen municipality. The research questions of this study necessitate an approach which aims to provide detailed and rich data in order to understand what is happening at a local level and 'beyond the surface', and why this is happening the way it is. For this reason a qualitative research method was fundamental for the research in question, and hence was chosen as the main type of method to collect empirical data. Indeed, the three research questions could not have been answered by quantitative methods – time and money, if available, could have allowed quantitative methods to be used to provide supplementary data, for example in the form of questionnaires to parents or teachers, but they could not have replaced qualitative methods as the main method of inquiry.

Yin (1994: xi) has characterised a case study as an empirical inquiry that 'investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident'. This characterisation constitutes an important rationale for choosing a case

study approach – the phenomena under investigation in the case study municipality are complicated, but tightly interwoven with the wider national context. The interaction between national and local levels, and local interpretations of national policies that enable a development of situations particular only to the local context, are complex processes that a case study research is likely to illuminate. All in all, 'case studies help provide insight into meanings people give to the reality around them', and this realisation lies at the heart of the research in question (McTavish and Loether 2002: 182).

One of the major aims of this small-scale qualitative research study could be described as shedding light on processes of individual and group decision-making, and how interests, ideas and opportunities are interpreted and utilised at various levels. I decided that in-depth, semi-structured, interview techniques were likely to provide the best means to attempt to unravel the complexities involved in decision-making processes. Fielding (1993: 136) has noted that focused interviews often prove to be 'valuable as strategies for discovery' – precisely what this research is aiming to achieve. Furthermore, semi-structured interview techniques allow certain flexibility in the interview process, which was a particular benefit (Bryman 2001). Since many different interest groups were included as the main informants, the flexibility of the interview schedule was utilised by adding new questions to the schedule for particular interviewees, or leaving out questions that appeared not to be the most appropriate in specific circumstances. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews also allows for the probing of more information during the interview process, for example by encouraging interviewees, both verbally and/or non-verbally, to elaborate on a particular theme or question. Indeed, probing techniques were frequently used during most interviews and, as Fielding and Thomas have suggested, 'it is all about encouraging the respondent to give an answer and as full a response as the format allows' (2002: 128).

Dilemmas related to generalisations (i.e. external validity) from qualitative research methods, for instance through the case study approach, have been subjected for much debate in the literature (e.g. Alasuutari 1995, Clarke 1999).

According to the standard view, quantitative methods may produce facts that are often superficial but reliable, while qualitative methods provide more in-depth but not very representative results (Alasuutari 1995: 145). This can lead to the most extreme interpretation of the quantitative versus qualitative debate in that 'quantitative methods are capable of producing 'hard' objective data that are amenable to rigorous statistical analysis, whereas, by comparison, qualitative techniques generate 'soft' data that are subjective' (Clarke 1999: 61). Although the above view presents a picture that is too black and white – it is clear, for instance, that the two techniques can be combined to produce multi-method designs and that both have their respective strengths and weaknesses – it still is evident that generalisations from case study results cannot be made to populations. This represents one particular weakness of the case study method – because a sampling logic is not used to select cases, they are picked for their analytical value instead, and therefore generalisations only to theory and not to population can be made (McTavish and Loether 2002, de Vaus 2001). Importantly, though, because of the very nature of case study research, generalisations arising from research results in this sense are not important otherwise another method would have been chosen (Yin 1994, McTavish and Loether 2002).

It has been argued that the prevailing obsession with the presumptions stipulated by the standard view about relative benefits and disadvantages of both qualitative and quantitative methods are, to an extent, misleading based on set perceptions of the two types of research methods (Alasuutari 1995). Qualitative methods, like case studies, are often dealing with attempts to unravel and explain unique events or phenomena – they are valuable as such and there is no need to try to explain the *existence* of the events or phenomena under investigation. As Alasuutari explains, 'if all readers of a study can recognise a phenomenon from the description presented, then generalizability is not a problem' (1995: 145). In this research, investigations through a case study method were thought likely to reveal information and original data about a specific local context that would be insightful and illuminative of larger national issues (Marshall and Rossman 1989).

Similarly, issues relating to validity and reliability of qualitative data can present problems for qualitative researchers since these data can be seen as 'soft' and subjective, as suggested above. Reliability and validity are two aspects which can help to assure correctness of information collected through various data collection techniques: reliability refers to 'the extent to which measures give consistent results' while validity refers to 'the extent to which measures correspond to the "true" position of the person or object on the characteristics being measured' (Selltiz et al. 1976: 161). It has been argued, in relation to using interviews as the main tool for collecting primary data, that 'characteristics such as the age, sex, race, religion, demeanour, attitudes, expectations and appearance of the interviewer can have an influence on the quality and validity of response data' (Clarke 1999: 75). Furthermore, because social sciences are concerned with measuring human behaviour and feelings, values are always going to be attached, and consequently no measurements techniques are likely 'to yield identical results from one act of measurement to another' (Selltiz et al. 1976: 163).

How, then, can these types of interview errors be minimised? It is clear that these types of characteristics perhaps leading to 'errors' cannot totally be eliminated – what can be done is for the interviewer to make sure that careful preparations are done prior the interviews (Clarke 1999). These can include reading textbooks on how to interview, prepare interview schedules in good time and try to adopt a professional attitude towards the task at hand, for example by attempting to create a friendly atmosphere in which the interview is to take place where the interviewee would feel at ease with the situation, and encouraging them to talk freely (Kornhauser and Sheatsley 1976). I used all of these methods in preparing myself for each interview, and during interviewing, thus attempting to increase both the validity and reliability of data gathered.

Methodological triangulation has been proposed to constitute one way of increasing both reliability and validity of research designs (Clarke 1999). This means combining more than one method in a 'multi-method research design',

for example interview techniques with questionnaires and/or analysis of policy documents. The research reported in this study utilised this type of triangulation by combining interview data with policy documents from the local and national levels. Data triangulation, on the other hand, involves collecting data in different contexts at different times[20] – and in this sense interviews carried out in the official side and the school side can be seen to represent a type of data triangulation (Clarke 1999: 86). Interview data collected in the official sphere acted as a supporting device for data collected from the sphere of schools.

4.2.1. Case study municipality and schools

The municipality chosen as the case study municipality is located in Finland and according to a definition by Statistics Finland (2007b) can be classed as being 'a large municipality' since it has a population of over 40,000. This municipality provides an interesting case study as the comprehensive school 'market' in the area is still relatively undeveloped. There are only a few schools at both primary and secondary school stages that have introduced specialist classes, although the policy of internal specialisation has been adopted by most schools in the area. This, in part, reflects the policy priorities driven by the local education board that since the early 1990s have encouraged schools to 'take profiles' by highlighting a particular aspect or topic in their curriculum. The municipality was chosen for reasons of convenience and my interest in the education policy developments within the vicinity of this municipality. Also, practical considerations played a part – money and time issues had to be given consideration which limited the scope of what could be attempted.

How and why, then, did I choose the schools that I did? From the start it was clear that any form of random sampling would not be a suitable method for selecting the schools for the study, first, because of the small number of schools that had specialist classes in the area (and which were 'critical' cases meaning that they had to be included in the study focusing on specialist classes), and

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[20] Also, possibly by different people.

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secondly, because of the nature of the research as a small-scale and local study (Yin 1993). The main aim of the research was, after all, to reveal how current education policy trends in relation to diversity and choice work at a local level and in schools. Also, the relatively small size of the sample was necessary to gain a meaningful insight into the schools' culture, ethos and development priorities. As de Vaus (2001:241) has pointed out 'the critical thing is to select the most strategic cases to test our propositions rather than aiming for a large number of cases'.

Deciding which schools to include in the research was not however, as straightforward a process as I had initially anticipated as not all principals originally approached agreed to participate. Principals of schools have a strong 'gate-keeping' role protecting access to schools – if the school leadership is not willing to take part in research efforts, for whatever reason, then access is denied. Two primary schools with a distinct specialist ethos agreed to be participate, City and Millpond schools (all names are fictional to protect anonymity). Both City and Millpond schools proved to be fascinating case study schools providing much interesting data about policy developments relating to specialisation.

It was also decided to approach two secondary schools since schools at the secondary level in the city tended to have more pronounced specialist agendas than the primary schools (two secondary schools were chosen to balance the number of primary schools in the sample). This is because there is more freedom for students to choose courses at this level of compulsory education than at primary level. Access to Hillside school and Parkview school (fictional names) was gained and the schools – their principals and teachers – yielded much rich and interesting data for my research. The first of the secondary schools in the study, Hillside school, had developed a very strong specialist ethos through its specialist pedagogy and some other specialisms based at the school. Parkview school, on the other hand, had some internal specialisms which were not as pronounced as the specialisation at Hillside. The next

Chapter 5 will provide details of each school chosen as a case study school for the study, their characteristics and distinctive policies.

4.3. Interviews

The empirical research questions were approached through in-depth interview techniques. As pointed out above, a substantial part of the research project was dedicated to uncovering processes, and in this endeavour focused interviews with key players were of central importance. Credibility of the research can be enhanced by using more than one source of data through triangulation as views and opinions of different interviewees may support or conflict with one another (Marshall and Rossman 1989, Bryman 2001). This may be of special importance within each case study school, which is why different key players were included.

Interviews, which were carried out between April 2004 and April 2007[21], concentrated on two distinct groups – schools (principals and teachers) on the one hand and elected politicians and education officials on the other. First, principals and teachers of the case study schools were crucial informants for finding out in more detail how the schools had developed their policies over the last decade, and how recent education policies worked in practice in the case study schools. In addition, a member of one school governing body (primary school level) was interviewed. Due to the changing nature of the boards in the city and their limited duties (see part 5.2.1), I decided not to include as many members of this group for the study as first thought – my initial plan had been to include at least two governing body members (one from primary and one from secondary school level) in the study. The second important group consisted of elected politicians working mainly in the Local Education Board and some other non-elected key education officials. This group represented the

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[21] The majority of interviews were carried out between April 2004 and December 2005. Two supplementary interviews were carried out in April 2007.

official side to analysing decision-making and non-decision-making trends in the municipality.

In order to ensure that the interview process was conforming to required ethical standards, several steps were taken in preparation for the interviews. First, a letter with a research summary was sent to people who were potential interviewees for the research project asking if they were interested in taking part, and explaining what this would involve. Informed consent was thus achieved – people knew what the research was about if they were to participate. Second, all people contacted were assured strict anonymity and confidentiality in all subsequent reporting of the data, if they agreed to take part in the research.

All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed verbatim – I experienced no problems with interviewees disagreeing with the use of a recorder.[22] Although verbatim transcription can be extremely time-consuming and labour intensive, this method was chosen in order not to lose any data that later could have become crucial for the research. Furthermore, this method has the added benefit of making the researcher familiar with the data, which is, of course, of great advantage when data analysis begins (Fielding and Thomas 2002). After transcription each interview was listened to again and checked against the transcript to make sure that no errors were made during the transcription process.

The total number of interviews for the research of 22 key individuals may appear, at first, rather limited. However, as each interview yielded much detailed data lasting on average one hour each, this proved to be a sufficient number – my original plan had been to include between 20 and 25 people in my research, and in this sense the plan was successful. One reason for the reduction of the total number of interviews from 25 to 22 was that one key group, the Local Education Board, proved to be less useful for answering my research

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[22] During one interview the interviewee asked for the recorder to be turned off momentarily, since, the interviewee was raising a point that was sensitive, and not relevant for the research theme, wanting to ensure that this information remained confidential and unreported.

questions than I had anticipated. I had intended to interview several members of the Local Education Board, but after carrying out three interviews from this group I became aware that these interviews did not yield the information I had hoped they would – there was not much awareness of education policy trends in Finland over time, and current policy agendas which was an important part of the interview schedule (and research questions). Subsequently, I decided not to interview any more members from this group. Furthermore, since an important part of the research was also placed on an analysis of key policy documents in various forms (see section on secondary sources), this supplemented the interview data and reduced the need to have a larger number of interviews.

A general question in this context can be raised as to whether in a small-scale case study project it is better to have a smaller number of in-depth interviews which can be thoroughly analysed rather than having a larger number of interviews which are harder to analyse in-depth due to time limitations. In this case, I relied on the former option which, as the research described in detail in the later chapters will hopefully show, was a successful approach through which much unique data were discovered.

Next, details of each main group of interviewees will be provided.

4.3.1. Principals

All principals of the four case study schools were interviewed. The original aim was to find out, in as much detail as possible, prevailing values, perceptions and opinions of the principals with regard to the schools' policies and direction of developments. What were the main shapers of the schools' policies, and how important was the role of the head in this process? Could principals reveal underlying incentives that may have played a part in shaping policies?

In addition to the four principals in post at the time of the research, two ex-principals of two of the case study schools were also interviewed – Millpond primary school and Hillside secondary school. At the time of planning for the

interviews at Millpond school, the principal was on sabbatical working for a municipality project. I thought that it was important to interview this principal since he was the one who had been at the school during the introduction of the specialist agenda during the 1990s, and was therefore a key informant in finding out about circumstances at the school and the municipality at that time. The ex-principal of Hillside school was interviewed for the same reason – she had been the principal at the school during the 1990s when many specialist features were introduced, and was therefore also a key informant for my research.

The first series of questions for the principals and ex-principals focused on general areas, such as how the principals had personally interpreted the changing education policy trends in Finland over the last ten to fifteen years (see Appendix 2 for an example of the interview schedule). Of specific interest were opinions and views of the informants in relation to changing relationships between schools (for example increased competition) and between the school management and the Local Education Board (for example in terms of decision-making). The aim was to build a comprehensive picture about the complex inter-relationships that existed within the municipality between schools, principals, teachers, governing bodies and local government players. As principals have become more like managers, and have a central role in directing, planning and controlling schools' policies and development, their views regarding policy evolution at both central and local government levels were crucial.

The second series of questions focused specifically on uncovering the processes and policy determinants with regard to the specialist classes and schools taking profiles. Of specific interest were questions relating to why and how schools that had introduced specialist classes had decided to go down their chosen paths – who the key decision-makers were, how these policies had worked in practice, and how and why policies had changed over the years. There was also interest in how schools were developing their future agendas, and again, who the major players were in this process. It was of special interest to see whether there

would be significant differences between opinions of principals in different schools in relation to these areas.

4.3.2. Teachers

The second informant group were teachers at the case study schools. I decided to interview two teachers at each school (a total of eight teachers in all) – the aim was to interview longer-serving teachers who had experienced changes within their schools and the field of education at large. Because I was interested in changes that had taken place in education policy since the early 1990s it was important to try to secure interviews with teachers who themselves had gone through the various changes and developments. The principals of the case study schools were approached in order to get to know names and contact details of possible long-serving teachers who would be interested to take part – not many such teachers were found and thus the number of teachers interviewed from each case study school was limited to two. [23]

At City primary school both teachers interviewed were music class teachers – the first interviewee teacher had been based at the school for 19 years, at the time of the interviews in 2004, and the second interviewee teacher for nine years (although, previously, she had been teaching at two other primary schools in the area for 19 years). At the other primary school in the research, Millpond school, the first class teacher interviewed had 19 years' experience teaching at the school, while the class second teacher had been based at the school for six years, at the time of the interviews in 2004. The two teachers interviewed at Hillside secondary school had both been based at the school for a relatively long time – the music teacher had been at Hillside for 14 years while the biology/geography teacher had been at the school for 11 years when the interviews took place in 2005. Finally, at Parkview secondary school, the first teacher interviewed had been teaching biology and geography at the school for

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[23] At Parkview school only one longer-serving teacher was found, who was willing to take part in the research. Subsequently another teacher who came forward had been based at school for five years, two of which on sabbatical.

18 years while the sports teacher had been teaching at the school for approximately three years – both interviews were carried out in the spring of 2005.

Interviews with selected teachers were carried out to enable the development of as full a picture as possible about the schools, their past practices, development priorities and current ethos (see Appendix 3 for an example of the interview schedule). The questions that were asked can be categorised into three broad types: general questions about teachers' opinions and views on the changing compulsory education policies in Finland in the 1990s, questions relating to changing circumstances in the schools in the municipality (e.g. relationships between schools, increased competition, polarisation of schools), and questions that relate to specialisation, which were of particular importance for teachers who were employed in these type of schools.

This pattern was followed in the first preliminary interview, which was intended originally to be a pilot interview, with a teacher in one of the case study schools, Millpond School, in mid-April 2004. The information that was gathered from this interview proved to be of crucial importance in building a more complete picture on the school's past and present practices, which was characterised by complexity, as well as in negotiating further access to the school at later stages of the research process. The amount of rich data gathered warranted the inclusion of this interview in the main body of interviewees from Millpond school.

4.3.3. The Local Education Board and education officials

The third interview group consisted of members of both the current Local Education Board at the time of the interviews in 2005, and the ex-board whose term in office ended in late 2004, and officials from the Education Office. Following the major decentralisation reforms from the late 1980s onwards, the powers and responsibilities of local education authorities have increased many-fold in a relatively short time. An important issue was to see how, if at all,

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relationships had changed between local education authorities and schools, in particular principals. It might be expected that, as a result of decentralisation, tensions would have heightened because of the increased accountability of principals in financial and governing matters, and, increased responsibilities of Local Education Boards and Education Office (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed description of the roles and responsibilities of these two bodies).

Interviews with members of the Local Education Board were used to elucidate the role that the board played in providing encouragement, support, and incentives for schools to specialise in the area (see Appendix 4 for the interview schedule). Interviewees were also asked what influenced the views of the board, and how members interpreted the development of Finnish education policy from the late 1980s onwards. Among other issues addressed, interviewees were asked to what extent the Local Education Board controlled the development of priorities at the level of the municipality, and their role, if any, in facilitating change. A question was also raised about the type of views members of the board held in relation to the enhancement of the educational market within the comprehensive system – in particular diversity, competition, specialisation and changes, if any, in terms of inequalities. In total, three people were interviewed from this group: the current chair (at the time of the interview in 2005), ex-chair and one ex-member of the board.

In addition to the board members, some other non-elected education officials were also interviewed with a similar interview schedule to the one used for the Local Education Board members discussed above. From the Education Office I managed to secure interviews with four key members. The Director of Education and the Head of Education for Development were interviewed alongside the Director of Finance and one official in change of education services for immigrant children in the area. The former three individuals were interviewed because they were the highest ranking officials in the Education Office and were thus thought to possess a clear understanding of education policy trends in the municipality as well as the country at large. The official with responsibility for immigrant pupils was interviewed to throw light on the

development of education services in recent years for students from immigrant backgrounds in the case study municipality. All four people were important interviewees in a sense that they represented the official side to educational decision-making in the municipality.

4.4. Secondary sources

Secondary sources were an important part of the research and they supplemented interview data. In this endeavour various policy documents published by the National Board of Education, Ministry of Education and Ministry of the Interior, and the Council of the State were particularly important. Documents relating to development trends in national education policy from the early 1990s were particularly useful as were documents focusing on specific issues like teaching of immigrant children and teaching for special educational needs students at the national level. In addition, some associated research centres and other official bodies including the Government Institute for Economic Research and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities alongside the Statistics Finland have published a considerable amount of official policy-relevant data which was used to provide contextual analysis and data for informing the issues of economics and finance as well as demography.

Secondary data sources were also used to inform the general fiscal and political background of the case study municipality via financial and demographic statistics (e.g. end-of-year accounts) and education policy documents, which consisted mainly of documents relating to Local Education Board meetings since 1990. Older education policy documents dating from the early 1990s to early 2000s were available in the local archives, which I visited on a number of occasions. The more recent documents from 2004 onwards were downloaded directly from the municipality web-pages. These documents were very important for getting to know the types of issues debated at Local Education Boards over the last decade and a half as well as actual decisions that were

taken. All data relating to finance and demography in the municipality published annually from late 1990s onwards were found directly from the municipality web-pages. In order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the case study municipality, the details of these sources are not listed in the bibliography.

Throughout the research process I followed local and national newspapers for articles and opinions about education policy developments. The use of newspapers on the whole was limited mainly to the purpose of keeping up to date with current issues, and therefore it did not constitute a distinct part of the research. It was crucial, however, for learning about the outcome of local elections, and some major decisions that were taken by the City Council and the Local Education Board during my fieldwork. Newspapers can be problematic on the grounds of impartiality, and as I did not wish to use these sources extensively, for instance by content analysis methods, I limited their use to just background information.

One teacher journal, which was available on the Internet, Opettaja-lehti, was also useful for keeping up to data with developments in the field of education policy and other issues related to schools, teachers and municipalities. This particular journal was also of great value for following teachers' personal experiences and opinions on various issues in local and national contexts, providing invaluable contextual information. All in all, the secondary sources used in this research constituted an additional element of triangulation supporting empirical research evidence gathered from interviews. Credibility of the research can be seen to have been enhanced as a result.

4.5. Data analysis

In this section, data analysis methods are briefly focused upon. As discussed, data for the research was gathered through semi-structured interviews with key players in the case study municipality and an analysis of documentary evidence

relating Local Education Board meetings. The main methods used for analysing the data gathered are discussed below.

It is evident that qualitative data analysis is by its nature more contested and complex than the analysis of quantitative data – there are no universally accepted methods or rules as to what are the best ways to analyse complex qualitative data deriving from the social world (Robson 1993, Bryman 2001). The aim was, in part, to show how and why municipality policies develop the way they do. This type of qualitative data analysis can be seen in terms of solving a puzzle or a mystery – the more pieces are found to fit in the overall scheme, the more complete the picture looks. Similarly, 'the more clues that fit in with the explanatory model, the higher is the probability that the solution is the right one' (Alasuutari 1995: 18). The combination of interview data, analysis of policy documents and archives, together with newspaper articles about the key events such as a radical decision by the municipality decision-makers to close a number of schools in the area have produced a coherent picture of developments in the various domains under investigation. However, as Alasuutari (1995:18) has noted 'scientific research can never achieve certainty beyond all doubt'. This does not reduce the 'quality' of research efforts – it merely reflects life in all its complexity and magnitude.

Grounded theory has been widely used in analysing qualitative data, and rests on a highly systematic and continuous way to gather data and to analyse it (Bryman 2001). Coding of data by finding common themes and denominators within interview data is central to grounded theory, which on the other hand is seen as crucial when building theories based on the findings (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Coding is used to point to similarities and differences in answers and outlooks of interview data within and between the different groups in trying to find common underlying themes. Coding of data has been suggested to be helpful in the construction of categories within data, and in the relation of these categories to contexts in which they occur (Robson 1993). Categories can then be related to each other to create organised structure.

I decided not to rely excessively on grounded theory with its strict assumptions and rules in my data collection and analysis. Grounded theory, on the whole, appeared too systematic and structured for my purposes and desire to fully understand the interview data. For this reason computer software packages were not used in data analysis either. The number of interviews in my research was such that it warranted a manual approach and enabled analysis of the transcripts in their entirety. Analysis was carried out in stages – when new interview data became available these were added to already existing analysis. The strategy was to build a more complete picture of events on a continuous basis adding substance to the existing 'skeleton' of data corpus, and in this sense it represents one specific approach from grounded theory.

The interview data were for the most part very detailed and rich, and therefore it was essential to become as familiar as possible with the transcripts. This was achieved by reading through the text of the interviews soon after they had been transcribed, writing down thoughts and ideas about the data on the margins, and gradually comparing and contrasting responses of the interviewees within different themes. This process was repeated several times when a new research theme was approached. Firstly, responses of principals were compared with those of the teachers at the same school. Then comparisons across schools were carried out. To this corpus of analysis were added the responses of the elected and non-elected politicians. The strategy was therefore to first analyse responses thematically, and then across the thematic groups noting similarities and dissimilarities. Finally, to borrow McTavish and Loether's conceptualisation (2002: 184), the analysis of case study data is often more summative in nature – 'weighing the evidence and providing a thick description of the findings'. Furthermore, as the same authors have suggested, an overall aim commonly is to produce 'an in-depth story or longitudinal critique rather than a systematic discussion of tabulated data' (ibid: 184).

5. The policy context at the case study municipality and schools

This chapter will focus on outlining the background context upon which the empirical research is based. The political and policy side to educational decision-making in the municipality alongside key policy areas in relation to the municipality and the case study schools will be discussed. The chapter thus constitutes an important and integral part of the research by explaining and analysing the sphere in which educational decision-making is debated, formulated, and implemented (see Chapter 4.1).

The chapter begins with section 5.1 describing the educational decision-making arena at the case study municipality by focusing on the key actors involved and their respective roles in educational decision-making processes. Attention in the following section, 5.2, then moves to the domain of schools, first, by focusing on the role of schools in decision-making in general, and second, by describing and discussing the four case study schools, their characteristics and policies. The final section, 5.3, offers an overview of the issues discussed.

5.1. Key actors in the educational decision-making processes in municipalities

Who are the most important decision-makers and policy shapers in education policy in municipalities? How important are the views of those players involved in the operational-level functions – education officials, principals, teachers and members of school governing bodies? And, what about the elected members working in the City Council and the elected and non-elected members of the Local Education Board – how crucial are their policies and priorities?

This section outlines the basic roles and functions of the various actors influencing the development of education policies in municipalities, and their inter-relationships. Special attention will be given to describing the situation in

the case study municipality, which demonstrates complex, and sometimes tense, interpersonal relationships between different level actors.

5.1.1. Identifying the actors involved

The most influential actor in making decisions about financing education policy in the city is the City Council with its elected members, and the administration in charge of implementing the policies (Finlex 1995). The City Council serves for four years in office whereas the City Council Administration serves for two years at a time. The City Council makes decisions on budgets, and hence, has considerable powers on deciding on the financial outlook on welfare services in the area, including education services (the City website 2004).

Following the local elections in the case study municipality in the end of 2004, changes have taken place in the political structure of the City Council, and subsequently the Administration, which is formed from people elected to the City Council. Overall, the political representation moved slightly to the right, although the Social Democrats maintained their position as the largest political party in the Council (local newspapers October 2004). The chairmanship of the Administration belongs to the largest party in the Council, and hence, the Social Democrats held this important post. However, the most visible leader in the city is the City Governor, who is separately elected by the Council, and at the time of writing (2005) represents the Conservative Party.

The Local Education Board in the city consists of around ten members in addition to the chair and a deputy chair chosen by the City Council – slight variations in these figures follow a decision taken by the Council as to how many members they wish to choose.[24] The chair and the deputy chair have to be elected members of the City Council, who are then given the role to serve as members of the Education Board ('trustees'). The other members can be chosen from among individuals not serving as elected members of the Council, such as

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[24] There were 11 members and a chair and a deputy chair serving in the administration in 2005.

ordinary members of political parties or people who were candidates at the local election, but were not elected.

Each Board has a set term of four years, after which members have to leave unless they are re-selected to serve another term in the Board. The overall terms of reference of the Board are organisational and economic development, setting targets as well as guiding and supervising planning, implementation and evaluation of its functions. Following the Municipality Act 1995, the decision-making powers of Boards have increased, although, as some authors have argued, the Act has not succeeded in enhancing local democracy, but instead has increased powers of non-elected officials such as those working in the Education Office (Oksanen 1995). There can be tensions between the political/strategic and operative sides in educational decision-making at the local level – the Local Education Board and the Education Office respectively– which can draw from a lack of trust between the two sides (Oksanen 1995:100).

The Education Office in the municipality is in charge of planning and development of education services according to decisions and directions made by the Board. The highest serving officials in the Education Office do, however, have some autonomous power to decide on longer-term development priorities for education services in the city. The Director of Educational Services is in charge of the Office and is selected for the post by the City Council Administration. In addition, there are two managers who are in charge of their respective areas – economic and organisational matters (the Director of Finance), and wider developmental matters (the Head of Education for Development). Until 2005 the Local Education Board selected these two leading officials for their posts, but from 2005 the Director of Education and Culture has been given this task (see below) (Rules of governance for educational services in the City 2000, 2005).

A recent organisational change in the case study city implemented at the end of 2004 has created a number of new managerial posts for the city governance, and reflects similar reforms taking place in other municipalities all over Finland (see

Figure 5.1). The overall aim of the organisational change was to improve efficiency and flexibility of the system, and to make it more 'user-friendly' by improving approachability in local democracy. It appears however, that instead of simplifying the existing structure, as it was intended to do, the move has created a new bureaucratic layer to the top-end of the governance structure. For educational services the restructuring process has created a new Director of Education and Culture below the City Council (which selects the person for the post), and above the Director of the Education Office (the City website 2005).

When moving down to the level of schools, principals and teachers can be identified as important stake-holders in relation to decision-making in their schools and beyond. Principals in particular hold powers that can be described as significant, and which have grown in importance over the years, as discussed in Chapter 2.3. In addition, school governing bodies and parent committees have a role to play in agenda setting, although the role of governing bodies has gradually diminished in the municipality as discussed below.
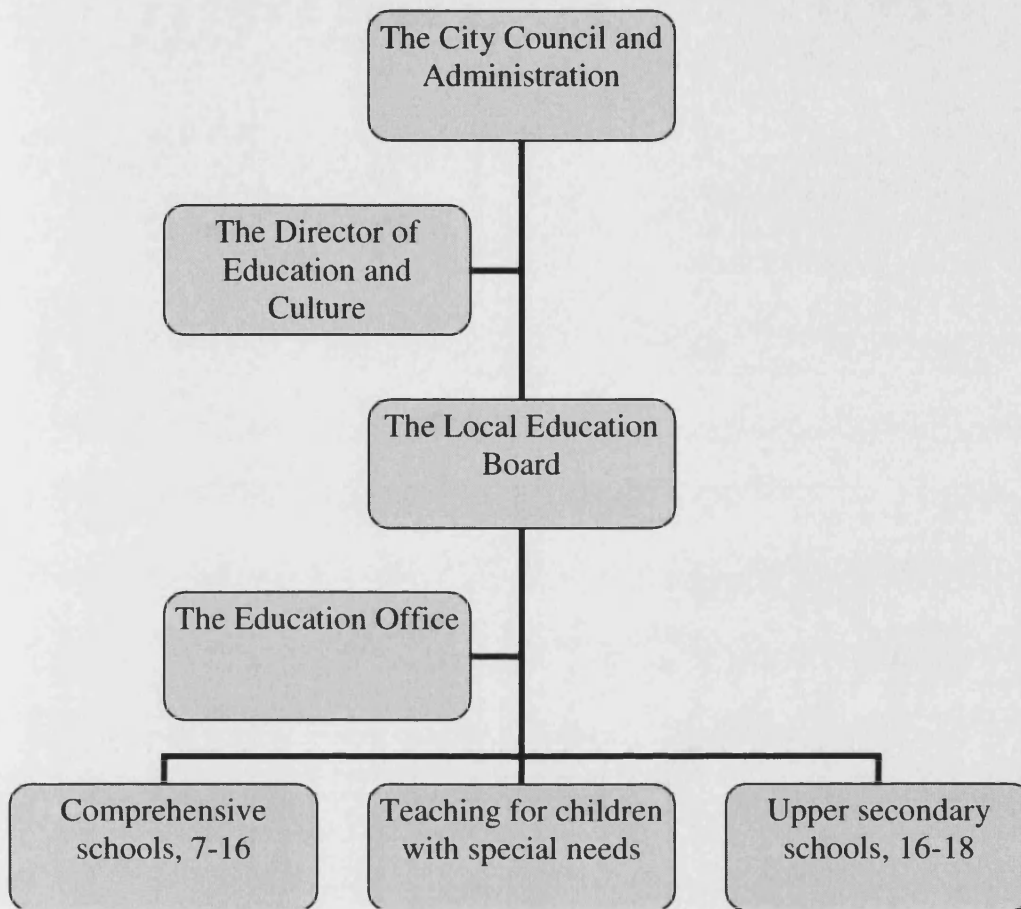
Figure 5.1 Hierarchy of educational decision-making bodies in the case study municipality

5.1.2. The role of the key actors

Having identified the various key decision makers above, the roles and functions of these bodies are examined next in the context of the educational landscape in the city. The inter-relationships of the actors are also considered.

As seen above, the elected City Council is the highest decision-making body in the city, and plays a crucial role in deciding on financial matters and budgets for services, which is one of its main duties and functions (Municipality Act 1995). Other decisions are generally taken at lower levels, and planning and development work is left for those employed for the task in the Education Office, the Local Education Board and various planning groups and committees that are set up with particular terms of reference.

Overall, Local Education Boards make decisions that are both longer-term strategic decisions and shorter-term tactical decisions (Oksanen 1995: 95). Municipalities do not necessarily have to have Education Boards – it is up to municipalities to decide whether they wish to set up one or not. This supports the strong decentralisation culture in Finland since the 1980s, and autonomous nature of municipalities in governing their own affairs. In larger municipalities Education Boards are common since there are many issues to deal with related to educational services, but in smaller municipalities the tasks of the Board can be delegated to principals of comprehensive schools. Furthermore, according to the Municipality Act 1995, municipality councils can delegate a part of their powers directly to Local Education Boards. What Local Education Boards do, therefore, can vary substantially across different municipalities (Municipality Act 1995). This has consequences for the way in which national policies are interpreted at the local level for instance, and is discussed throughout the rest of the thesis.

In general, Boards have powers and duties to confirm the curricula of comprehensive schools (includes curricula for children with SEN), which cater for students aged 7 to 16, and upper secondary schools catering for pupils aged

16-18 in their municipality. Importantly in this context, they decide on proposed specialist classes – this is indeed the situation in the case study municipality. Local Education Boards thus have great authority in municipalities to agree or disagree with schools' proposals to set up any specialist functions. In the case study municipality the Board also decides on the yearly number of classes and pupils at each school under its jurisdiction, and chooses principals and governing body members for comprehensive schools in the city (Rules of governance for educational services in the City 2000, 2005).

But, what has been happening at the level of schools in the case study municipality – what role do schools have in decision-making processes? And, what do the four case study schools look like in terms of their ethos, identities, specialisms and student populations? These issues are discussed next and constitute the important baseline, or grass-roots level, context for the remaining chapters of the thesis.

5.2. The school domain, case study schools and their policies

This section of the chapter focuses on the domain of schools linking the broader decision-making sphere discussed above with the school level. The first part offers a brief overview of the broader role of schools, and in particular principals, teachers and school governing bodies, in local decision-making. The following parts discuss the four case study schools and the specialist functions offered at each school.

5.2.1. The role of schools in decision-making

At the level of comprehensive schools, the role of principals is important in setting agendas for the development of schools' policies, and these have become more prominent during the decades of far-reaching decentralisation since the 1980s. The pressures placed on principals, the leaders of schools, as developers of policy and organisation, managers of human and economic resources, as well

as pedagogical leaders have therefore grown considerably (Kangasniemi 1997). Increased powers of school leadership have occurred simultaneously with increased expectations and responsibilities (Kääriäinen et al. 1997). The input of teachers in decision-making is also important, but tends to focus on autonomous curriculum planning and selection of appropriate teaching methods. They are therefore responsible for quality of education (Oksanen 1995: 109). These issues are further developed in Chapter Seven, which will elaborate the role of principals, and in some cases teachers, in school-level decisions – it will be seen that in some instances principals and teachers have been the key players in directing the development of policies of the case study schools.

The question as to whether school governing bodies have any role in local decision-making is an interesting one, and although they have had an importance role to play in the past, it is likely that these bodies will cease to exist in future. The creation of the area-model in the case study municipality has meant that individual governing bodies of schools have been replaced with area-governing bodies – in effect creating a single governing body for particular areas of the city with several primary schools and one secondary school attached (see section 6.2). Currently, among the main duties of area-governing bodies are the development and support of the school organisation in co-operation with parents and children, and safeguarding appropriate school surroundings (Rules of governance for educational services in the City 2000, 2005).

In the case study municipality the role of area-governing bodies has been debated in the Local Education Board meetings, but no decision has yet been made about their fate. It has been decided to continue with the current practice until at least 2008 when governing body members will be selected again for their four-year term (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2005). It is likely that in future governing bodies will be replaced by parent committees, which are formed from among parents of children attending a particular school (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2007). The role of parent committees would be limited to guidance since they do not have any formal powers to make decisions

regarding schools and their policies. However, if area-governing bodies were to be abolished, it is clear that parent committees' 'watchdog role' would be enhanced.

Next, the focus is on the four case study schools, beginning with a description of City school and its policies, before moving on to consider the other primary school in the study – Millpond school. After this the two secondary schools, Hillside and Parkview schools, and their policies are described briefly.

Figure 5.2 below shows the number of students in each case study school between 1992 and 2004. As seen, student numbers in City school have remained broadly similar in this period, ranging from just over 400 students to about 350. In Millpond school student numbers have fluctuated more, reaching the peak of 400 students in 1994 – from 1994 to 2004 the numbers have remained at a broadly similar level of just under 350 students. In the two secondary schools, the picture has been more varied. In Parkview school student numbers declined from the early 1990s to the early 2000s after which they started to increase, reaching the peak of about 450 students in 2003 and 2004. In Hillside school, on the other hand, there occurred a major increase in student numbers throughout the 1990s exceeding 550 students, but from early 2000s the numbers declined rapidly. In 2004, there were only about 360 students studying in Hillside school.

Student numbers in case study schools 1992-2004
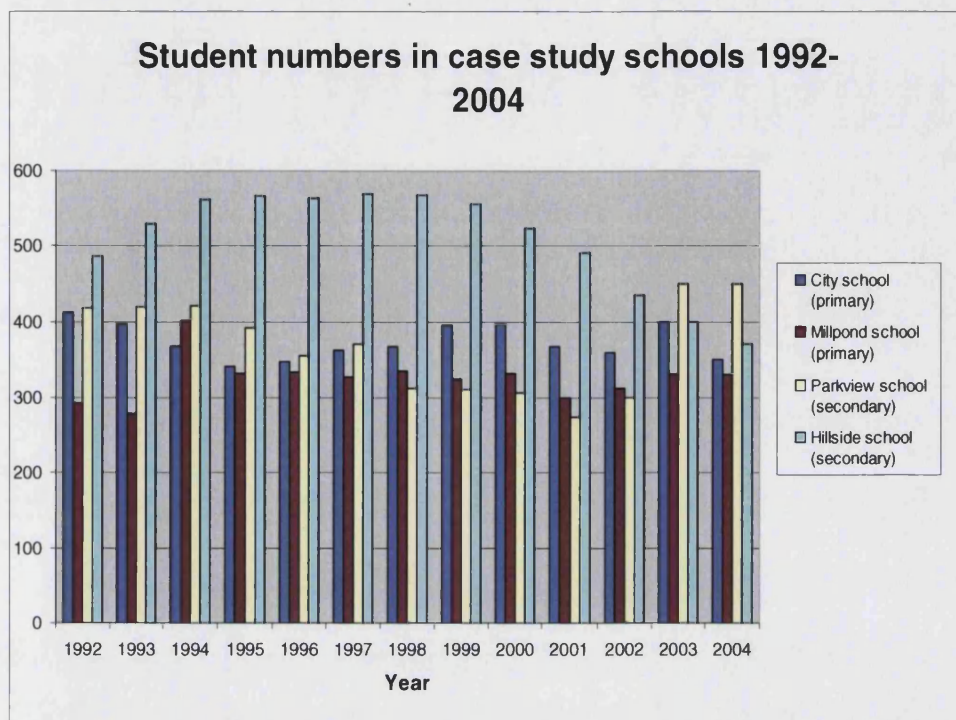
Figure 5.2 Number of students in the four case study schools 1992-2004 (data from the Education Office)

5.2.2. Primary school 1: City School

City School was one of the largest primary schools in the city, and was situated close to the city centre. The oldest part of the school was built in the early 20th Century. In 2003 the school had a student population of approximately 400 pupils (statistics from the Education Office). In the prospectus published by the Local Education Board (2003) the school was described as providing basic education of a high standard and offering a wide choice of foreign languages. In addition, reflecting its central location, good transport links and close proximity to cultural amenities were highlighted. City school had become a centre for a number of specialist educational functions in the city signalling the priorities of decision-makers and shapers at the Education Office and the Local Education Board. There were specialist music and language teaching as well as provision for children with special educational needs which were all linked to 'official'

specialisms originating from the educational decision-making domain through external policy drivers (see Chapter 7.1 for further discussion).

The history of specialist music teaching (i.e. music classes) dates back to the beginning of the comprehensive school system in the late 1960s. Municipalities were allowed to set up specialist music classes at schools in their area, which had more hours dedicated to music teaching than other classes (see Chapter 2). Hence, students at music classes followed a different curriculum from other students at the school. The overall aim was to provide opportunities for high quality music teaching for a small number of students all over Finland, who had demonstrated an ability to benefit from this type of education. Entry was therefore to be selective and based on a test, which a child takes in the end of his or her second year at school. Specialist music teaching, then, begins in grade three of compulsory education when a child is aged around nine. While normally children have only two hours of music teaching in a week in grades three to six, in music classes the number of weekly hours dedicated to music teaching has been doubled (i.e. four hours per week) (Guidelines of the municipality-based curriculum 2006).

Between the late 1960s through to the early 2000s the municipality had three schools at the primary stage of education that offered specialist music classes, however, music class provision has been discontinued in two of the schools (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1996 and 2002). The one primary school that retained its specialist music classes was City school.

It is important to stress that the whole municipality, was, and has always been treated as a single catchment area for the music classes, so children who attend these classes came from all over the city, and sometimes even from neighbouring municipalities (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1996). This was different from most other schools in the city since children were normally allocated to their local schools in the first instance according to the area-model (see Chapter 6.2 for further discussion).

The school also had a range of other specialist classes that focused on either language teaching or supportive teaching for immigrant children. The specialist language groups offered language teaching for immigrant populations in their native languages, and there was provision for such languages as Urdu, Russian, Thai, Farsi and Spanish in 2005. Teaching took place outside normal school hours and was voluntary, so students were expected to put in extra effort to learn their native languages. Children could come to attend these classes from other schools in the municipality, and therefore were not necessarily fully part of the school. The preparatory teaching for immigrant children to enable them to enter mainstream Finnish speaking classes was also based at City school (see section 6.2 for details of municipality policy).

Another distinct specialist class at City school was an English-speaking class, which was selective and only accessible to those children who had acquired a very good proficiency in English by living abroad for instance, or whose parents were foreign nationals. During the academic year 2004/05, there were 31 students (about 8.9 per cent of the total school population) following the English-speaking teaching programme. As a result of a relatively small number of students enrolled in this programme, classes had been combined so that all grade 1-3 children (aged 7-9) were in one group and grade 4-6 in another (children aged 10-13) (the Basic Education Prospectus 2005-2006). The English-speaking classes followed the municipality-based curriculum, in the main, but English language studies began at grade one (normally at grade three) and English language was used in the teaching of academic subjects (except Finnish and other foreign languages in which the language of tuition was Finnish) (Guidelines of the municipality-based curriculum 2006). The numbers of weekly hours were also different. The English-speaking classes had more weekly lessons in English language (and fewer lessons in Finnish language) – for example, in grades three to six the English-speaking classes had four weekly hours of English whereas normally this amounted to only two weekly hours (Guidelines of the municipality-based curriculum 2006).

On the 'supportive' teaching front for children with special educational needs the school offered a 'start group', which was designed for 7-year-olds who had been diagnosed as requiring extra support for the first year at school. This was not, however, a function limited to City school – there were several other schools in the municipality that offered these types of support groups for children living in the area. The main reason for the existence of these specialist functions was a policy adopted by the educational decision-makers in the city, which stipulated that most special needs children should be integrated within 'normal' comprehensive schools by offering extra support services (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2002) (see Chapter 6.2 for a further discussion). Once again, children came to these specialist classes and groups from all around the town and from all the schools in the area.

The school provided an interesting case, as despite having various specialist classes, provision for children with some form of special educational needs also existed. The school provided facilities both for the talented, through its music classes, and for the more challenged, through its immigrant-focused and special needs-focused programmes. A unique equilibrium thus existed between these two different sides to the school's policies, which had created a distinctive school ethos.

Following a decision by the Local Education Board and the City Council in the spring of 2005, City school closed in the autumn of 2007, and children from the nearby area were directed to other schools (see Chapter 8.2).

5.2.3. Primary school 2: Millpond School

Another primary school that had a specialist agenda in the area was Millpond School, which specialised in English-weighted teaching. This differed from the English-speaking class offered at City School, discussed above, in that in this school only *a part of the curriculum* was taught in English and other parts in Finnish, as decided by the school. Teaching was based on a language immersion technique or 'Content and Language Integrated Teaching' (CLIL), whereby a

student learns a foreign language more naturally, as a part of everyday school context, rather than in specifically designed lessons. The foreign language was therefore 'the medium through which the content of different subjects is taught' and its central idea the 'inseparable integration of the subject content and the foreign language' (Rasinen 2006: 165).

The school, which was located close to the city centre, had just over 300 students in 2003 (statistics from the Education Office). In the prospectus published by the Local Education Board (2003), the school's specialist agenda was highlighted alongside its internal specialisms that focused on internationality and healthy lifestyles. The policy practice at Millpond School since the early 1990s provides an interesting example of how the specialism in English-weighted teaching expanded to cover the entire school.

The English-weighted programme began initially in 1991 as a result of a decision taken by the school's governing body, with the necessary backing of the principal and the support of the Local Education Board (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1990-1991). What made it possible for Millpond school to specialise was a combination of factors, which included a suitable timing, an enthusiastic governing body and experienced teachers. A brochure produced by the school in the early years of it embarking on the specialist teaching experiment in 1991 described the underlying rationale of the method as being based on 'increasing international interrelationships, and the increasing need for a basic command of languages'. It went on to suggest that 'the hopes of parents, the new school legislation and the renewal of language teaching methods have led to an increase in the teaching in foreign languages'.

Following the emergence of unforeseen problems with the running of the programme, such as an internal differentiation of students on the basis of ability and dilemmas regarding entrance conditions, a decision was reached by key decision-makers and teachers to expand the programme (see Chapter 7.3). The school introduced English-weighted teaching across all the classes at the school in autumn 2004. All students enrolling at Millpond school from late 2004

onwards were thus part of the extended English teaching programme, and parents who did not wish their children to begin English-weighted teaching had to enrol at another local school. There were no entrance exams or other tests, but all children automatically were taught using the school's special pedagogical methods: in short, the school followed the municipality-based curriculum, however, at grades one to six (the primary stage) there was at least one weekly lesson in which the language of tuition was English (Guidelines of the municipality-based curriculum 2006). According to the municipality curriculum (which is based on the national guidelines), the teaching of the first foreign language officially begins at grade three when the child is aged nine and continues throughout the primary stage – this was also the case at Millpond school (ibid.). The teaching of English language, per se, was thus limited to two weekly hours (ibid.).

English-weighted teaching was part of the school's internal specialism on international relations education – other internal specialisms, or 'key areas' as described in the school's web-pages, included healthy lifestyles and 'ethical behaviour' education. The focus on healthy lifestyles included an emphasis on learning to enjoy physical education and fitness as well as appreciating a healthy diet and a responsible attitude to narcotics. The focus on 'ethical behaviour', on the other hand, highlighted educating children to take responsibility for their own behaviour and to have responsible attitudes towards other people (Millpond school website 2005). Indeed, the school emphasised its aim to enhance every student's right to belong to the school community on an equal basis and the acceptance of difference (ibid.). The school had an area 'small group' for special needs students in grades 1-3 for which students came from around the area for more supportive part-time teaching while regularly attending mainstream classes (ibid.). In addition, there was another small group based at Millpond school for children with more serious learning disabilities who required specialist individual support (ibid.) – this represented 'social integration' since the disabled children and children in mainstream classes were not taught together but shared other activities together (e.g. mealtimes) (Warnock et al. 1978).

Developments that have occurred in Millpond school since 1991 are interesting and throw light on various aspects of internal policy maturation. Essentially interlinked to internal policy development processes were external conditions and developments in the municipality as well as wider education policy transformations – the end result was therefore an amalgamation of many different factors.

5.2.4. Secondary school 1: Hillside School

Hillside was a secondary school with a student population of approximately 400 students in the academic year 2003-2004 (statistics from the Education Office). The school offered specialisms in music and English-speaking classes alongside the school-wide 'classless teaching' pedagogy, which was an innovative method enabling students to progress at their own pace through the secondary stage of education. The school's ethos was to educate students to become 'balanced and responsible', who 'value different cultures and take care of nature and environment' (Hillside school website 2005). Some of the educational key areas, i.e. internal specialisms, of Hillside school included supporting students' wellbeing at school, promoting healthy lifestyles as well as co-operation with parents and other schools (Hillside school website 2005). The school also provided support for children who needed extra support and help, for example immigrant students and special educational needs children (Hillside school website 2005).

A large majority of students came to Hillside from City school, which was its feeder primary school. In the past, the school had a larger number of students coming from other primary schools in the area, however, following a decision by the Local Education Board in the early 2000s to make school catchment areas more area-specific (see Chapter 6.2), it was decided that City school would be the main source of students for Hillside. This decision meant a declining number of students starting at Hillside each year, as some of those previously granted a place were directed to other local schools (Hillside school website 2005).

The school had various specialist features. The city's music classes at the secondary stage (grades 7-9) were based at Hillside as were the English-speaking classes. In the early 1990s there were three schools at the secondary level, which had music classes (the same number as there were primary schools offering specialist music teaching) (Rules of governance for the City 1990). However, by the early 2000s music classes at the two other secondary schools were discontinued – Hillside remained the only school at the secondary level to maintain its music classes. English-speaking classes started in 1996 and functioned at Hillside until the autumn of 2006 when they were transferred to Parkview school (Hillside school website 2005, Guidelines of the municipality-based curriculum 2006). Children to both of these special classes – music and English-speaking classes – came from City school. Between 2004 and 2005 there were 23 students in the music classes and 25 students enrolled at the English-speaking programme (Hillside school website 2005, statistics from the Education Office).

From the 1990s onwards the school had been one of the pioneers of a unique style of teaching, 'classless teaching', whereby children took modules suited to their own pace instead of progressing through the secondary stage in set groups/classes (Hillside school website 2005) (see Chapter 7.2). The secondary education curriculum at Hillside school was divided into a number of modules that all children had to take in order to successfully complete the secondary stage (ibid.). This gave children the freedom to progress at their own pace – normally enabling some children to complete the secondary stage curriculum in a shorter period than the standard three years. It also enabled children to take longer over the secondary stage if, for instance, they had suffered a long-standing illness or other difficulties (ibid.). Schools, in general, are able to utilise different formats for the classless teaching pedagogy – the format adopted by Hillside school was therefore unique.

The school introduced a number of other specialist features during the 1990s, which coincided with the move to increase school decision-making powers and autonomy in drawing school-based curricula. English-weighted teaching was

one of those specialisms introduced at this time (in 1995) as was teaching for immigrant students (in 1992) (Hillside school website 2005).[25] English-weighted teaching was later discontinued (since this specialism was moved to Parkview school – see below), but the school still acted as an educational centre for immigrant children that came to the school largely from City school. In this sense the school's international focus was maintained being one of the operating concepts of the school (Hillside school website 2005).

Following a decision by the Local Education Board and the City Council in the spring of 2005, Hillside school was closed in the autumn of 2007. Children from the nearby area were directed to other schools, mainly Parkview school discussed below. The introduction of the 'area-model' in the municipality also had important consequences on Hillside and Parkview school from the early 2000s. A decision was made by the Local Education Board to start directing students from particular primary schools to particular secondary schools, which in effect limited 'parental choice' in the municipality (see section 6.2). As can be seen from Figure 5.1 above, student numbers at Hillside school declined significantly from 2000 to 2004 while those at Parkview school rose. Intervention by local educational decision-makers has thus had a considerable impact on schools in the area and has also had implications on equity and equality of opportunity as seen in Chapter 8.

5.2.5. Secondary school 2: Parkview School

Parkview school was a secondary school with approximately 350 students in 2005 (statistics from the Education Office). The basic education prospectus, 2004-2005 described the school as offering education that supported students' growth for wellbeing. Internal specialisms since the early 1990s have included international education (e.g. European cooperation of schools in various areas) and environmental education. In addition, 'good quality basic education at every

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[25] English-weighted teaching is currently offered at the primary level in Millpond school, and at secondary in Parkview school.

level and in every subject' was described as an area of special focus at Parkview according to the school's web-pages (Parkview school website 2005).

The school also acted as a centre for teaching autistic children of secondary school age in the city. Teaching took place in small groups of around six children supported by a teacher specialising in special needs education and several teaching assistants. In some subject areas such as arts education, autistic children could be integrated within other groups at the school (Parkview school website 2005). In addition, there was another specialist group functioning at Parkview designed for children who experienced problems in studying as part of large groups and needed more special attention in their everyday learning. In this specialist 'small group' there were about 10 children who were taught by a specialist teacher (Parkview school website 2005). There were no differences in the aims and content of the curriculum, or the number of hours per week set in the National Curriculum (ibid.). As in the case of the group of children with autism, children joined larger groups in some subject areas to enhance integration with children in mainstream classes (ibid.). This approach combined social integration with functional integration whereby children were taught together in the same class (Warnock et al. 1978).

Student numbers at Parkview school steadily declined during the 1990s until 2000. In the autumn of 2003, the English-weighted teaching groups for grades 7-9 were transferred from Hillside to Parkview school and children from Millpond school therefore continued their English-weighted programme at Parkview. This was linked to the introduction of the area-model as discussed above (see also section 6.2). In addition, the English-speaking classes were transferred from Hillside to Parkview in 2006. Together these resulted for a significant expansion of student numbers at Parkview school – in 2004 there were 450 students at Parkview school – an increase of approximate 30 per cent since 2002 (statistics from the Education Office). The Local Education Board and City Council's decision to close several primary and secondary schools in the city from 2006 onwards had further implications on Parkview school and its

student intake was set to increase further as more children were to be directed to Parkview from nearby areas.

5.3. Conclusions

This chapter has outlined the local context in which educational decision-making takes place and has explained the four case study schools and their policies and functions. The background context examined in this chapter constitutes the basis for which the empirical research is based, and is further developed through the remainder of the thesis. It has been seen that key decision-makers from the City Council to the level of the Education Office and the Local Education Board can exert considerable power and influence on schools in the area. The domain of schools does not therefore exist in isolation or autonomously, but is strongly tied in with key decision-makers and their policy priorities. The influence of the Local Education Board on schools has been seen to be particularly significant and decisions reached in this domain can have far-reaching consequences on local schools – this issue is returned to in the following chapters of the thesis

While schools are essentially linked to the local authority level, the local level is, on the other hand, tied in with the national level which to a degree directs the development of local education policies. Attention in the next chapter turns more specifically on this area and the ways in which the local level has interpreted national education policy priorities. It is seen that the relationship between the national and local levels is not necessarily straightforward, but is governed by various intervening factors including the issue of finance. These important factors are discussed and analysed next.

6. Education policies from the national to the local level

This chapter focuses on analysing education policy changes both at the national level and the local level. The main question to be asked is how national education policies and priorities with regard to choice/diversity and equity/equality opportunity are interpreted, in practice, at the local level in education services (Research Question 1). Links between the two levels are made – particularly in relation to financial issues – and are analysed with the aim of making connections as to what impact national frameworks, policies and constraints have on the local level. The issues of finance and demography are found to be of central importance.

The chapter begins, in section 6.1, with looking at the legal foundations of education policy which frames the development of local education policies, focusing particularly on policies which impact on specialisation, diversity and choice and on equality of opportunity and equity. In this endeavour, the National Framework Curriculum 2004 and the perceived education policy development priorities by the Ministry of Education and the Government are examined. In section 6.2, two important education policy areas in the case study municipality are considered which are also linked to national education development priorities: parental choice and the area of integration and inclusion of special educational needs children and children from immigrant backgrounds into mainstream education. From here attention is moved to the issue of funding in the following three sections. Section 6.3 highlights the funding of education from the national level and how economic recession has impacted funding of education at a local level. The following section, 6.4 focuses, in more detail, on financing on education in the case study municipality – it will be seen that demographic changes and prevailing, long-term, economic difficulties have had a significant impact on the development of education policies at the local level. Attention in section 6.5 is placed on analysing how interviewees in the case study municipality perceive the issue of funding. The final section 6.6 offers some brief conclusions to the chapter.

6.1. The legal foundations and national development priorities

This section focuses on outlining and analysing the national legislative and policy context which constitutes the framework within which local education policies are formulated. The main pieces of educational legislation which impinge on local education policies are the Education Act 1998 and the National Framework Curriculum 2004. Since the 1998 Education Act has been discussed in detail previously (see Chapter 2.5), the main focus will be placed on the National Framework Curriculum 2004. Recent development priorities by the Ministry of Education and the Government are also addressed through examining the Development Plan reports which outline the direction and aims of the Finnish education system at large.

6.1.1. Policies impacting diversity and 'choice'

The National Framework Curriculum 2004 drawn up by the National Board of Education introduced changes of considerable impact across schools and municipalities in Finland. A number of factors can be identified which were of special significance including, first, the reinforcement of an undivided comprehensive school structure, and second, the prescriptive nature of the 2004 Framework Curriculum together with its far-reaching value-base. Together these developments can be seen to have an impact on diversity and 'choice', although perhaps more indirectly, by emphasising co-operation of schools within the new undivided structure and a continuum between the previously separate primary and secondary levels – this may encourage the spread of specialisation to primary level schools.

The establishment of 'undivided' comprehensive schooling (for children aged from 7 to 16) has, in practice, removed the administrative divide between primary and secondary levels of education (Ministry of Education 2006c). In fact, this change dates to the implementation of the 1998 Education Act (in 1999) which aimed to create administratively and pedagogically more unified

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basic education for educational providers, i.e. most commonly municipalities (Ministry of Education 2006c, Johnson 2007a). This aim has, however, since been considerably strengthened in subsequent legislation, particularly in the 2004 National Framework Curriculum (Pietarinen 2005). A shift has occurred from administrative and pedagogical aims towards encouraging the creation of a unified school culture and ethos (ibid.). The encouragement of the undivided comprehensive school system was also highly apparent in the 2001 lesson hour allocation statute which the Framework Curriculum incorporated (ibid.). When in the previous 1993 lesson hour allocation reference was clearly made to *primary* and *secondary* levels of education, in 2001 this was no longer the case (Finlex 2006a, Finlex 2006b). Education was to be seen as a continuum from the time a child begins schooling at the age of seven until the age of 16 at the end of the comprehensive education (Finlex 2006b). The 2004 Framework Curriculum further reinforced the undivided structure by making this a central aim for development (Pietarinen 2005).

One way the aim of a more unified comprehensive school was put in to practice was by an increased emphasis on integration and inclusion – the focus on groups like children with special educational needs and children from immigrant backgrounds (ibid.). This is one reason why the comprehensive school system has become more diverse than previously. According to the National Board of Education (2007b), the conceptualisation of inclusion[26] is threefold: first, that all children are educated together, secondly, that education is organised in a way suited to children's individual needs, and thirdly, that each individual feels accepted and valued within the school organisation. This change has had an impact on the way education is organised in municipalities strengthening the idea of a local school and cooperation between schools in local areas (Pietarinen 2005). How these guidelines have been interpreted at the local level in the case study municipality is considered later in the chapter.

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[26] The term 'inclusion', highlighting the extent of true integration of SEN children within mainstream classes, has become more accepted term than 'integration', which often refers to a setting into which a child can be placed – without necessarily being included (Farrell 2001). In Finnish policy documents both the terms integration and inclusion are commonly used, however.

It is also significant that the 2004 Framework Curriculum is more prescriptive than the 1994 Curriculum it replaced, which has been achieved by increasing norm-steering from the centre (Pietarinen 2005). More detailed prescriptions of desired learning outcomes for different subjects are included in the Curriculum across the grades. There are clear guidelines about student assessment and marking and, importantly, the assessment criteria for the final grade nine certificate aims to enhance standards for national comparisons (National Board of Education 2004). Furthermore, the guidelines state that the curriculum in municipalities can be drafted so that it includes municipality-based parts as well as area and school-based parts as decided by the educational provider, i.e. normally municipalities (ibid.). In this way, the existing freedoms of teachers, principals and municipalities have been partly limited. At the same time, however, individualisation is still partly encouraged through allowing school-based curricula to exist, which can be seen to create tension between uniformity on one hand, and, individuality on the other (Pietarinen 2005).

A small scale study by the National Board of Education in 2005 examined different curricula used by municipalities across Finland – it was found that a majority of municipalities examined had introduced a system where municipality-based parts were highlighted and constituted between 70 to 90 per cent of the local curricula with the remainder being a mixture of area- and school-based parts (National Board of Education 2007c). Interestingly, however, it was also found that in some municipalities the school-based part constituted up to 50 per cent of the curricula (ibid.), which suggests a strong specialisation ethos in operation in these municipalities. It is clear that municipalities can exercise considerable discretion within the national curriculum guidelines and are thus able to implement types of curricula which take into account local interests and development priorities.

According to the latest Development Plan for education policy drawn by the Ministry of Education and approved by the Government in 2007, 'the education system has to support the creation on new jobs in Finland and to prepare its

population and economy ready to adjust to changes brought on by globalisation' (Ministry of Education 2007a: 5). It is evident that this developmental aim has an impact on comprehensive schools through an increased emphasis on diversity and choice as compared to the Ministry's previous report *Education and Research 2003-2008* discussed in the next part (6.1.2). The 2007 report (Ministry of Education 2007a: 21-22) argued that:

> 'Diverse municipality and private schools provide families the possibility of choosing suitable education for their children. The role of private schools is...to strengthen the diversity of the Finnish education system and to provide opportunities for parents' active role in choosing a school'.

Later, in the section on the challenge of increasing internationalisation, the report highlights that high-quality knowledge of foreign languages are central to a nation's success in the global market and an important aim therefore is to 'clarify the choice of languages at schools...to support the provision of language immersion techniques[27] at schools' and 'to take action to widen and diversify language provision at schools' (ibid: 31). Although choice and diversity have been emphasised, the language used remains rather vague and details regarding the implementation of these aims scarce. It is clear, however, that issues relating to school diversity and parental choice still remain important education policy aims at the national level. For example, as the report states, the planned reforms in the state subsidy system in 2010 will be carried out in such a way that individuals' right to choose schools and institutions will not be negatively affected (ibid: 26). In the light of evidence examined here it appears that these trends will continue to have an impact on comprehensive schools in years to come.

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[27] This is also known as Content and Language Integrated Teaching (CLIL) – see part 5.2.2 for further details.

6.1.2. Policies impacting equality of opportunity and equity

There are tensions apparent in some of the underlying values of the National Curriculum 2004. These allude to a conflict between old and new – a recognition of a continued importance of values such as equality of opportunity and the inevitability of internationalisation and individualisation as seen below.

The value-base of basic education in the 2004 Framework Curriculum emphasises such broad areas as democracy, equality, human rights and the importance of multiculturalism thus endorsing the values of the 1998 Education Act (see Chapter 2). Societal responsibility and respect for freedom and rights of individuals are also highlighted. Interestingly, the value-base is built around the concept of Finnish culture and identity, which encompasses aspects of globalisation and internationalisation (National Board of Education 2004). Finnishness is seen as an integral part of the wider social and cultural network, especially in the Nordic and the European contexts. It appears that there is a concern to place Finnish national identity within a wider, more open, context – this is after all set at the forefront of the value base of comprehensive schools (National Board of Education 2004) (see also the discussion on Finnish national identity in section 2.2).

Regional equality and equality between citizens is another aspect of the value-base. Through basic education, regional and gender equality is claimed to have an increased emphasis, but the needs of 'different learners' are at the same time argued to be of importance. The term 'different learners' can be seen as ambiguous in the context of equality of opportunity as it covers both the talented and the less talented, for example those children with learning difficulties. The Framework Curriculum therefore neatly includes both the talented and the less talented under the umbrella of equality of opportunity – this may enable schools to cater increasingly for gifted children through various specialisation programmes and classes. Indeed, in 2002 the Committee of Education and Culture argued that special attention has to be placed on supporting the more talented children as well as the weaker students along the

lines that 'in one's own local school and familiar class there are opportunities to progress in studies deeper than average' (2002: 5). This line of thinking demonstrates the official interpretation of equality of opportunity and some of the ambiguities present (see Chapter 3).

In 2004 the Ministry of Education published a report *Education and Research 2003-2008* outlining the Ministry's and the Government's development priorities in education for the next five years. The report examined various factors which could be seen to present challenges for the Finnish education system, including demographic changes, globalisation and internationalisation. Notably, it was argued that educational equality of opportunity remains a central objective: 'each individual must have an equal right to receive education on the basis of their abilities and special needs, and to develop themselves regardless of their wealth' (Ministry of Education 2004: 19).

What this means in compulsory education in practice is less clear. According to the report, 'access to basic education services is to be secured' (ibid: 19), but there is no elaboration upon how services are to be tailored to suit students' differing abilities. In terms of developing services for students from immigrant backgrounds, which the report recognised as one priority, emphasis is placed on language teaching in order to promote integration into the society. This is arguably important if integration and inclusion of the immigrant populations within the Finnish society remain desired goals.

The response of the Report to some of the findings of the PISA study 2000 offered perhaps the most tangible suggestions as how to improve equality of opportunity. Although Finland's overall results in the PISA were highly equitable, differences between and within schools existed. Therefore, as one important development priority the Report endorsed the strengthening of the principle of a local school alongside the fact that resources should be directed to the less well-performing schools (ibid.). In addition, 'the prevention of the circle of social inheritance is to be supported...with the aim of preventing differentiation of schools' and 'the practices regarding the use of admission

policies are to be made clearer' (ibid: 34). Yet again, it is not clear how these principles could and should be realised in practice – for example, would the emphasis on a 'local school' mean that parental choice policy at the same time becomes less important? This is the direction which developments in the case study municipality have been steering towards (see section 6.2 for a discussion).

The Report of the Council of the State (Government) to Parliament in 2005 on the effect of the educational legislation and the achievement of objectives set in the legislation adopted a fairly neutral line and reinforced the objectives of *Education and Research 2003-2008* (Ministry of Education 2006c). The four main development priorities for the future identified included equality, globalisation, demography and effectiveness and efficiency of the education system (ibid.). Curiously, the argument that individuals should have an equal right to receive education suited to their particular abilities and needs – as identified in Ministry of Education report in 2004 – was placed as a challenge of demography rather than equality of opportunity. This was because the basic rights for education were linked with the reform of municipality and service structures in the light of a required adaptation of the school/institution network necessitated by a declining number of children (Ministry of Education 2006c). As the report highlighted 'among the key questions in the future will be how to secure, and in some parts improve, the equal availability of high quality education services when child and youth populations are declining' (ibid: 12).

The development priority for enhancing equality, on the other hand, could be described as being a rather broad-sweep approach in the Government's report without detailed plans as how to achieve improvements in practice. Furthermore, the central focus for enhancing equality was placed on post-compulsory and adult education with only the needs and rights of children with special educational needs and children from immigrant backgrounds being highlighted in compulsory education (ibid.). Thus, the aims of preventing differentiation of schools and of clarifying the role of admission policies in comprehensive schools, as identified in *Education and Research 2003-2008*, were not reinforced. This raises the question as to whether school

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differentiation, parental choice and entrance tests are in fact interpreted as less important elements for improving overall equality of opportunity. These are important considerations which the Government should adequately evaluate in any analysis of equality of opportunity policies.

An updated Development Plan report, *Education and Research 2007-2012* (Ministry of Education 2007a), represents a more diluted version of the previous report in terms of equality of opportunity and equity. Although equal educational opportunities to high quality and free education throughout the country constitute an underlying principle for the development of the education system (ibid.), quality seems to take precedence over equality of opportunity. Significantly, an aim to reduce the average size of classes is supported, partly, because it enables 'the promotion of creativity, different kinds of giftedness and innovation from early education onwards' and is thus linked to improving quality of education and learning outcomes (ibid: 43). No mention is made regarding differentiation and polarisation between schools, nor the role of admission policies, which were identified in *Education and Research 2003-2008* as a possible cause for concern. On balance, the current development priorities are clearly focused more on improving quality and effectiveness of compulsory education rather than strengthening equity and equality of opportunity.

Attention in the next section focuses on analysing how national education policy priorities relating to choice and diversity on one hand and equity and equality on the other have been interpreted, in practice, at the local area level in the case study municipality.

6.2. Municipality policy on parental choice (choice/diversity) and on integration and inclusion (equity/equality of opportunity)

This section focuses on two important policy areas affecting students, parents, schools and decision-makers and shapers in the municipality: the policy of parental choice relating to the national choice and diversity agenda, and the

policy of integration and inclusion of immigrant students and children with special educational needs (SEN) which relates to national policy development trends and aims to increase equality of opportunity as discussed above. Both of these two areas are also connected to the 1998 Education Act, in allowing children to choose other than the local school, and by making it necessary for municipalities to organise education suited to differing needs and requirement of children (see Chapter 2.5). How these policies and priorities have been interpreted and implemented at the case study municipality is discussed below. Table 6.1 outlines the main policy decisions and the implications and outcomes of these decisions affecting choice/diversity and equity/equality of opportunity in the municipality. The issues regarding parental 'choice', the flexible index and the area-model are discussed and analysed in the sections below – the school closures decision will be examined in more depth in Chapter 8 (see 8.2.3).

Year	*Policy decision*	*Implications/outcomes*
1996	Parental 'choice'	Parents allowed to express preferences as to a school of their 'choice'
1998	'Flexible index'	Introduced optimum school sizes in the area – removed any financial incentives for schools to expand in size
2000	Area-model	More control to LEB in allocation of school places in the area – parental 'choice' discouraged
2005	School closures	Four schools closed (including City and Hillside case study schools) – diversity among secondary schools reduced and less options for parental 'choice'

Table 6.1 Main policy developments in the case study municipality regarding choice/diversity and equity/equality of opportunity

6.2.1. Parental choice in the municipality

Parental choice policies are important when evaluating the impact of market-oriented reforms at a local level. This issue has been discussed in different contexts in previous chapters (see particularly Chapter 2.3 and 3.2). It will be seen below that the policy trend in relation to parental choice in the case study municipality is interesting – and not what would normally be expected under market-oriented education policies which are designed to encourage rather than discourage parental choice.

The policy of parental choice officially entered the education policy arena in the case study municipality in 1996 (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1996). This meant that the previous school district model was abolished[28] and that parents and/or students were given a right to 'choose' which school they wanted to attend at the first and seventh grades (at the age of seven and thirteen), although a right to attend a local school was maintained (ibid.).

In the beginning of the 2000s a contrary development occurred when the Local Education Board (LEB) made a decision to direct students from certain primary schools to certain secondary schools through the creation of an 'area-model' (End-of-year accounts 2000, Education Services publication 2000). Thus, in a way, this represents a return to the old school district model whereby a municipality was divided into separate districts and children were directed to schools within their own districts. Although this had happened naturally to a certain extent even under the 'parental choice policy' – since most students and parents would choose to continue at the closest secondary school to their homes – the decision meant that parental choice was discouraged and some schools previously in demand thus suffered a reduction in the number of students.

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[28] As seen previously, the district model was officially abolished in the 1990s from school legislation.

The main principle behind the area-model is that the municipality has been divided into a number of different areas in a manner that links one secondary school around several primary schools, which have thus become 'feeder' primary schools for the secondary school. Common curricula for the schools within the different areas have been developed alongside municipality curriculum guidelines and school-based curricula ('area-curricula') (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2000). Consequently, area-governing bodies have replaced individual governing bodies of schools (ibid.) – and this has reduced the role of school governing bodies as discussed previously.

In 2005, the Board pointed out that one of the aims of compulsory education in the municipality was the development of the undivided comprehensive school system 'which has been put into practice through the area-model created by the decision of the Local Education Board in 2000' (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2005). This suggests that the creation of the area-model is linked to the Basic Education Act 1998 which first made reference to the aim of the undivided comprehensive school (see section 6.1). Although no undivided comprehensive school has been created in the municipality whereby children from grades one to nine (aged seven to sixteen) would all be educated under the same roof, this possibility has been contemplated by the Board in the past (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2004). It appears that the Board has concentrated on developing the area-model instead of creating new undivided comprehensive schools in the area.

The creation of the area-model has in effect reinforced the idea of a local school and has thus limited parental choice in the municipality. It was seen in the section above that the Ministry of Education (2004) in its report *Education and Research 2003-2008* advocated the strengthening the principle of a local school but without referring to any specific ways in which this could be achieved in practice. The interpretation by the case study municipality is thus interesting, particularly when taking into account the updated *Education and Research 2007-2012* report which, as noted above, emphasises parental choice and school diversity.

Although it is still possible for parents to request other than the local school for their children – after all this is a requirement set in law – the Local Education Board has increased its control over parental choice in the area. If parents choose other than the local school they have to self-finance travel to that school (the Basic Education Prospectus 2006-2007). In 2004, only six children were attending a school outside their 'areas' or school districts (this figure does not include those children using some specialist services offered at schools outside the district) (Municipality accounts 2004).

The Basic Education Act 1998 gives municipalities the freedom to decide whether to provide financial assistance for travelling expenses if parents opt for a non-allocated school for their children – in the case study municipality a decision has been made not to provide financial compensation (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2006). Furthermore, the area-model has necessitated the LEB drawing stricter limits to school sizes (e.g. the number of children starting each year at a particular school and subsequently the number of classes functioning at each school) (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2004). This, then, has meant that some case study schools have got smaller in size while others have enlarged (see Figure 5.1).

Indeed, a decision regarding 'optimal sizes' of schools in the area made by the Board in 1998 can be seen as a predecessor to the area-model – according to this decision the Board calculates a flexible index for each school based on schools' optimum sizes, and crucially, if schools exceed this defined size, no extra resources follow from this (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1998). The decision therefore introduced upper limits to the size of schools and related this to funding – removing financial incentives to increase school size. Hillside secondary school which attracted a large number of applicants in previous years suffered particularly from declining numbers of students following the creation of the 'flexible index' and the area-model.

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Clearly, then, following the introduction of the area-model in the case study municipality in the early 2000s, the policy of parental choice has been sidelined as emphasis has been placed on a clear allocation of students from primary to secondary schools on a basis of a residential area. The fact that the Local Education Board also decides on the size and number of classes beginning each year at the local schools clearly supports the move to increasing control at the LEB and the Education Office. This can be seen as representing a strong interpretation of the idea of the local school and is thus in line with national policies, and subsequently, a weak interpretation of parental choice and broader market-oriented reforms which appear to be more divergent from prevailing national education policy priorities.

6.2.2. Integration and inclusion

The schools in the municipality have various specialist functions – some reflect national and local policy priorities while some are school-specific. The two municipality-wide specialist policy areas which are based on wider education policy requirements are the immigrant teaching and teaching for children with SEN. The issue of integration and inclusion has more recently become an important national development priority as identified by the Ministry of Education and the Government discussed in   section 6.1. But, how have the national development priorities in terms of integration and inclusion been interpreted at the local level?

The current education legislation requires municipalities to implement policies so that every child's age and differing needs are taken into consideration as discussed previously in different contexts (Finlex 2004, Naukkarinen 2005). This has necessitated special arrangements to be made for immigrant children in larger municipalities. The aim is to prepare students for entry into mainstream Finnish-speaking classes through the provision of preparatory teaching and extra support in areas such as cultural adjustment. In addition, according to the Development Plan of the Ministry of Education (2004: 27), 'the maintenance and development of immigrant students' own mother tongue will be supported

with the aim of functional bilingualism'. The state provides financial resources for a limited period to help municipalities to undertake these support tasks (Finlex 2004). At the case study municipality a number of primary and secondary schools have been selected as 'hosts' for these specialist functions, which include the four case study schools (see Chapter 5.2).

From the 1990s onwards the number of immigrants in the case study municipality has been increasing – at the time of writing there were about 400 such children studying in the schools in the area (Education Office 2007). Children with 'immigrant backgrounds' include those born in Finland as well as those who have moved to the country later, for example as refugees or due to work commitments or marriage – one defining factor is that these children do not speak Finnish as their mother tongue (ibid.). According to a more detailed definition by the National Board of Education (2007a: 3), 'Immigrants may mean refugees, migrants, re-migrants and other foreigners and, in some cases, asylum seekers as well'.

Among the children with immigrant backgrounds in the municipality about 30 different languages are spoken as the mother tongue (Education Office 2007). Currently the municipality organises specialist teaching for 15 languages out of the 28 including, for example, Farsi, Albanian, Chinese and Persian – language teaching groups are organised if there is a minimum of four children studying the same language (ibid.). There are also various other specialist functions designed primarily for children of immigrant backgrounds in the municipality which include state-funded support teaching for immigrant children, teaching of pupils' own religion as well as preparatory teaching. According to the Basic Education Prospectus 2007-2008, the aim of preparatory teaching, which normally lasts for one school year, is to 'promote the pupil's integration into Finnish society and provide the pupil with skills that are necessary before transferring to the Finnish comprehensive school' (ibid: 31). This echoes the recommendations of the Council of the State in 2005 (Ministry of Education 2006c), which highlighted the aim of integration of immigrant populations to the society on the grounds of enhancing equality (see section 6.1).

An assessment of the arrangements for teaching of immigrant children in the municipality was published by the Education Office in 2005. It was found that although a considerable improvement of services had been achieved over the last decade or so, many areas still needed to be improved (Education Office 2005). One of the most important areas identified by the Education Office study related to the need to change attitudes in addition to improving available services (ibid.). In order to achieve full inclusion of immigrant children within the schools and the society at large – which remains the ultimate aim of the national and local immigration policies – attitudes and perception of children and adults need to become such that recognise the true value of multiculturalism (ibid.). This includes the basic right of every human being to be treated and valued as individuals in their own right. Children of immigrant backgrounds should therefore have the same rights as non-immigrant children. In practice this right relates to such issues as a child's right to attend a school closest to his or her home. However, there are still practical constraints which hinder the realisation of this right, since it is not feasible to arrange many specialist services used by immigrant children at all schools in the area. Immigrant children often have to travel to schools that offer the services they need. It is clear that financial and practical considerations play a role in how services for immigrant children can be arranged (Education Office 2005).

Indeed, recent survey evidence indicates that resources to finance *Finnish or Swedish as a second language* organised for immigrant children who are not fluent in Finnish was perceived as insufficient by a majority of municipalities (National Board of Education 2005: 14).[29] The survey, which was carried out among just over half of all Finnish municipalities, and examined the ways in which municipalities organise this special service for immigrant children, found that 'Only 3% of the Finnish-speaking municipalities consider their funding adequate, 32% consider it quite good, 42% poor, and 23% completely

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[29] Funding typically combines central government transfers and local funding (National Board of Education 2005).

inadequate' (ibid: 14). A lack of funding clearly has an impact on the organisation and arrangement of immigrant children's education services in the case study municipality and other municipalities across the country.

Arrangements in the municipality for children with some types of special educational needs also reflect the wider national policy of integration and inclusion, and the creation of uniform or undivided comprehensive school discussed earlier in the chapter (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2002). Children with SEN who require support services cover a range of differing needs, which include: those who are in danger of falling behind in their studies, those who have disabilities and/or illnesses which affect their opportunities and potential to learn and develop, and those whose psycho-social or emotional development has been hindered or is in danger (Education Office 2004). The categorisation of SEN is therefore needs-led not legislation-led, and the aim is to provide education services suited to specific needs of children in each SEN category whether physical, emotional or intellectual for example (European Agency 2003).

According to current legislation, children with SEN should be educated together with mainstream children whenever possible (Finlex 2004, Ministry of Education 2006a). The 1998 Education Act (17§) stipulates that a student who has mild learning difficulties has a right to get his/her special education in mainstream education. More serious special needs such as emotional or physical disabilities or illness may warrant the transfer of a student into special education which is organised outside mainstream classes, however, 'if possible it is organised alongside other mainstream education' (Finlex 2004: 7). It has been estimated that in 2006 in Finland the percentage of students designated as SEN was 7.7 of which almost half were integrated, partly or totally, within mainstream classes (Ministry of Education 2007b).

Many specialist services have been created in the case study municipality aiming to enhance adjustment and learning of SEN children as seen below. Steps towards increasing inclusion of SEN in the municipality were taken in

1996 when a development plan was drafted for services provided for SEN children (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1998). This plan was updated in 1997 to 1998 when a new model of teaching was adopted: the area small-group teaching aiming to enable teaching of SEN children at local mainstream schools (ibid.).[30]

An important aim in the municipality has been to improve availability, flexibility and appropriateness of services for children with SEN (Education Office 2004). An emphasis has also been placed on the importance of early detection of various problems and difficulties children may be experiencing at school and subsequent action taken to resolve these (ibid.). Co-operation between students and their parents, teachers and other experts (e.g. health professionals and social workers) has been recognised as being central in the successful recognition of special needs and the planning and organisation of appropriate support services (ibid.). Some of the available specialist functions and support services in the case study municipality include small group teaching for children who have difficult and broad-ranging learning difficulties, and area-based 'start groups' which are aimed at children who need special support during their first years at school (Education Office 2007). In addition, there is specialist teaching for children with autism at a number of schools in the municipality, and some specialist teaching units for those children who require more individual attention and support and hence are not able to take advantage of the policy of integration and inclusion.

It has been seen that policies in the case study municipality aimed at enhancing integration and inclusion of immigrant children and children with various forms of SEN have been given an increased emphasis, and are thus in line with wider national development priorities. However, as the Education Office (2005) has reported, people's attitudes and perceptions should change in a way that recognise the value of difference – only this way can true inclusion be achieved.

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[30] The term 'area-model' discussed in relation to parental choice appears to be related to the term 'area small groups' which appeared in local policy documents in 1998.

Overall, though, it appears that equality of opportunity for immigrant and SEN children has already been much extended since these two groups of children have similar rights to other children to be educated at schools close to their homes, alongside their peers.

6.3. Financing of education from the centre to the periphery

This section will briefly analyse the impact of the central government on the financing on education and builds on the discussion on Chapter 2 on the changes on funding systems and state subsidies in the 1990s (see Chapter 2.3). The main issues considered here include the economic recession in the early 1990s and how this set-back affected overall state finances, and the relationship between national and local economies.

The impact of the financial recession on state finances was severe. As the figure 6.1 below shows, compared with the volume of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the other EU countries in the period between 1990 and 1996 Finland suffered a diminishing volume in terms of its GDP (Kiander et al. 2005). After 1990 the GDP dropped below the baseline (100 in 1990) for the following six years, but from 1996 onwards economic growth has been steady except for a brief set-back in 2001. Overall, Finland's economic growth has been faster than that of other EU countries in the same period (Kiander et al. 2005: 3). But what was the level of spending on educational services at the nation level in this period?

Figure 6.2 shows the percentages of the volume of GDP spent on all levels of education in Finland between 1995 and 2004 whereas Figure 6.3 shows the real expenditure spent on compulsory education only. As can be seen, in the late 1990s and early 2000s there was a significant drop in the share of GDP allocated to all levels of education[31] (see Figure 6.3). It has been noted

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[31] These figures include expenditure spent on compulsory and post-compulsory education (further and higher education) as well as educational administration.

(Eurydice 2008: 162) that although there was a relative decrease in the share of GDP spent on education in Finland, this was still less marked when compared with countries such as Ireland, Slovakia and Luxembourg. All of these countries, moreover, experienced a steady growth in their GDP during 1995 and 2001 (ibid.). In addition, by comparative standards, Finland's spending on education as a share of GDP between 1995 and 2001 has exceeded the EU-25 average, which has hovered around 5 per cent (ibid: 163) (see also Appendix 6). It is also interesting to see that when focusing on real expenditure which was spent on education at the compulsory level between 1995 and 2004 there has been no dramatic drop in expenditure, but more of a steady growth with some periods of plateaus, notably between 1997 and 1998, and again between 1999 and 2000 (see Figure 6.3).

Figure 6.1 Volume of the GDP in Finland and the EU15 area 1990-2004 (source: Kiander et al. 2005: 3)

Educational expenditure (all levels) as % of GDP in Finland, 1995-2004
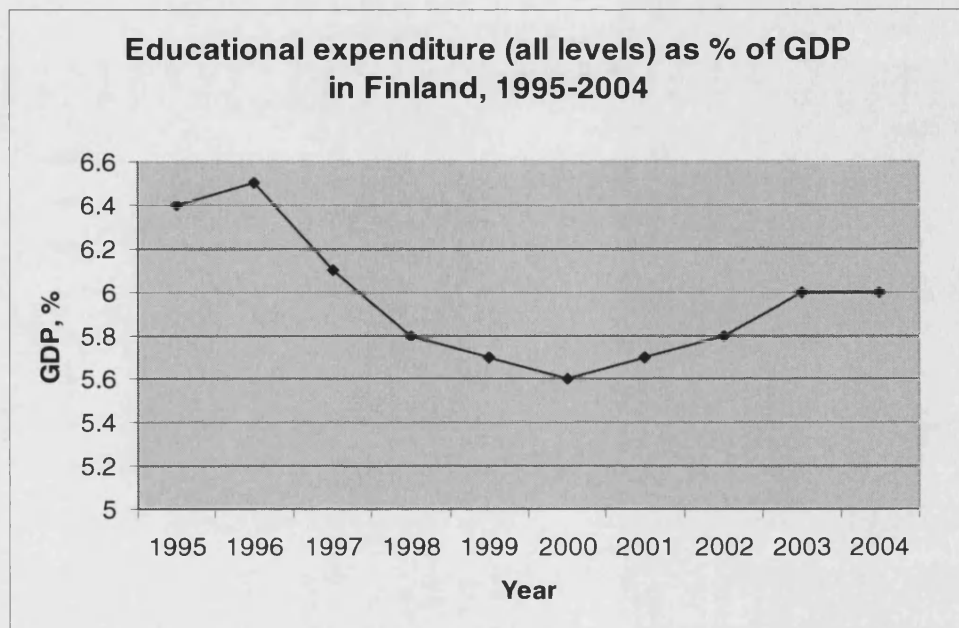
Figure 6.2 Share of GDP on all levels of education, 1995-2004 (source: Statistics Finland 2008)

Real expenditure on compulsory education (million euros) in Finland, 1995-2004
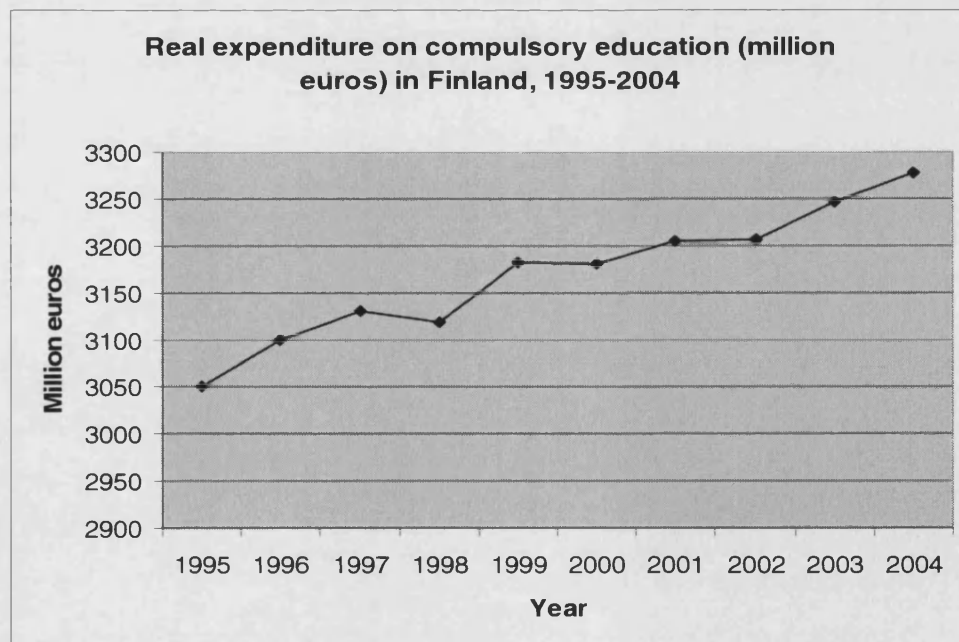
Figure 6.3 Educational expenditure on compulsory education measured in real terms (million euros), 1995-2004 (source: Statistics Finland 2008)

When attention is focused on looking at the differences between surplus of central government and municipality sector finances some interesting facts come to light. As expected, the recession of the early 1990s resulted in a large deficit in central government finances which can also be seen in Figure 6.1 above (Kiander et al. 2005). In 1993-1994 the deficit as measured by the percentage of GDP plummeted to almost minus 11 per cent (Kiander et al. 2005: 10). Recovery was fast, however, and by the late 1990s central government finances were in surplus again having been almost ten years in deficit (ibid.).

The recession did not have such a dramatic impact on municipality finances – in fact, between 1992 and 1997 overall municipality finances have been in surplus (Kiander et al. 2005). From the mid-1990s, however, expenditure in municipalities has been increasing and from around 2000 onwards difficulties in municipality finances started to be more acutely felt resulting in a widening deficit in recent years (Kiander et al. 2005). In response, the state has increased the amount of state subsidies given to the local level (ibid.). A working group at the Interior Ministry estimated that between 2000 and 2004 operational expenditures at municipalities increased by approximately 6 per cent (Ministry of the Interior 2004). Growing expenditures reflect, in part, increasing responsibilities placed on municipalities together with a growth of personnel, wage increases and overall demand for services (ibid.). Furthermore, an ageing population and a subsequent decrease in the working population also represent a long term challenge for both the national and local economy (Ministry of the Interior 2007).

These developments show that state and municipality finances do not necessarily go hand-in-hand, but can demonstrate very different trajectories. Municipalities have to face specific problems which place strains on the overall state of local finances. In particular, recent stagnation in local taxes together with growing expenditure has meant that many municipalities are struggling with a growing deficit in local finances that not even the increasing state subsidies from the central government have been able to tackle (Kiander et al.

2005). How the trends in central and local finances apply to the case study municipality and what problems the municipality has had to face in recent years in relation to finances is to be considered in the next section.

6.4. Financing of education in the case study municipality

The aim of this section is to analyse the financing of education services in the case study municipality with a specific focus on factors which present constraints at the local level: demographic changes, changes in state subsidies and prevailing general economic difficulties. In addition, attention is also focused on analysing the ways in which the municipality has responded to these difficulties.

The section begins with a look at the trends in demography in the municipality and continues with analysing how this and general economic difficulties have impacted education policy trends and priorities in the municipality.

6.4.1. Demographic challenge

It is clear that a demographic change in terms of a declining number of school-aged children is one important factor which has implications for municipality finances in a number of respects (see Figure 6.4 below). First, reducing numbers of school-aged children means diminishing state subsidies for the municipality coffers – the number of children constitutes a crucial denominator for calculating the state subsidy as seen previously (see Chapter 2). Secondly, fewer children in the municipality means that less school space is needed to educate children than before. This can necessitate the closure of some schools in the existing school network since running schools with less capacity would be financially expensive – an issue which will be returned to in Chapter 8. Clearly, these trends reflect ongoing developments in municipalities across Finland as discussed in the sections above. National demographic trends show a declining

number of school-aged children from 2008 to 2012 after which numbers are predicted to start to increase (see Figure 6.5 below).
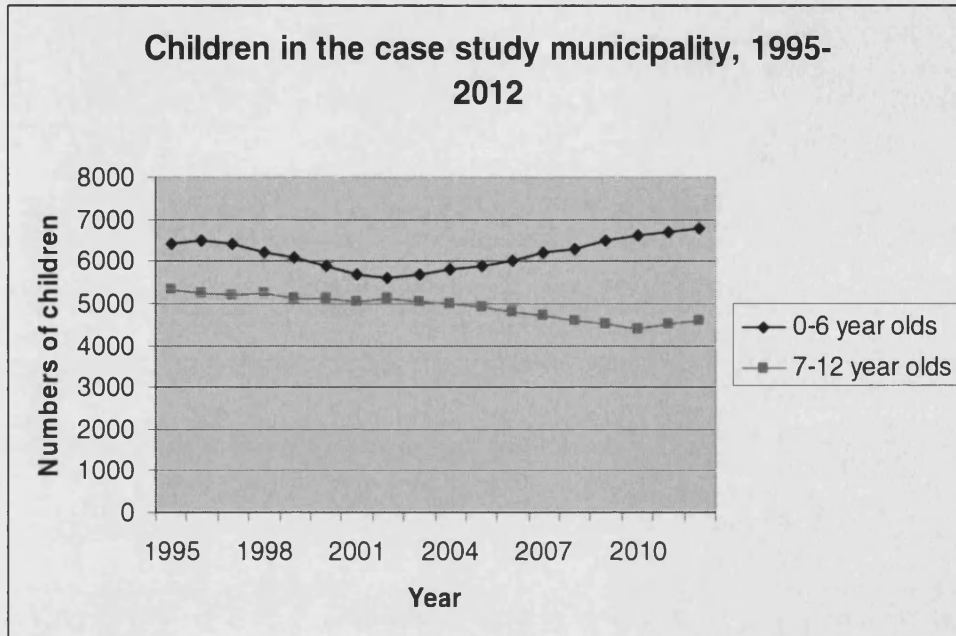
Figure 6.4 Children in the municipality 1995-2012 (source: municipality statistics 2008)
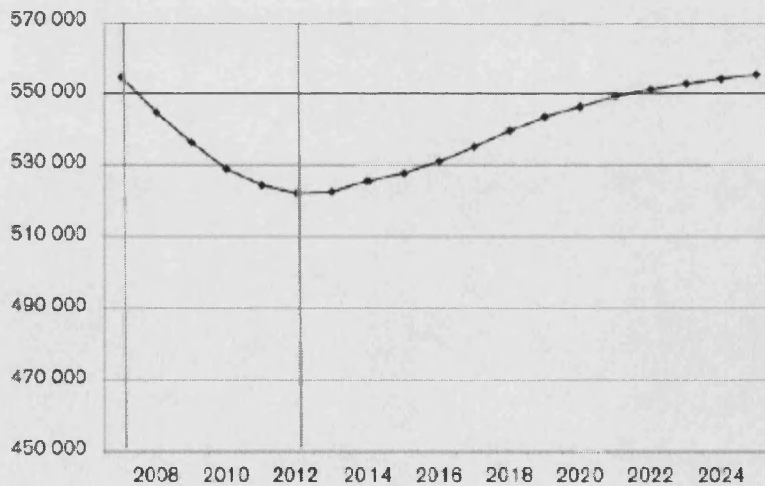
Figure 6.5 Numbers of school-aged children (7-15 year-olds) in Finland from 2007 to 2025 (source: Ministry of Education 2007a: 6)

At the same time as the number of children has been declining, the overall population size in the municipality has been steadily increasing. Between 1995 and 2006, the population size has increased by approximately 14 per cent (municipality accounts 1999 and 2006). This change also has an implication for the state subsidy for education and culture. The share paid by the municipality has increased (as seen in Chapter 2, the formula here is strongly dependent on the total population size) while the subsidy based on student numbers has declined. In practice, the total state subsidy paid for education and cultural services has declined significantly since 1995 corresponding with the cuts made in central government subsidies after the recession, and has been negative after 2005 (see Figure 6.6 below). As seen previously, the reform of the state subsidy system in 1997 meant that the state subsidy for education and culture could be negative (see Chapter 2).

Despite declining subsidies for education and culture, the total state subsidy which is comprised of the general component and subsidies for health and social care as well as for education and culture has gradually increased since 1999 (see Figure 6.6). Before this, as shown below, the total subsidy declined sharply from the mid-1990s to 1997 and moderately from 1997 to 1999. The increase in the total state subsidies is therefore in line with the national trends discussed in the previous section (see part 6.2.1). It also has to be remembered that since the practice of ear-marking was discontinued in 1993, municipalities can decide how they want to allocate the money received through state subsidies between different sectors (see section 2.3).

State subsidies 1995-2006 - totals and education and culture (million euros)

— Education and culture

— Total state subsidies (including education and culture)
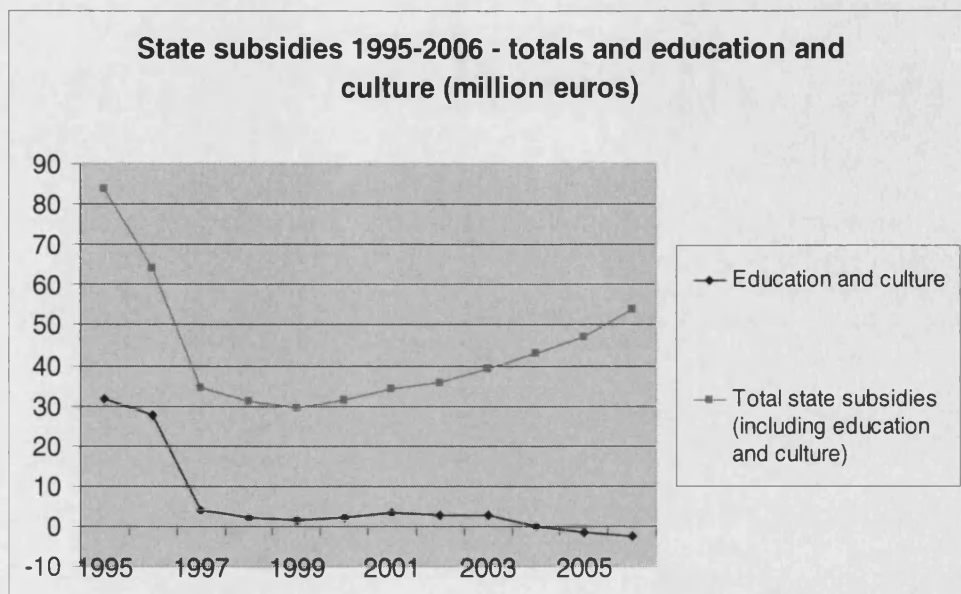
Figure 6.6 Total state subsidies and state subsidies for education and culture 1995-2006 (source: municipality accounts 2007)

But, what has been happening in the case study municipality in terms of its overall financial situation between the mid-1990s and the present? And how are these trends reflected in educational service provision in the municipality? These issues are discussed next.

6.4.2. Economic challenge

This part discusses the economic challenge in the case study municipality, first, by looking at changes in municipality accounts between 1997 and 2006, the issue of unemployment, and finally, how education services have been affected by the prevailing economic difficulties in the municipality.

One way to analyse the changing nature of municipal finances is to focus on figures from municipal accounts over the last ten years. Two figures which indicate the overall state of financial affairs are the surplus/deficit of each fiscal year and the annual balance which measures, in simplified terms, the balance between operational income and expenditure, local taxes, state subsidies and

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some other expenditure/income e.g. from interest. Therefore, the lower the balance the worse the overall municipality finances. What, then, has been happening in terms of the municipal accounts since 1997?

It can be seen that the overall surplus/deficit of municipality accounts varied significantly between 1997 and 2006 (see Table 6.2 below). The very high deficit in 2004 (-16.9 million euros) represents the worst fiscal year in the municipality over the nine year period. The following year 2005, however, stands out as a particularly productive financial year – how can this be explained? In 2005, the municipality sold off a large amount of land which shows in the higher than average total surplus for that year (End-of-year accounts of the municipality 2005). By the following year 2006, the situation had evened out considerably with the total surplus totalling only just under 6 million euros.

As expected, figures for the annual balance indicate a similar trend: the economic situation in the municipality was improving in the early 2000s until 2003 and 2004 which were economically poor fiscal years – after this downturn the situation has improved in more recent years (see Table 6.2).

When looking at the fiscal situation at a local level it is also important to consider the issue of unemployment. Local taxes constitute the main source of income for municipalities[32] (in 1999, 46 per cent) – if unemployment is high this means less tax revenue for the municipality as well as more money spent on social security payments for the unemployed (Moisio 2002: 17). In the case study municipality in 2006 taxes accounted for about 56 per cent of overall income for the fiscal year. Since 1999 this figure has always been in excess of 55 per cent except between 2004 and 2005 (approximately 53 and 39 per cent respectively) (Municipality accounts 2000-2006). Unsurprisingly, the years 2004 and 2005 represented years of very high unemployment in the

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[32] State subsidies constituted only 15 per cent of the income of municipalities in 1999 – in addition to local taxes (45 per cent), the remainder of revenues constituted of property tax, business tax, user fees and other revenues (Moisio 2002).

municipality peaking in 2004 when unemployment hit 14.9 per cent. This partly explains the high deficit in the municipality accounts in 2004 (Municipality statistics 2004-2005). In comparison, the average nation-wide unemployment rate in 2004 was only 8.8 per cent (Statistics Finland 2007a).

It is interesting to note than during the recession in the early 1990s, unemployment in the case study municipality was not as high as it was in the mid-2000s. In 1993, unemployment was 12.7 per cent after which it steadily declined until 1999 when it accounted to only 9 per cent (Municipality accounts 1999). The national figures for unemployment were 16.3 per cent in 1993 and 10.2 per cent in 1999 (Statistics Finland 2007a). As seen above, these statistics are also in line with the national trends demonstrating worsening financial circumstances for municipalities after 2000.

In order to finance welfare services when costs are going up and incomes are declining municipalities often have rely on borrowing (Moisio 2002). Indeed, in the case study municipality borrowing has been steadily increasing from the mid-1990s onwards. Compared with the situation in 1998, by 2006 the amount of borrowing in the municipality had almost doubled as measured by loans in euros per citizen (Municipality accounts 2004 and 2006). The situation is similar to developments in municipalities across Finland – municipalities have had to rely more on borrowing to finance services (Ministry of the Interior 2007).

The annual balance and total surplus/deficit of municipality accounts, fiscal years 1997-2006, million euros

Year	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Annual balance	4	18	15	13	22	25	6	5	15	20
Surplus or deficit	-9	6	0.4	-5	2	7	2	-17	103	6

Table 6.2 The municipality accounts, 1997-2006 (source: End-of-year accounts)

The problematic state of municipality finances together with demographic changes (i.e. reducing numbers of school-aged children) have inevitably reflected on the education services locally. Budget cuts for education services have been introduced throughout the 2000s (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2004, 2005 and 2006). In total, the budget has increased year on year because operating expenditure has steadily increased in the same period (Municipality accounts 2000 to 2006). As seen above, this is a trend affecting all municipalities where operating expenditures have steadily been increasing since the 1990s (Kiander et al. 2005). Statistics from the case study municipality show, however, that operating expenditure between 2000 and 2006 has always been higher than the net budget for education services which suggest that the education budget tends to be underestimated and/or set unrealistically low (Municipality accounts 2000 to 2006).

In practice, diminishing funding from early 2000s onwards has meant that class sizes have got larger (thus reducing the number of classes operating at schools), that the number of teachers and support workers has reduced and that school meals and cleaning services have been streamlined (Minutes of the Local

Education Board 2004, 2005 and 2006). The problems of the early 2000s were not new, however, but related to much longer standing issues – similar issues were debated ten years previously alluding to prevailing economic difficulties in municipality finances at a nation-wide level, as seen earlier in the chapter (see section 6.3). In 1992, the Local Education Board was already reflecting on how savings could be made at the level of schools (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1992). Among the issues considered were the possibility of increasing class sizes, closing down some schools and beginning co-operation between schools within certain areas and creating area-governing bodies (ibid.). Similar issues entered the agenda in the early 2000s when the municipality was struggling with particularly poor financial circumstances, as discussed above (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2004). The obligation to make expenditure savings in education services stemmed from the requirement by the City Council to make the use of educational space (i.e. schools) more efficient by 10 per cent. This was part of the City Council's overall plan to restore the local economy (ibid.). In addition, the projected demographic changes in the number of school-aged children (see Figure 6.4) had an impact on the school network also noted by the Board in 2005: 'since the number of children in basic education is going to decline, it has been necessary to consider the necessity of existing school buildings' (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2005).

The prevailing economic difficulties in the municipality together with demographic changes have been shown to present problems to the municipality, and education services have been affected by these trends. But how do educational decision-makers and teachers and principals at the case study schools perceive these changes? And how have the requirements to cut down educational spending in the municipality been realised in practice? These issues are elaborated next with reference to Local Education Board considerations in related areas.

6.5. Perceiving funding issues from the grass-roots level

This section focuses on answering Research Question 1.2 which set to analyse the ways in which key decision-makers alongside principals and teachers at schools perceive challenges deriving from financial issues and constraints. The school closures decision, and how the interviewees perceived this decision, will be discussed in Chapter 8 (see part 8.2.3). The section begins with a focus on interpretations by interviewees of financing and funding for education both nationally and locally.

6.5.1. Construing the challenge

The issue of funding was an area which was mentioned by almost all interviewees as a difficult challenge for education policy in the municipality, as well as Finland at large. How did interviewees perceive this challenge? And how does this link with the issues discussed earlier in the chapter – the national and local situation in terms of financing and demography?

Some of those interviewed, as elaborated on below, offered a broader outlook on the issue of finances, and how there has been a long-term negative trend in the overall educational finances since the 1990s after the severe economic recession (see Chapter 2 and sections 6.3 and 6.4). In this way, they construed finances as an external factor which interfered with the day-to-day running of schools but also as something that the municipality had little control over since municipality finances were strongly related to factors beyond the control of municipality decision-makers and shapers.

The Head of Education for Development at the Education Office made a point, which characterises the changing educational landscape in Finland since the 1990s with reference to issues relating to educational resources and funding:

> 'First and foremost...schools were in a way driven to get used to a constant change...year after year municipality finances got tighter and tighter and there was no going back

to the old system...and this efficiency way of thinking is sneaking in – hopefully in a positive way – we have to keep an eye on the finances very strictly, to develop our own evaluation effectively so that we are able to put money into the right places...these terms from the quality-management of the business world have come in little by little'.

One teacher from City school remarked that although Finnish economy overall was seemingly doing well in more recent years this did not reflect in education services at the municipality level. In this way a challenge was that:

'There is more money than ever in Finland, but still all the time we should keep on saving...in a way this brings up the issue of municipality politics since we are given tasks based on law...but not much consideration has gone into thinking how much this costs, how much money is needed and who pays for it – where the money should be taken from.'

Both of the teachers interviewed at Hillside school brought up the issue of municipality economy and suggested that financial difficulties negatively affected the ability of schools to carry out their duties effectively:

'It is depressing to talk about money but it is a fact that the money given to basic education is so limited. And when the general direction is downwards all the time, this is a dreadful situation at the moment – the future looks bleak. And this is a bit like climate change working with students – now that resources are being cut – it does not show straight away, but after 20-30 years it will definitely show'.

'In a way the resources are taken away from us to enable us to do our work well – and again children suffer from this the most. Unfortunately the time given by a teacher to an individual student gets smaller and a student's basic security

suffers as a result. And when basic security suffers, then learning outcomes will suffer too'.

The ex-member of the Local Education Board argued that although it was necessary to save at times the possible consequences had not been given enough thought:

'during the economic downturn we learned to save and save…but now these economic margins are often set without much sense – schools are being told they can only use this and this much money and there is no willingness to see inside that treadmill what good could be achieved with that money. After all, we can't let go of all development. Is it really sensible for municipalities to cut off money from education services just randomly'?

Both the current Chair of the Board and the ex-principal of Millpond school also suggested that economic issues presented great challenges for the municipality and schools which were in the receiving end of budget cuts.

According to the Chair, 'finances are such a difficult problem at the moment – it has a large impact on class sizes and the number of groups in basic education'. The ex-principal, on the other hand, highlighted that economic problems reflected in education services and resources. This interviewee went on to argue that there should be 'long-term developmental planning so that there would not be these sudden savings-lists of millions of euros or talk about the closure of a couple of schools like there is at the moment, which brings uncertainty'.

Minutes of the Local Education Board from 2004 and 2005 support the view that large budget cuts have been demanded on education services during the mid-2000s (see also Table 6.2).

During the fiscal year 2004, educational services were subjected to a requirement to cut operational expenditure during the year by several hundred

thousand euros. As a result, the number of classes in primary schools had to be reduced (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2004). In the 2005 budget, educational services were subjected to further cuts which amounted to approximately 1 million euros (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2004).

A similar trend in a demand to cut operating costs continued in 2006 which the Local Education Board addressed rather cynically. In preparing for the 2006 budget, the Local Education Board commented that the planned savings would mean saving over 1 million euros in expenditure in comparison to the existing level of resources. In practice, this would mean that the number of teachers would have to be reduced leading to the formation of many over-sized classes. According to the Board, in order to keep educational resources at the existing level the budget would have to be increased instead of reduced (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2005).

One of the teachers at Millpond school and the principal-in-post of Hillside school both provided their own interpretations about the problematic issue of finances. The teacher thought that the required reduction in educational resources demanded on schools in the area was problematic because the available resources were already limited and there was thus no ideal way to introduce cuts, while the principal interviewee suggested that there had been no proper financial recovery after the economic recession in the early 1990s:

> 'municipalities are not doing that well for various reasons and then more cuts are being made from the already cut [budget] – there is money in the society but it doesn't show in education and not many other places either that would prevent problems of the future. There is no money for prevention work and for dealing with basic things but there is a tendency just to fix holes that will appear. In my opinion the current action is just extinguishing fires'.

The ex-Chair of the Local Education Board argued that one of the greatest challenges for the Finnish comprehensive school system was related to a lack of

financial resources: 'if we talk about money and municipality politics in general, then municipalities have great financial problems...and almost all municipalities are under some kind of financial crises'. As a result of the financial difficulties, this interviewee thought that a related challenge was that: 'we should be able to keep this municipality-based school organisation good for all. We have really good teachers, but there begins to be a lack of everything else'.

Similarly to the interviewees above, the principal of Parkview school also suggested that the economic situation was a cause for concern: 'this city's overall economic situation is so tight that this [education service] is in danger of withering away since the comprehensive school system does not roll in money in any case anywhere in Finland'.

The concern about a lack of resources aired by several interviewees above is a view also raised by the main Teaching Professions' Union in Finland (Opetusalan Ammattijärjestö OAJ). In its action plan for 2007 to 2008 the OAJ argued that the government should commit itself to securing more resources to the education system, and particularly 'to increase resources both at national and local levels in all educational institutions and nursery education...and to raise the proportion of state funding for educational...expenses' (OAJ 2006: 10).

All in all, the considerations elaborated in this section clearly indicate that there are significant tensions between two different realities – that of the economy and (available) resources and that of the realm of education services. This was brought to attention by the interviewees from schools and offices who have to deal with being in the receiving end of budget cuts. Although the local economy and education services are strongly interlinked, they also exist in their own separate and unique spheres.

6.6. Conclusions

This chapter has examined and analysed national education policy priorities regarding diversity and choice and equality of opportunity and equity as well as the issue of finance both at the national level and at the local level. The main focal point was placed on evaluating how the case study municipality has interpreted national education policies and what role the issue of finance has had in these developments.

It has been seen that national education policy priorities stemming from the National Framework Curriculum 2004 (and the Basic Education Act 1998) including the undivided comprehensive school structure, different learners and their individual needs, and the 'tripartite' structure of the curriculum (municipality/area/school-based parts) have all been adopted in the case study municipality. The creation of the area-model in the case study municipality has limited parental choice and has placed emphasis on municipality and area-based curricula instead of school-based curricula. Together with an increased emphasis on integration and inclusion of children with SEN and children from immigrant backgrounds within mainstream local schools, equality of opportunity and equity can be seen to have become more prominent in the local arena. It has to be remembered, however, that the ongoing financial difficulties in the municipality have at the same time directed education policy developments. Although equality of opportunity and equity have been emphasised limiting the emergence of the local school market, these decisions were introduced, at least in part, as a way to save money during severe fiscal constraints (these issues will be returned to, and further discussed, in Chapter 8). Financial considerations therefore constitute important underpinnings to education policy developments in the case study municipality. The national and local levels are interlinked, but as this chapter has shown, the local level still exercises considerable discretion in ways in which national education policy guidelines and trends are interpreted in practice in municipalities.

The next chapter will turn attention from the legal and financial background context at national and local levels into the context of schools through looking at the issue of specialisation in more detail. The various external and internal policy drivers which help to explain why schools have introduced specialisms will be further analysed and evaluated.

7. Internal and external policy drivers for specialisation of schools – reasons, rationales and impacts

This chapter discusses and analyses various external and internal factors which motivate schools to introduce specialisms (Research Question 2). It is asked why and how schools in the case study municipality have introduced specialisms – who are the key people initiating changes and why are they interested in introducing specialisms? To what extent are policy drivers linked to attempts to increase diversity and choice at the local level? In addition, of interest in this chapter is the impact specialisation has had on the schools concerned, particularly if various selection procedures were used. It is thus asked, what impact the decision to specialise has had on schools which have relied on some forms of admissions criteria to select an intake of children for the specialist classes. Although the main emphasis in this chapter is on uncovering various reasons and rationales for schools to introduce specialisms, equity and equality of opportunity issues also enter the picture (see also Chapter 8).

There are a number of specialisms that began as a result of external request from city officials to schools. The city's English-speaking classes at City school and at Hillside school represented one of these official specialisms as did the long-standing music classes (see Chapter 2). Also, the English-weighted specialism, which began in the 1990s at Millpond school, and later at Hillside (from where it was transferred to Parkview school), was also an official specialism – it was conceived at the level of city officials although it later developed into an unofficial specialism. The foundations of these official specialisms whose policy drivers were largely external are in direct contrast to those specialisms which highlight internal policy drivers as the main motive for the introduction of a specialism at the level of schools. The classless teaching specialism based at Hillside school is one example of a specialism which began as a result of a strong internal policy driver. A distinction between 'official' and 'unofficial' specialisms will thus be made to separate those specialisms that

have come from the city and those that a school has introduced on its own initiative.[33]

The chapter begins in 7.1 with a focus on analysing external policy drivers through the specialisms of the English-speaking classes, teaching for immigrants and children with special educational needs, the music classes, the 'international' specialism and the English-weighted teaching specialism at the secondary school level at Parkview school. From here attention is directed towards analysing internal policy drivers in section 7.2 which were found to be the main type motivating the development of the 'classless teaching' specialism at Hillside school as well as the environmental specialism at Parkview school. Finally, in section 7.3 the English-weighted teaching specialism which initially began at Millpond school at the primary school stage is considered. This specialism was found to combine both external and internal drivers. The chapter ends in section 7.4 which offers some brief conclusions deriving from the preceding sections.

7.1. External policy drivers

Official specialisms in the municipality highlight external policy drivers as a main motive for specialisation, and are the most common type among the specialism looked at in this study. But, why would the city through its various decision-making levels be interested in providing various specialist education services within its jurisdiction – are these reasons strongly linked to attempts to increase diversity and choice in the area? What and whose interests are at play here? And, crucially, which schools were chosen as 'hosts' for these specialisms?

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[33] A distinction made in Chapter 2.3 referring to 'external' and 'internal' specialisms separating those specialist classes that use admissions policies to select children into the classes from the broader school-wide specialisms that are non-selective is not going to be utilised in here. The official/unofficial distinction serves the purpose better than the external/internal distinction.

7.1.1. English-speaking classes

The city's English-speaking classes began in 1996 at both primary and secondary levels (City school website, Hillside school website). The schools, which were asked to take this specialism on, were City school at the primary level and Hillside school at the secondary level. Interview data alongside evidence from Local Education Board meetings provide insights into the developments that surrounded the introduction of the English-speaking classes in the municipality, and indicate that these classes are linked to an attempt to increase diversity and choice in the area.

The beginning of English-speaking classes was linked to a wider foreign policy programme initiated by the City Council, namely the 'International School' programme (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1996) at the time when municipalities and schools were encouraged to specialise. The International School programme included the English-speaking classes alongside Russian language teaching and immigrant teaching which all have increased diversity and, as far as the language specialisms are concerned, have offered more choice for local parents. All of these specialist services have been concentrated at City school at the primary level and Hillside school at the secondary level with the exception of additional schools providing services for immigrant children around the municipality (ibid.). In this sense, these policies can be seen as a continuation of the previous decision by the Local Education Board and other officials to concentrate some specialist services at a few schools only (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1990). With the expansion of language provision in the municipality, it was thought by the Board that it made economic and practical sense to continue placing these facilities primarily at a few schools only: 'at the primary school level it has been a clear line that teaching of languages should be based at City school. Undoubtedly, if language teaching was divided between several primary schools this would make the practice more fragmentary...in addition, small teaching groups will often require more resources than what is necessary' (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1990: 11).

School location appears to be a significant rationale explaining why particular schools were chosen as hosts to the English-speaking classes. It is logical to place a specialism that is to be offered at only a small number of schools at the centre because of good transport links from all over the municipality. This was indeed suggested to be the case by the principal of City school and both the current and the ex-principal of Hillside school. The principal-in-post of Hillside school at the time of the interview pointed out that: 'because we are located in the centre with good transport links from all over the city, if there is one [type of specialism], we tend to get it'. Interestingly, it also emerged that the ex-principal of Hillside school was very surprised by the fact that the school's teaching body expressed a strong will to take on the English-speaking classes on top of many other specialisms the school already had (e.g. classless teaching and music classes discussed in the latter sections). This suggests that although Hillside school was asked whether it was interested in taking the English-speaking classes – on the basis of its location – there was no compulsion for the school to accept the offer.

The English-speaking classes were described as 'the City's favourite child' by one interviewee. Why were these classes seen in such a good light in the municipality, and what does this say about the underlying rationales for setting up these specialist classes? Once again, interview data throw some interesting light onto the answers to these questions.

There was a relatively large population of workers and students in the municipality who were non-native and could benefit from this type of specialist teaching, as one principal interviewee commented. It was the case, though, that it tended to be largely Finnish children who had acquired proficiency in English while living abroad who enrolled in these classes (City school website 2005). Secondly, it might be that this type of specialist teaching was seen to enhance the city's image, as was the case with the underlying rationales for setting up specialist language teaching at Millpond school that will be discussed later. Indeed, the Local Education Board in the early 1990s discussed how specialist

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language teaching would help to boost the image of the city (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1990-1991, see also section 7.3). Some of the interviewees, including the area-governing body member and the principal of Hillside school respectively, thought that the city had been keen to introduce some specialisms in order to create a favourable public image:

> 'It shows that when we specialise just for creating a favourable public image – that we are so international here. It is not good if it does not begin as a response to a genuine need of the population'

> 'The city's educational administration is clearly keen to take on whatever things to enhance its image – to show how innovative and highly developed they are'

In 2005, as the school's website notes, there were only about 20 schools in the whole of Finland that offered English-speaking classes. Interestingly, it appears that English-speaking classes were certainly not economical for municipality finances as the number of students in these classes was very small, a fact which was highlighted by both principal interviewees at City and Hillside schools as well as the ex-principal of Hillside. This raises the question as to why these classes have been allowed to continue to exist when the municipality has been under severe financial difficulties. It was seen previously how cuts in educational expenditure have affected education services, and educational decision-making, in the area (see Chapter 6.4 and 6.5).

Some interviewees suggested that despite the fact that it is expensive to run classes that require specialist material and teaching staff for a small number of students, it is unlikely that the service will be discontinued because of the popularity of the idea among municipality decision-makers. The area-governing body member commented that: 'They won't give it up [the English-speaking classes] although it has caused problems in terms of governance, pedagogy and budgeting'.

It has to be noted, however, that the small number of students enrolling in the English-speaking classes, and the fact that numbers have recently reduced even further, has been recognised by the Local Education Board (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2006). For 2007-2008 and 2006-2007 the number of students in these classes in grades 1-6 was calculated to be around 30 where as in 2005-2006 it was 34 (Education Office 2006, 2007). Subsequently, the Board observed there to be a need to monitor the number of students and to assess whether there is a genuine need to continue this type of teaching in the municipality (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2006). It is evident therefore that some decision-makers have cast doubt on the existence of the English-speaking classes in the light of current trends.

The English-speaking classes came about at a time when school diversity was encouraged through the school-based curricula – it is clear that these classes offer 'choice' for those parents whose children have acquired fluent English-language skills. The fact that the English-speaking classes have been allowed to continue despite financial constraints in the municipality suggest that these classes are seen by local decision-makers as a valuable asset to local parents, children, and perhaps most importantly, local decision-makers themselves. However, as the contemplation by the Local Education Board in 2006 indicates, it appears that perhaps financial considerations finally took precedence over other non-fiscal considerations and forced decision-makers to re-evaluate the need for these specialist classes in the future.

7.1.2. Immigrant teaching/teaching for SEN

Changing policies at a national level have obliged local decision-makers to consider how best to implement or acknowledge existing legislation and policy priorities in the municipality. As seen in Chapter 6.1 and 6.2, integration and inclusion of children with SEN and children of immigrant backgrounds have become important development priorities nationally, and in the case study municipality improvements have been made to the provision of services for these two groups of children. Immigrant students should be given a chance, for

example, to study their mother tongue through extra-curricular classes where possible (OECD 2004a) and be integrated within normal 'Finnish-speaking' classes with the provision of support and help on individual basis. As far as children with SEN are concerned, the national policy trend is highlighting inclusion and integration, which is also based on the 1998 Basic Education Act.

The interviewee Head of Development for Education based at the Education Office, pointed out that the development of education services for immigrant children is one of the priorities in the municipality: 'The development of teaching for immigrants, which is going on is quite central. We have approximately 350 students from multicultural backgrounds [in the municipality], which is an amount that fills a small school'. The immigration official also based at the Education Office who was interviewed suggested that although the city takes immigrants each year, there are no proper statistics on the exact numbers:

> '[the city] takes 50 refugees a year but in addition to that we have more coming in all the time...over the last year we have had more of these people who have moved here by themselves – through work, studying or marriage...but we haven't got statistics of those in basic education over a longer period of time...but last year I think we had approximate 350, which is 40-50 students more [than the previous year].'

City school had been the centre for extra-curricular language tuition in the municipality as well as for specialist education designed for primary school-aged immigrant children and for children with SEN. In addition, Millpond school had some specialist services designed for SEN children. At the secondary level, the main school for these activities was Hillside school. However, as seen in Chapter 5.2, changes have taken place in the municipality in terms of where specialist educational services are offered as a result of some schools being closed down in 2007 (see also part 8.2.3). Despite these recent upheavals, the question remains as to why the specialist teaching for immigrant

children and for children with SEN were *initially* and primarily based at City, Millpond and Hillside schools.

It appears that the reason why City and Hillside schools were chosen as the main sites for these services in the area was their central location. Teaching for immigrant children was linked to the International School programme, which was part of wider municipality foreign policy, and thus concentrated at City and Hillside schools (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1996) (see part 7.1.1 for further details).

Three principals (principals of City, Millpond and Hillside school) all raised the issue of location and elaborated why this was likely to be an important reason as discussed below.

The principal interviewee of City school suggested that it made economic and practical sense to have these services based at schools that were situated in the city centre, since children came to these from all over the municipality. Furthermore, the principal suggested that the fact that there was space to organise such functions was an important criterion, as was the fact that there were teachers who were capable of undertaking immigrant teaching, also pointed out by the principal.

The principal-in-post of Millpond school also brought up the issue of location and size as being an important rationale when designing where to place specialist education services in the municipality: 'where these small groups were set up was largely a question of space – which school had space and had willingness to take these on – and then what is a larger and more centrally-located school within that area where these can sensibly be placed'.

Finally, the principal of Hillside school agreed that the school's central location in the city was a likely reason why the school was offered special teaching for immigrant children alongside the English-speaking classes. Because City school has been the main feeder primary for Hillside – as it has been discussed

previously – it made sense to have these functions in schools that have been traditionally linked in this way to ensure continuity. The principal also commented somewhat critically that it might have been a good idea to share out these specialist functions between different schools more evenly, since these tended to be concentrated at Hillside. However, the principal went on to suggest how the overall impact had been a positive one: 'immigrant students have brought a great deal of tolerance [to the school]. The fact that we have 15 per cent students with immigrant backgrounds has meant that it is not at all unusual if somebody looks a bit different'. The teachers at Hillside school interviewed also alluded to the increasing tolerance at the school as a consequence of the immigrant teaching. One of them opined that: 'the immigrant teaching has had a positive impact, absolutely, tolerance and everything else grows in students as a result'.

The issue of attraction of a central location to students also has relevance here. As the area-governing body member and the ex-principal of Millpond school suggested, the city centre was perceived to be popular among students who wanted to attend a school in the centre where there were things to do and see. This might have been an added incentive for politicians and decision-makers at the Board to choose a school that was in the centre for many specialist functions.

National education priorities and development trends have highlighted integration and inclusion. It is clear that student population at schools is diversifying which is putting extra pressure on local decision-makers and schools to design services to children with SEN and children from immigrant backgrounds. The underlying aim is not thus to increase diversity and choice at the level of schools, but to design services to a changing, and more heterogeneous, student population at mainstream local schools and to increase equality of opportunity and equity to both SEN and immigrant children. It appears that the main reason for particular schools to be chosen as 'hosts' to these services in the case study municipality was related to location and size of schools as well as to economic considerations. These decisions were subjected

to schools from the educational decision-making sphere in a form of external policy drivers.

7.1.3. Music classes

The city's music classes, which were based at City school and Hillside school, are interesting for a number of reasons. Not only do they represent an older specialism that dates back to the beginning of the comprehensive school system in the 1960s and 70s, entry to these classes is also strictly selective which presents some problems for the schools concerned. Issues relating to diversity and choice as well to equality of opportunity and equity are clearly relevant here as seen below.

Music classes have become part of the city's official specialism agenda although following the decision to close down both City and Hillside school, there are uncertainties as to how well these functions can be transferred to other locations in the municipality. A further potential threat to music classes in the future is the declining number of applicants in grade 2, which has been a trend in the 2000s (data from City school archives – see Figure 7.1 below). Despite some of the difficulties facing music classes, it is evident that for some people this specialism remains an important one. But how did the music classes initially come about?

Music classes started to function at City school in 1968, as one of the teachers interviewed pointed out. Since City school has been the main feeder primary school for Hillside school located on the close proximity, music classes at the secondary stage have been located there.[34] As one music class teacher from City school argued, there can be seen to several benefits for the city from having the music classes:

> 'we could get by without them [music classes], but since we
> have been doing this for over 30 years...it has become a

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[34] Hillside school was not the first secondary school to get the music classes.

tradition and it has an impact on the general cultural appreciation. And we [City school] have focused on choral singing for economic reasons since it is so cheap when there is no need to buy instruments for children – and we have achieved nationally and internationally significant results which, in a sense, acts to improve the image of this city'.

According to the principal of City school, the decision to begin this new type of experimental music teaching was taken by local decision-makers at the City Council and had nothing to do with the school's own aspirations. It is interesting to note, as the principal suggested, that following financial difficulties in the municipality in the late 1990s, a decision was made to discontinue the music class facilities at the two other sites at both primary and secondary levels (as discussed in Chapter 5.2).

Once again location appears as the main reason why City school and Hillside school could keep their music classes (location also emerged as a central factor for the official specialisms like teaching from immigrant and SEN children discussed previously). This was suggested to be the case by both the principals of the two schools. The principal of City school pointed out that the decision to place this function at City school came from outside the school: 'it was the will of decision-makers that we offer such a specialism in the municipality, and it is not possible that all schools would offer it'. Furthermore, according to both the principals interviewed, it made economic and practical sense to choose schools that are in the centre rather than further away since children have to come to these classes from all over the municipality. This realisation was also alluded to by the Local Education Board when discussing the development of language teaching in the municipality as seen earlier in the chapter – practical and financial considerations can be seen to be important for the design of educational services in the area (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1990)

But, what kind of impact have the music classes had on City school and Hillside school? What role, if any, does selection play in this – have music classes

become an integral part of the schools or does selection interfere with integration? These questions will be considered next with reference to interviews from both City and Hillside schools with an emphasis on City school; this is because it is at the primary stage of compulsory education that selection for the music class is initially made.

Testing and selection

The tests for entry to the music classes are arranged at certain schools during one school day where the assessors from City school travel to perform the set test for the applicant children. The test itself, which the school used, was an old test that dated back to the 1970s, and in effect, had changed little since that time. It was a test particular to this school, and the teachers involved in running the music classes had the power to change the test. Indeed, the teachers had been discussing the possibility of altering the existing test, but at time of writing this had not been achieved.

One teacher expressed a desire to change the test to take into account the fact that some children, boys in particular, may under-perform in the largely singing based test although points were not given for the quality of singing voice. Both the teachers at City school thought that it was necessary to have a test for the entry to the music classes because the idea was, after all, that children in those classes have musical ability – and the objectives have been set with that in mind. However, as the teachers also pointed out, there were downsides to testing because no test was foolproof and some will inevitably under-perform on the testing day:

> 'Everybody knows that testing is problematic – does the test really measure what it is supposed to measure? And crucially, someone might fail a test and then you are out in that instance. But I can't think of any better system that would be realistic'.

'Test is a test – it is not absolute. Good students might not get in and then there can be mishaps if somebody is such a 'test-person' that they will just make their way in'.

On the positive sides to testing one teacher interviewed pointed out that: 'Testing enables us to have a more equal [ability] crowd – and this means it is easier for us to study'.

In terms of deciding who passed the test, the school used a flexible cut-off point that was altered year by year, and was related to the number of people applying. In recent years the number of children who have applied to get into the music class has declined (see Figure 7.1 below). This trend was not simply tied in with changes in demography – when looking at changes in numbers of seven to twelve year olds in the municipality, the trend remained at a similar level between 1995-1998 after which it dropped slightly, but remained at a similar level again until 2004. A more significant drop in the numbers of children in this age category only appeared from 2005 onwards (see Figure 6.4). Consequently it was easier to get access to the class now than in previous years when there was more competition. Indeed, this was suggested to have been the case in the past by one of the teachers at City school.

Although there was, and is, flexibility in the test, it does not mean that all children who apply would get in if there is space – the teachers involved will decide whom they think demonstrates musicality at a level suitable to benefit from the specialist music agenda, and in this sense they have considerable powers.[35] The well-established selection procedures appear to be appropriate in their flexibility to accommodate changes relating to the number of children applying each year.

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[35] For example, in 2003 there were 58 applicants out of which 28 enrolled in the class having passed the test – in 2007 there were 37 applicants out of which 21 passed the test (End-of-year accounts 2003, municipality web-pages 2007).
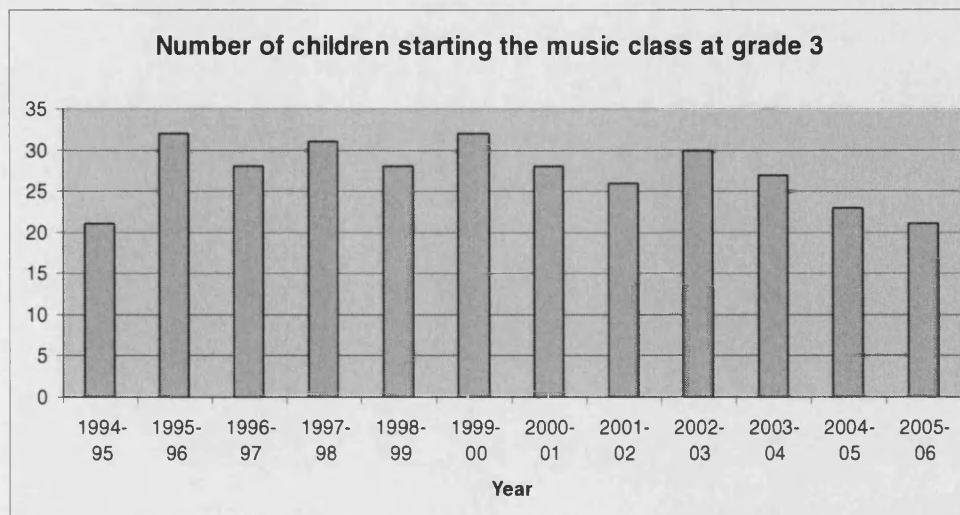
Figure 7.1 Number of children entering music class at City School

Further decentralisation that took place in the governance of the city in the early 1990s had an impact on how the tests were organised. Previously the Education Office had a central role of coordinating the music tests. Following the reforms of moving powers more to the lower levels, including schools, the responsibility for the running of the tests was left entirely for the school. This change obviously increased the workload involved in organising and running the test, and understandably the school was hoping that the Education Office might take back some of its prior functions in relation to the test, which was after all a service offered for the whole city, as one teacher pointed out.

What did interviewees at City school and Hillside school think about the music classes in general – did they think that music classes are needed and serve a function which justifies selection?

Indeed, specialist music teaching was considered to be important by those teaching it. Many of the interviewees thought that music classes provide opportunities for high-quality music teaching with similar frames of reference in

the whole of Finland, which has become a long-standing tradition. This issue is elaborated on below.

It was seen entirely fair by the principal and the teachers at both City and Hillside school that those children who demonstrated an interest in music and had the required ability could participate in the specialist music teaching classes. One teacher at City school argued that it was important to offer specialist teaching for children without it harming anyone: 'I think it is very good that we can offer something to students that interests them without it taking away resources from anyone else'. Another music teacher at the school agreed that the music specialism was important, but that in a way the system was not ideal: 'there should be more opportunities for this type of teaching for all students – this is ideal for those who manage to get in or who are interested – of course, it would be great if other children had chances at school...to study music properly'.

Both the teachers interviewed at Hillside school emphasised that music classes had an important role for number of reasons. As one of the teachers commented, music classes give opportunities for students who are not that good at traditional subjects, like mathematics, to succeed. This view clearly contrasts with the majority of views expressed by other interviewees on the ability of music class children, however, as discussed in the following sections. Another teacher at Hillside school pointed out that: 'I am convinced having been teaching music classes for almost 14 years that it is important – that students who have motivation to sing and are enthusiastic and able can study [music] with special emphasis and with more hours dedicated to it each week, in the same group of students'. This teacher also suggested that music as a hobby was beneficial for society at large since it supports wellbeing of citizens.

Although no special resources were devoted to the functioning of music classes, smaller class sizes in some years in comparison to other classes at the school

could be interpreted as a benefit for those in them enabling more one-to-one time and attention given by teacher to students.[36] The issue of smaller sizes of music classes in comparison to other classes at the school was mentioned by the principal of Hillside school as something that was a typical feature. Subsequently, since it is more expensive to run smaller classes that still require their own teacher, the 'non-music' classes will have to be larger in size to compensate the school financially, as the principal noted. In this way, children in the music classes with typically smaller class sizes can be seen to have a distinct benefit over those children who are not. Also, teachers' workload may be somewhat easier in the smaller music classes than in the 'non-music' classes because children are generally high ability students with a strong motivation to learning, as elaborated on below.

It is interesting to note that, according to the teachers interviewed at City school, it appears to be particular types of children who enter the music classes from particular types of families.[37] Active interest of both children and their parents in music and arts was suggested by the teachers to unite many of the children and their families who enter the music class. Even the application process requires special effort since forms have to be filled in and a music test undertaken at a specific time and place, as one of the teachers pointed out and suggested that in this sense parents have to be motivated. The principal of Hillside school also suggested that children in the music classes tend to be more active and more energetic in general than other 'non-music' children. The fact that these children are often 'different' from others was also recognised by the Local Education Board which suggested that 'children attending music classes are often talented in many different areas...' when planning the organisation of language teaching in the municipality (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1990:13).

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[36] Smaller class sizes in some years are due to a smaller number of children passing the test.

[37] Data regarding the occupational/social background of parents of children at the local schools are not collected by schools or local authorities in the case study municipality.

One of the teachers from City school argued that there are distinct features among the children who will enter the music class:

> '...if in a 'normal' class there are three really active students then in a music class there are three students who are not active in that way...that is a really typical feature among students at music classes. And in one way study skills and things like that are better than average'.

Interestingly, one teacher interviewed at Millpond school had herself been through music classes as a child and thought that because of the test, the children who will pass, are talented in other areas in addition to music: 'generally-speaking they were a universally talented crowd'.

Were the music class children well-integrated in the school on the whole? According to both the teachers at City school, the situation was good and integration had been achieved, at the time of the interview in 2004. In some subjects such as language teaching and physical activity classes, children were mixed with others outside their classes, whereas normally for all other subjects the music class group would stay as a group on its own. This was seen as an arrangement that had perhaps helped with integration and unity between the music class students and other students. The teachers did not deny, however, the existence of some feelings of differentiation – that the music class students might occasionally perceive themselves to be 'better' having passed a test, and that the other students might view the music class children as somehow different. One situation where these differences perhaps became more apparent were school celebrations, where music class children often took centre stage, as all three interviewees pointed out.

This part has discussed the music classes functioning at City and Hillside schools – it has been seen that music classes represent a well-established and older specialism which initially began as an external request from the city's policy-makers. It is clear that the music classes have increased diversity among local schools and although the number of these classes has been much reduced

as discussed, parents still have choice to opt to enrol their children in these selective specialist classes. The fact that music classes are selective, on the other hand, has been shown to have various kinds of impacts on the schools, children and teachers concerned. Admission policies ensure that high calibre children are selected in the music classes who will then benefit from high quality music teaching, perhaps in smaller classes than is the norm for children in non-music classes. This in turn might have a role to play in enhancing the image of the city through the school's choir – as one teacher suggested – and it might create feelings of superiority among the children studying at the music classes. The music classes may be small in number, but appear to be much more significant in terms of their impacts.

7.1.4. The international specialism

Parkview school had two areas of specialisation that had a longer history: international education and environmental studies. The international specialism highlights external motives as a reason for specialisation and will be briefly discussed next – the environmental specialism on the other hand was found to have began as a response to internal motives, and will thus be considered in the next section of the chapter. How and why, then, did the international specialism become a more prominent feature at the school?

The international specialism at Parkview school began when the school was asked whether it was interested in taking up this role. This specialism developed from a European Union project in which the school was involved, the Comenius project[38], which aims to increase co-operation between schools, teachers and students living in EU countries through shared learning experiences and exchanges. The European Commission has identified further general aims of the Comenius project: to improve quality of teaching at schools and to enhance the European dimension within it, to encourage individuals to study foreign

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[38] Part of the wider Socrates programme in the field of education which started in 1995 and which aims to increase the European dimension in education across all EU countries (European Commission).

languages as well as to increase the knowledge and understanding of different cultures (European Commission 2007: 7).

According to the principal, the school was asked by municipality officials whether it wanted to take part in the project. Having expressed its interest and willingness to do so, the school subsequently received some special funding from the municipality designated for increasing an international dimension at schools in the area as well from the EU Comenius budget for undertaking exchange programmes under the scheme (e.g. some teachers travelling abroad for training), as the principal of the school explained.

Although the Comenius project ran only for a limited period of time, and the funding was thus limited, some of the schools involved in the initial scheme continued their partnership afterwards. A community of schools was formed, which were engaged in mutual exchange activities. In time this developed into a more permanent feature and a type of specialism for Parkview School, as the principal interviewee explained: 'internationality has been very strong for about ten years in that we have close contacts to many European schools, we go and visit them and they come and visit us in turn'. The focus on international education has remained an important feature at the school – this was mentioned by both the teachers interviewed as well as the principal who was interviewed.

It is evident that one of the reasons for Parkview continuing with its international dimension as a type of specialism was linked to the situation during the 1990s when schools were encouraged to become different and take up various specialisms.

Indeed, the principal mentioned the enhancement of status and reputation of the school through taking part in such schemes as the Comenius project as one reason for the school's continued interest in the international education and partnership schools: 'The international [specialism] was something that we purposefully sought in order to get some new energy for the school... without

these [specialisms] outsiders could interpret it as if we did not do anything here'.

The principal went on to make an interesting point about the rationales of schools to take up specialisms: '...The school's reputation is formed on the basis of what we can do in addition to the basic work'

The international specialism, as we have seen, initially began as a response to an external request to take part in an international school project which in time developed into a longer-lasting specialism at the school. This specialism highlights external policy drivers as the main driver for specialisation, and the underlying reasons for setting up the international specialism were clearly associated with the diversification trend in educational provision in the 1990s. As this short discussion has shown, pressures were inflicted on schools to become 'different' at this time. In this case the pressure was placed on Parkview school from the educational decision-making and shaping sphere, but the pressure appears to have been internalised at the school level.

7.1.5. English-weighted teaching at Parkview school

English-weighted teaching at the secondary stage of education initially functioned at Hillside school from 1995 until 2002 as the school's ex-principal explained. The reasons for this are clear – Millpond had been one of the feeder primary schools for Hillside school alongside City school. Following a policy change at the level of the Local Education Board, however, English-weighted teaching was transferred from Hillside to Parkview. The Board's decision to begin directing students from particular primary schools to particular secondary schools in practice meant that Parkview school became the main secondary school for students leaving Millpond school at the age of 12-13 which necessitated the transfer of English-weighted teaching to the new location at Parkview school. This demonstrates how, at times, a specialism can begin at a school primarily as a result of decisions constructed at the external decision-

making sphere – this time linked to the introduction of the area-model (see Chapter 6.2).

How, then, did interviewees at Parkview school interpret this change of policy and the transfer of the English-weighted specialism to the school?

According to the principal of Parkview school, an agreement was reached between teachers and the principal regarding the beginning of this new type of teaching. However, it appears that this matter had already been 'decided' at the political level – after all, a decision had been made to direct most of the students from Millpond to Parkview, and in this sense it appears that there was very little leeway for flexible arrangements and for airing of teachers' opinions. The principal also alluded to this by saying that: '[the English-weighted teaching] came through the system since we started to get students in who had been taking part in this type of teaching at the primary school level'.

The long-serving teacher interviewee commented that, in general, there should be more internal discussion between teachers, principal and other key players on issues regarding the school, its policies and activities. 'We go through different things in teacher meetings... but in some matters I will miss it [discussion]. We should have more internal discussions between different groups [at the school]'.

The same issue was taken up by the other teacher interviewee who suggested that there had not been enough information given to teachers about what was going to happen, and what individual teachers were expected to do in relation to the English-weighted programme:

> 'It has been a bit unclear to me as to how much I should be giving it [English-weighted teaching] and to which groups, although this issue has been sorted out now. But it has not started at all well. It has been talked about, but I haven't understood it very well and have been somewhat confused'.

Clearly, then, as this part has shown, a specialism can at times come to a school as a consequence of external decisions. The reason for the English-weighted teaching beginning, firstly, at Hillside school from where it was transferred to Parkview school was that students from Millpond school continued their education at the secondary stage at these schools. These reasons were external since they were purely related to external circumstances, such as the creation of the area-model in the case study municipality determining which secondary schools primary school children are to be transferred at the age of 12-13 (see Chapter 6.2). External policy drivers in this case were paramount, but the diversity and choice agenda did not play a major role in this case – the main underlying reasons can be seen to be organisational rather than attempts to increase school diversity and parental choice. The actual reasons and aims for setting up the English-weighted teaching at the primary school level in Millpond school were more multi-faceted, however, and are discussed in section 7.3.

7.2. Internal policy drivers

In contrast to external policy drivers discussed above, 'unofficial' specialisms highlight mainly internal policy drivers as a main motive for specialisation – these specialisms emerged as a result of internal circumstances at particular schools at a particular time. The classless teaching pedagogy at Hillside school and the environmental specialism at Parkview school constitute two examples of such specialisms. The main focus of attention here will be placed on Hillside school and its very prominent specialist teaching agenda. But, what was happening inside these schools that enabled specialisms to be introduced? How, if at all, were these schools different from other schools in the area? These are some of the questions that the following section of the paper will endeavour to answer.

7.2.1. Classless teaching at Hillside

The case of Hillside school and its classless teaching pedagogy with respect to its underlying policy drivers is interesting. It is evident that the ex-principal's personal views alongside her strong personality had a crucial role to play in determining the development priorities and the direction to which the school started to move towards in the late 1980s – becoming a school with a unique and prominent ethos which attracted interest among local parents. This issue is considered next to shed light on the question on how an internal policy driver in the form of strong leadership can have an impact on a school and its future.

The year of 1987, when the now ex-principal became head-teacher of Hillside school, marked a change in the school's development priorities. From that year onwards the school began to develop its specialist agenda to teach according to a non-graded pedagogy, which became a defining feature of the school as the ex-principal explained. This pedagogic style was based on the idea of dividing the curriculum into separate 'courses', which enable students to progress at their own pace – some faster, some slower, but most at a conventional pace taking three years to complete and pass the secondary stage curriculum (see section 5.2 for further details).

What, then, motivated the principal at Hillside in the late 1980s to go down this unusual path of pedagogic development?

The reasons for this were varied and offer a fascinating example of how internal motives converged with external motives from the political sphere and produced a unique outcome. In the case of Hillside school, the aims and visions of the principal were crucial in creating an atmosphere fertile for change – a strong and visionary leadership by the principal was fundamental. This was pointed out by all three interviewees at the school (current principal and two teachers) who referred to the ex-principal's firm beliefs and total dedication in her vision to develop the school on the lines of the classless teaching ideal. One of the teachers suggested that the word 'iron lady' might be a telling description of the

ex-principal: motivation, vision, leadership and strong personality all rolled in one. These might all be aspects of great importance when embarking on a new project that touches the lives of many children and adults alike. The two teachers interviewed at the school commented that:

> 'If one wants to be oriented towards change then one has to be a bit stubborn… but, I don't know whether – and this is an ethical/moral question – it is right to do things according to one person's vision…so it [the change] started from the top. This is what I think.'

> 'The ex-principal… had her own visions as how things should be dealt with, she was very goal-oriented and not necessarily always listened to her staff that much.'

It is clear that this was not an easy task. A wholesale change is not easy to achieve and requires considerable effort and dedication from those in charge as the case of Hillside school shows. It is also note-worthy how the principal managed to convince the teachers that this was indeed a very positive change, which opened up many new opportunities for the development of the school, teachers as well as presenting the students a new way of learning. Also, as discussed previously, the early 1990s brought with it new freedom to schools in the form of the school-based curricula encouraging schools to become different from one another. This fundamental change was undoubtedly favourable for developments taking place at Hillside school at the time – not only was diversity among comprehensive schools a new and sought-after value, but schools were allowed to have considerable freedom in the way they wanted to plan their own curricula. Hillside school took full advantage of this new opportunity. But what were the consequences of Hillside school becoming different and specialising? These issues are discussed next.

Consequences of specialisation

By the mid-1990s the 'classless' teaching pedagogy had really taken off the ground and Hillside school had developed a strong character with its specialist agenda – the school became more popular among local students and more children chose Hillside school as their secondary school at the time when free school choice was still an official policy in the municipality. What were the reasons behind the school's growing popularity?

When the school was at its largest in the mid-1990s there were just under 600 students at the school (statistics from the Education Office – see Figure 5.2). During its most popular years there were consistently more applicants than there were available places, which meant that many students did not get the place they had applied for. As seen previously, parental choice was introduced officially in 1996 and was in place until 2000 when the area-model was adopted (see Chapter 6.2). According to the ex-principal this showed that:

> 'we had succeeded in what we do because we had been doing this [classless teaching] for a longer time and people had experienced what it means – it wasn't based on imagination but on knowledge and in this sense it confirmed that we had been doing things correctly'.

According to the people interviewed at the school, a certain reputation arose for Hillside school as a result of its classless teaching allowing students more freedom to choose a part of their own curriculum as well as the speed at which they wish to go through their curricula. This was also alluded to by some interviewees at the other case study schools – City school and Parkview school. The ex-principal of Hillside suggested that the shift into the classless system brought with it a more individual approach and a culture that emphasised discussion and co-operation between different players at the school. Moreover, higher availability of a choice of courses meant that children could choose from among more options than traditionally available in secondary schools in addition to the compulsory core courses. The ex-principal 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'.

The ex-principal also added that this had had a positive impact on the atmosphere at the school because: 'everyone felt that they are in the right place having designed what they want to do themselves...and they saw that it was their own will being implemented'. In addition, the ex-principal suggested that the school and its surroundings became more peaceful, more tolerant and friendlier as a result of its specialist ethos.

It is evident that Hillside school was different from other schools in the area, which seemed to arouse interest among local children and parents in the school and its pedagogy. As a teacher at City school alluded to, Hillside school had been seen as being 'tempting', even for students who had to travel longer distances to attend the school. Furthermore, one of the teachers interviewed at Hillside school suggested that the fact that the school differed from other schools in the area resulted, in part, in its growing popularity: 'I think that the fact that we were different together with our central location led to the rush of students wanting to come here'.

If a school became different and thus attracted more interest from local parents and children this was not necessarily interpreted in only positive terms by other schools. One of the teachers interviewed pointed out that because Hillside school was different it affected relationships between Hillside and other schools:

'We were seen as a bit odd and, could I say, a bit over-individualistic who did not take others into consideration. But our staff was never consciously inclined to think so. And

when the school district model was removed we had a rush of students to our school, and maybe people tended to think that we are taking these students from other schools – maybe this happened in part, but when the school districts were removed I don't think we actively did this. We took on as many students as we could fit in, but then this reputation developed whereby people thought that we are better than others and do as we like without caring about the others'.

The ex-principal of Hillside school suggested that it was possible that other schools in the area – their principals and teachers – might have suffered from a kind of envy towards Hillside school's success. While Hillside had more applicants than it could take in, other schools experienced a decline in the numbers of applications which in turn was likely to have an impact on the morale of teaching staff and principals at the less popular schools. Indeed, an interesting point was raised by one teacher of Parkview school who argued that declining student numbers affected the internal school atmosphere in schools that were not attracting such a large number of applicants – suggesting that perhaps diminishing morale of the teaching staff does play a role, although this can only be suspected to be the case (see Figure 5.2 on distribution of students across case study schools from 1992 to 2004). As the ex-principal of Hillside school went on to argue, however: 'if I had been the one with less applications...I would have been thinking if there is anything I could do about that – could I develop the school which does not seem to be in demand?...this is an important thing'.

Is it possible that Hillside was seen as a type of elitist school due to its strong specialist agenda, and that this had a negative impact on its relationships with other schools?

The ex-principal argued that elitist interpretations had been around, but these were mostly unfounded in reality. The interviewee stressed that: 'we have been teaching the same things to students as other schools with the same resources as

other schools'. The only aspect that could be interpreted as elitist was the school's English-speaking classes, which was recognised as a possibility by the ex-principal. Crucially, though, these were part of the city's official specialism agenda and thereby had nothing to do with the school's own attempt to raise its profile. The importance of location was discussed in the previous section 7.1 as being an important external policy driver, which further suggests that the English-speaking classes cannot be seen as elitist from the point of view of the school – Hillside was chosen as a potential candidate to have these classes because of its central location similarly than City school at the primary level. However, it is interesting to note that the decision in the municipality to introduce the 'flexible index' in defining optimum school sizes and at the same time removing financial incentives for schools to take students above the defined optimum size (see Chapter 6.2) was not welcomed by the then-principal of Hillside (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1998). According to the principal, the flexible index was unfavourable for large schools – while all other principals thought that the flexible index presented a fair and just way to divide resources to schools in the municipality (ibid.). This suggests that Hillside school was keen to maintain financial incentives linked to school size and subsequently remain large, if not expand in size. What is evident, though, is that Hillside school was clearly different from the other local schools due to its various specialist features – it can be asked whether this might have led to the school becoming more exclusive as a result, at least at a level of raising the school's profile in the minds of local students and parents.

Many different aspects come to play when analysing the responses of the informants for what was going on at Hillside and what impact the various specialist features had on the school. The reasons for the school's popularity appear to be varied. It is clear that the classless teaching specialism – which emerged through the motivation and enthusiasm of the school's ex-principal as an internal policy driver – was one crucial criterion. The new diversity and choice agenda entering the domain of comprehensive schools in the early 1990s assisted developments by allowing schools to have more freedom. Together with the school's immigrant teaching and other specialisms, the classless system

created a new ethos at the school, which made Hillside school the most popular secondary school in the area in the 1990s. Overall, the fact that Hillside school was growing in size in the mid-1990s and was different from other local schools through its specialisms can be seen to be linked to a type of 'elitism' in the local education sphere.

7.2.2. The environmental specialism

The focus on environmental education at Parkview was less visible than the international specialism at the school (see section 7.1). This was despite the fact that the environmental specialism had a relatively long history at the school as seen below. How, then, did this specialism first emerge at Parkview school? This issue is briefly discussed next.

The specialism in environmental studies developed out of a personal interest of the school's then-principal on the area at the time when school-based curricula were actively encouraged in educational legislation. The wider educational context therefore provides the necessarily clues to explaining the timing of the introduction of this specialism – it is no co-incidence that the specialism in environmental studies at Parkview school emerged in the early 1990s.

The principal-in-post who was interviewed highlighted that the focus on environmental education had been an on-going specialism for about 15 years. However, the principal was unable to provide much detail on the actual weight given to this specialism in more recent times.

The two teachers interviewed at the school were not aware of the current status of the specialism in environmental studies. There appeared to be some confusion about this at a more practical level – both of the teachers thought that environmental studies and biology had once been a specialism, but were unsure whether it was an official feature anymore. Clearly, then, this focus has had less impact on the school than has the international dimension discussed in 7.1, which has remained a more prominent specialism over the years.

It is clear that the environmental specialism developed out of the personal interests of the then-principal of Parkview school highlighting internal motives for specialisation which were intertwined with the broader education policy trends at the time – the encouragement of schools to become different from one another through specialisation in the 1990s. In this sense there are similarities to the classless specialism at Hillside school discussed above. Interestingly, though, this specialism never developed further and in comparison to the classless specialism at Hillside school, the environmental specialism at Parkview school never really took off the ground.

7.3. External/internal policy drivers

It has emerged that there is one particular specialism among the case study schools, which clearly combines both external and internal policy drivers and thus provides a case study into the prevailing unique circumstances at the school as well as the municipality at large. The English-weighted teaching specialism at Millpond school where it was first introduced at the primary school level represents this type of specialism.

In this section the development of English-weighted teaching in Millpond school is considered (see section 7.1 on how the same specialism emerged through an external policy driver at Parkview school). Information from the local archives alongside interview data provide the main sources of evidence. This analysis presents an illuminating example how an official specialism can develop into more of an unofficial one over the course of time.

7.3.1. English-weighted teaching at Millpond school

When examining how the English-weighted teaching programme began at Millpond school, it is evident that many varied interests as well as unexpected opportunities were at play. A situation arose as a result of wider national

educational developments and trends, and a specific interest of the Local Education Board, which together presented opportunities for schools to develop their image and profile. However, although the opportunities for language specialities were, in theory, open to all primary schools (i.e. grades 1-6 catering for children aged 7 to 12/13) a great majority of schools were not ready to seize this opportunity. Who, then, were the central players in these developments and how did they interact with one another? An analysis of Minutes of the Local Education Board 1990-1991, provides some useful data on this issue, as elaborated below.

Three different groups can be identified which had a role to play in the overall development of this interesting situation, each of which had different reasons and rationales to benefit from the potential outcomes of the developments: the Board, the schools, and more indirectly, the local Chamber of Commerce.

Following national education policy developments in the early 1990s, there were pressures for municipalities to introduce policy changes and enable the introduction of school-based curricula (see Chapters 2.3 and 2.4). This pressure to change and transform existing policies was also felt at the level of schools, as interview data elaborated on below show.

The Local Education Board in the case study city in 1990 was contemplating the possibilities and options of how to develop comprehensive schools in its area (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1990-1991). It was thought that the broadening of options and choice for parents and children was one priority (ibid.). This is hardly surprising, though, considering national policy developments towards increasing parental choice in compulsory education and the fervour of which this was taken up in the capital city, Helsinki, and other large cities (see e.g. Seppänen 2003 and 2006). The possibility of increasing foreign-language teaching in primary and secondary schools was also discussed. It was thought that by offering more opportunities for specialist language teaching in some schools the city's image would be greatly enhanced, and that such an undertaking would be a great leap forwards in the then current climate

of educational change (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1990-1991). Furthermore, the existence of a university in the locality, including a teacher training college, was seen to be a further incentive to broaden language teaching facilities in the city – this would provide sufficient teacher resources and sufficient number of school children as well as a general interest of parents in language teaching (ibid.).

The Board was clearly keen to develop language teaching facilities in the city. To reflect its interests, the Board set up a meeting with principals of local comprehensive schools, at the end of 1990, to discuss the language issue further. Interestingly, there prevailed a view among most principals of primary schools that teaching in a language other than Finnish was mostly a concern and an issue for upper secondary schools, not primary and secondary schools. There was one principal, however, who expressed a differing view and voiced a clear interest in the possibility of setting up a special class at the school where teaching would happen, partly, in a foreign language. This principal came from Millpond school. One of the outcomes of the meeting, which came to take effect in the autumn of 1991, was that teaching in a foreign language in the city was to begin and was to be financially supported through providing resources for necessary teaching materials. The only school that was going to introduce a language specialism was Millpond school (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1990-1991). What was happening inside this one school, which made it want to undertake something new in the city's educational space? Once again, there were several different factors at play, which combined to produce this specific outcome.

The policy dynamics inside Millpond school were far from straightforward, and can be characterised by complex inter-relationships between different actors and agents. The vision of the school leadership, namely the principal and the governing body, was undoubtedly important in initiating a policy change, but teachers were also essentially interlinked with changing circumstances, as discussed below.

The role played by the school's governing body constituting local parents, with the strong backing of the school's principal, was crucial in creating an atmosphere inside the school favourable for change. On the basis of information given by the ex-principal[39], it appears that without the governing body's interest in the issue of language specialisation the status quo would have prevailed. The ex-principal mentioned that the existence of the university, with many local residents having connections to the university, had been an important influence for the development of policy at the school. The ex-principal suggested that:

> 'there are many children living in this area whose parents are working at the university and this kind of crowd who place a great value on foreign language skills...and foreign language skills as a value and as a pedagogic issue was supported widely by parents. And this interests and enthusiasm among parents, and also among the governing body, in this issue was great'.

The role of the governing body, in this respect, can be seen to represent both external and internal aspects of policy dynamics, since the members represented interests of the local community and local parents as well as the school's internal interest. Together with the positive outlook on the possibility of introducing this type of far-reaching change by the principal of the school, the plan was given the necessary backing by governing body and the teachers at the school to go ahead.

It is interesting to note that at this early stage of the policy change, not all teachers at the school were in favour of the proposed plans – this was evident from all four interviews (current and ex-principals and two teachers).

It appears on the basis of interview data that many teachers, and particularly those whose foreign language skills were not highly developed, had worries

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[39] At the time of the interview the (ex-) principal of Millpond school was on secondment that was scheduled to end in July 2005. Since then, however, the principal became officially an ex-principal due to a career move.

about how the changes would affect their daily lives at the school, and whether they would be able to cope. There were also concerns about the unknown – it was simply not known how the proposed language specialism, if taken on board, would work out in practice.[40] It was going to be a step into a deep unknown, and worries and concerns of many teachers in this respect were warranted. One teacher interviewee commented that: 'it [the specialism] came as a surprise – that we would start this kind of experiment – and we were not prepared for it... there was a lack of information and aims were not clear – we did not know where we were heading'. The ex-principal raised a similar point in that:

> 'within the school it [the decision to specialise in English-weighted teaching] awoke fears among those teachers who possessed weak English-language skills or who were not inside this thing – is this going to have an impact of their own work, do they have to start teaching in English at some point and what are the consequences of this?'

Crucially, though, at the same time as there was a group of teachers expressing doubts about the plans, there was also another group of teachers who were the main reason enabling the school to contemplate plans to introduce an English-weighted specialism. A core of teachers who were highly qualified in English language were a part of the teaching staff, which, as pointed out by all the three interviewees (two teachers and the ex-principal), was relatively rare in primary schools at the time. This specialised group of teachers represent one important internal aspect in the policy dynamics inside Millpond school without which a change into the direction of language specialisation would not have been possible. One teacher commented that:

> 'Our school had two teachers who had a double qualification – they were both qualified as class teachers and as English-language teachers, which was quite rare at that time...and

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[40] These developments took place in the early 1990s – the specialism itself was adopted in 1991.

these pioneers started to run it [the English-weighted teaching]'.

The ex-principal similarly suggested that: '...we had a particularly strong know-how of English-language at the school...inside the school we had teachers who had acquired excellent English-language skills'.

Around the same time as the Board and schools were in negotiations about language teaching in comprehensive schools towards the end of 1990, one specific interest group in the city, the Chamber of Commerce, made a proposal to set up an English school in the municipality (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1991). This was received with scepticism by the Board, which argued that such an arrangement would require special permission since the existing law would not permit Finnish children to attend a school where a majority of students are foreign nationals.[41] Furthermore, the Board highlighted developments in language teaching in comprehensive schools in the city, namely the English-weighted programme, and argued that a similar situation could thus be achieved by developing language teaching within comprehensive schools. It is interesting to note that the Board in its reply to the Chamber of Commerce also had an assumption that there was a strong likelihood of similar foreign language-weighted programmes being established at other schools in the municipality. The Board speculated that it would be easier to set up specialist language groups within comprehensive schools, and that with time this would represent a similar solution to that proposed by the Chamber of Commerce (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1991). This was an assumption that never materialised – Millpond school remains the only primary school in the city that has a foreign language weighted programme. Although primary schools had the opportunity to develop their language teaching on similar lines to that at Millpond school, they did not seize this opportunity. Reasons for this remain

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[41] The law stipulated that a Finnish national cannot enroll at a foreign language school unless it is temporary, or unless there are concrete reasons that make this the best option.

unclear, but it could be that a lack of attractive incentives made schools not to take on this opportunity at the time.

The above example provides an example of how different interest groups interact, and how situations arise that can be unexpected and can have unexpected outcomes. From the point of view of schools, their own interests and aspirations together with appropriate support and a fertile atmosphere for change can combine to create an opportunity that suddenly presents itself. The time was ripe for Millpond school to 'take a profile', the term used for a school to specialise in a subject area, and it seized that opportunity successfully. As seen above, other schools had the opportunity, but they did not use that opportunity – perhaps purposefully. After all, it is easier to remain the same rather than embrace something new. But being innovative takes courage, vision as well as, in part, certain ruthlessness. This was how Millpond school started its progress on English-weighted teaching. But not all went according to plan. Due to unforeseen problems in the running of the school's specialism, some of the teachers at the school raised concerns about the inherent inequities in the way the programme worked in practice. What happened?

Increasing inclusiveness

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'. [42] 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, many children and parents were left disappointed. How, then, were children selected for the specialist programme?

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[42] Teaching relies on language immersion technique whereby children learn a foreign language more naturally as a part of their everyday education, as explained earlier (see Chapter 5).

It is evident that a part of the problem at the beginning of the English-weighted programme at Millpond related to dilemmas in deciding what the best way of selecting children was. The specialism was popular from the start, which meant that it was important to get the criteria right in selecting children in a way that did not unfairly discriminate among those wishing to enter the programme. This was difficult in practice, however, and as all the interviewees pointed out, various criteria were being used. The ex-principal admitted that the school was experimenting with different selection methods: 'one can say directly that we were learning [about admissions criteria] since we changed the criteria on an almost yearly basis'. 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. The two teachers interviewed emphasised that the school's admissions policies were never unfair in the sense that there were no tests or other measures that might be deemed to be unfair. However, as the ex-principal of the school pointed out, at the beginning of the programme some criteria could be interpreted as a type of entrance requirement since children had to exhibit normal development of language and they had to be able to 'concentrate' in order to be able to start the specialist stream indicating inequality of access. The longer serving teacher, on the other hand, remarked that:

> 'it was a bit difficult because we didn't want any entrance
> exams, but the selection criteria changed almost every
> year...and this showed that we couldn't really think what
> would be the best system. In one year we could rely on
> recommendations and wishes and previous studies in English
> language – in another year it could be a lottery and in another
> year something else'.

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. Why did this happen and with what consequences?

Internal polarisation

The emerging polarisation within the school between the specialist and non-specialist classes reflected two distinct issues. First of all, a lack of spaces for the specialist class meant that not all who applied could be given a place as indicated earlier. 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 – inequalities of access were apparent. The latter point was taken up by the ex-principal:

> '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'.

The principal went on to point out that once it became apparent that selection criteria emphasising normal language development had inequitable effects in creating internal polarisation between the two classes, more emphasis was placed on lottery methods in selecting students into the English-weighted stream.

The teachers interviewed, on the other hand, reported that in the minds of the local parents the emerging specialist/non-specialist dichotomy was a concern, which in turn reinforced the wishes of many parents to enrol their children in the English-weighted class. A further interesting point was raised by the principal-in-post who suggested that those children who got in to the specialist class typically had parents who showed interest in their children's education and provided necessary support for them to benefit from a more challenging curriculum. What is evident is that demand clearly exceeded supply.

According to the teachers interviewed, a type of elitist interpretation of the specialist classes emerged which was partly real and partly imagined, and was related to the appearance of elements of polarisation within the school. Indeed, both of the teachers interviewed referred to the English-weighted classes in the 1990s as 'elitist-English' – a term used by the teachers at Millpond school. According to the ex-principal interviewee, parents exhibited both hopes and dreams about the English-weighted teaching, which reflected the fact that they strongly wanted their children to enrol in the specialist programme and to benefit from this specialist curriculum. One of the interviewee teachers also commented that:

> '...smart parents realised that students who had some kinds of learning difficulties preferred to enrol in the 'normal' classes and this gave way to interpretations of a weaker class and an elitist class, although this was not necessarily based on reality...and this was a differentiating factor'.

Polarisation within the school was seen as a problem by many teachers as noted by the two teachers and the ex-principal interviewed. One of the teachers, who at the beginning of the programme in the 1990s taught non-specialist classes, pointed to the fact that the way the more challenging students enrolled in these classes in much greater numbers made her work much harder than it had been before. This development was also seen as somewhat unfair by the same teacher. Suddenly there was a concentration of students needing more help and assistance in the non-specialist classes, when previously all the children with special educational needs were distributed evenly across the whole age-range. This, on the one hand, meant more demanding work for those teachers in charge of the non-specialist classes. The specialist stream, on the other hand, had an influx of easier to teach, and possibly more academically able students due to the admissions criteria, discussed above, as the ex-principal pointed out. In addition, there was a fear in the minds of many of the teachers at the school that this phenomenon was unsustainable – all the interviewees recognised this as a potent problem, which had to be addressed.

The decision by the teachers and the principal to consider all available options, including an option to end the specialist programme altogether, was an attempt to address the problems that had surfaced over the years. A ballot among all the teachers at the school took place with the outcome that the programme should continue, but in an expanded and more inclusive form, as the ex-principal commented: 'this decision was largely made as a result of teachers' own interests'.

The decision to expand the programme ended existing elements of polarisation within the school since the specialist agenda after the reform covered the whole school – this was seen as a positive development by both the teachers interviewed. All children starting at the school had a chance to benefit from the English-weighted teaching unlike before the reform. The change meant, though, that adaptations to the programme had to be made in order for the curriculum to be more suitable for all children. In practice, as noted by the ex-principal and teachers, this necessitated a simplification of the curriculum and a reduction of English-weighted teaching hours.

This section described how the English-weighted specialism developed at Millpond school in the early 1990s, and how various interest groups had a role to play in these developments combining both external and internal motives including attempts to diversify provision at comprehensive schools in the municipality. Following problems arising with the running of the programme which led to internal polarisation of the student population, a very interesting policy change took place when the specialism was expanded to cover the whole school. As a result, the previously rather exclusive specialism became more inclusive, and thus, more equitable.

7.4. Conclusions

It has been seen in this chapter how various external and internal policy drivers have had a role to play in affecting how and why schools in the municipality

have introduced specialisms. External influences have highlighted a number of very different factors ranging from broadly political reasons to practical issues such as a school's location. Internal drivers, on the other hand, have been rarer – factors such as personal ambitions and ideals of individual principals, special expertise of teaching staff as well as reasons related to attempts to raise schools' profile and reputation have been discussed. But, to what extent are these different drivers linked to attempts to increase diversity and choice in the local area? And, what impact have they had on equity and equality of opportunity? These issues are further discussed below.

In general, it appears that while external policy drivers can often be linked to attempts to increase diversity and choice in the local area, the impact they have had on equality of opportunity and equity is more variable. Specialisms linked to external policy drivers which were found to be particularly interesting in terms of their relationship to diversity and choice, on one hand, and equity and equality of opportunity, on the other, included the city's English-speaking classes, music classes and teaching for SEN and immigrant children.

Both English-speaking classes and music classes have increased diversity of provision, and thus, opportunities for parental choice among local comprehensive schools and they appear negatively to affect equity and equality of opportunity. The English-speaking classes were selective and only accessible to those children with fluent English language skills – the classes were small which could be seen as an unfair advantage to children studying in these classes. The city's music classes, however, provide the most prominent example of selection – it was found that, in general, selection appears to have inequitable outcomes. Children in the music classes could be seen to be in a beneficial position compared with children in non-music classes whether in terms of smaller class sizes in some years in comparison to normal non-music classes, or separating out the more talented students in the music classes from the rest.

By contrast, increased facilities for SEN and immigrant children in the municipality, by focusing on integration and inclusion, has been a response to

diversifying and more heterogeneous student population. Although national and local education policies in terms of an increased emphasis on integration and inclusion have led to more facilities being offered, these specialist services are very different to other specialisms looked at in this study. It is clear that 'different learners', whether assessed in terms of children with learning difficulties or cultural background differences, generally have a more disadvantaged starting position when entering the education system – and thus more individually tailored services are needed to tackle these disadvantages. Policies of integration and inclusion can be seen as being beneficial for increasing equity and equality of opportunity for both SEN and immigrant children. This issue will be returned to in the next chapter.

Although external policy drivers can be seen to be linked to efforts to enhance diversity and offer more choice for local parents, internal drivers appear to be more clearly linked to these efforts. Subsequently, the specialisms which have born chiefly out of internal policy drivers appear, overall, to have more negative impact on equity and equality of opportunity than specialisms deriving from external drivers. However, as seen below, in some cases developments have taken place outside schools or within schools which have reversed emerging inequitable trends.

It was seen that out of the four case study schools, only one school – Hillside – had a strong internal driver for specialisation, in the form of the ex-principal, which led to the classless teaching pedagogy being adopted at the school. Together with other specialisms including English-speaking classes, immigrant teaching, and music classes (and thus combining both internal and external policy drivers), the school became a very prominent and different school in the municipality offering genuine 'choice' for local parents. It was seen that financial incentives did not have a significant role to play in the developments. It is important to remember, however, that the introduction of the area-model in the municipality in the early 2000 restricted parental choice – a decision which had the most direct impact on Hillside school and its student numbers which subsequently started to decline (see Figure 5.2). As discussed in Chapter 6,

ongoing financial difficulties in the case study municipality have had a direct impact on the way educational services are organised and it appears that by directing students from certain primary schools to certain secondary schools, and limiting parental choice, costs have been contained. Policies that require extra expenditure are not viable options for decision-makers when economic considerations dominate.

Internal policy drivers often exist alongside external ones in influencing schools to specialise. The case of Millpond school, for example, showed that the existence of a number of highly qualified teachers enabled the school initially to introduce the English-weighted specialism. Therefore, although the specialism was officially conceived outside the school and was linked to considerations to increase diversity within local schools by local decision-makers and shapers, the internal circumstances at Millpond school were crucial in making the introduction of the English-weighted specialism a possibility. The English-weighted teaching at Millpond school also highlighted an interesting policy change whereby selective practices which resulted in inequities within the school at the beginning of the programme were abandoned in favour of more inclusive practices by extending the specialism to cover the whole school. This change removed elements of inequities in admissions criteria and interpretations of possible elitism among teachers and parents. It can be suspected, on the basis of evidence considered, that without changes being made to admissions policies, Millpond school could have become increasingly elitist and internally divided in terms of its student population.

At times, a specialism can come to a school through the system. The English-weighted classes at Parkview school provide an interesting example of this type of reason and, as such, differs from the other specialisms looked at in this study. The beginning of the English-weighted specialism at Parkview was related to a municipality-wide decision taken at the Education Office and the Local Education Board to direct students from certain primary schools to certain secondary schools. Subsequently, the English-weighted classes were transferred from Hillside to Parkview school, and it appears that the school had little say as

to whether it actually wanted to take on this specialism or not. The decision was made in the external decision-making arena and was related to a wider policy change in the municipality (the area-model) which, in this case, was not aiming to increase diversity among schools but instead limited parental choice in the area (see Chapter 6.2 for details).

Together these findings raise some important issues in relation to equity and equality of opportunity. One question this raises is whether selection, in any form, within the comprehensive school system can have beneficial outcomes for the majority of students. On the basis of the cases discussed here, it appears not. The next Chapter 8 focuses more specifically on equity and equality of opportunity issues in the case study municipality.

In conclusion, there are no straightforward factors which would explain why schools have developed specialisms in various areas at the case study schools. Reasons and rationales have highlighted a multitude of underlying factors – sometimes combining external and internal reasons – which together explain the development of specialisms at schools. The broad educational landscape constituted the foundation in which changes could take place by encouraging schools to become different and specialise. However, the extent of the changes taking place was seen in many cases to be linked to schools themselves – whether in terms of unique interests and motives of school staff and leadership or the location and size of schools. And, furthermore, the issue of finance was also interlinked to changes taking place, most prominently by limiting the possibilities of schools growing in size since the introduction of the area-model in the municipality in 2000 – local control over schools has thus increased and previous freedoms have been restricted.

8. Specialisation, equity and equality of opportunity – do they fit together?

In the final empirical chapter attention will be directed towards analysing the relationship between specialisation, equity and equality of opportunity. More specifically, the question that it seeks to answer is whether the phenomenon of specialisation within the Finnish comprehensive school system, and with it the creation of differentiation, is compatible with equity and equality of opportunity which still remain central aims of the Finnish comprehensive school system at large (Research Question 3).

The definition of equality of opportunity used in this analysis echoes the definition which was used at the time of the comprehensive revolution in Finland in the 1960s and 1970s. This embodies a more inclusive idea of equality of opportunity, especially in terms of regional and socio-economic concerns. Children with special educational needs are also included in the definition as are those with immigrant backgrounds. Because of the more inclusive nature of the definition adopted, the meritocratic conception of equality of opportunity is rejected, and selection and differentiation on the grounds of ability/aptitude is subsequently seen as inequitable. The concept of equity is therefore used to supplement the concept of equality of opportunity, and it is interpreted as 'fairness' according to its standard definition (see extended discussion of equity/equality of opportunity in Chapter 3.1).

The chapter begins in section 8.1 with a focus upon interpretations of equality of opportunity covering a multitude of different areas. It will be seen that a theme that emerges is a view highlighting individuality within communality – a view shared by many interviewees. The following section 8.2 attempts to answer the question as to whether equality of opportunity has in any way suffered as a result of schools taking on specialisations, and creating elements of differentiation and competition in the case study municipality. Evidence points to an interesting case whereby a line of decisions taken at different levels of municipality decision-making arenas have limited the development of an

educational market in the city. Emerging elements of competition between schools and inequities between different parts of the city have been restricted as discussed in the latter sections of this chapter. The recent decision in the municipality to close down a number of schools including the two case study schools, City school and Hillside school, in response to financial difficulties and demographic trends is also discussed. The chapter concludes with a discussion in section 8.3 which aims to bring together the main emerging issues by critically evaluating the impact of specialisation on equity and equality of opportunity in the case study municipality.

8.1. Interpretations of equality of opportunity and equity

This section focuses on looking at how the key decision-makers (N=7), principals (N=6, including two ex-principals) and teachers (N=8) in the case study municipality conceptualise equality of opportunity and equity. The section thus aims to map views of the interviewees on the changing education policy context in Finland in the 1990s and 2000s at a time when many far-reaching policies were introduced – and when specialisation of schools became possible. Changes in the National Framework Curriculum, the possibility of specialisation through the school-based curricula and the changing values within the broader educational landscape including inclusion and integration issues come under the scope of the analysis. Issues addressed relate to what respondents have made of the changing ethos of the Finnish comprehensive school from the 1990s onwards. Do they believe there to be a need to reform the existing system, and why? Do they have faith in the comprehensive school system, or do they believe that changes at the core, for example through specialisation, are necessary or, indeed, inevitable?

The section begins with an elaboration of interviewees' views and opinions on the changing ethos of the Finnish comprehensive school – through the National Framework Curriculum and with it, specialisation of schools. Following this, attention moves to analysing interviewees' perceptions about the common

school and the phenomenon of specialisation. Finally, issues surrounding individuality and communality are considered – within this the issue of integration and inclusion of special needs students and children of immigrant backgrounds within mainstream schools, which can be seen as essential components of equality of opportunity and equity, is also discussed. Differences and commonalities of responses are analysed, and the question is raised as to whether the changing notions of equality of opportunity through legislative changes have been internalised by some of the key people interviewed in the case study municipality. This analysis builds upon Chapter 2 focusing on legislative changes in education policy from the 1960s to the present, the discussion in Chapter 3 focusing on analysing the concepts of equality of opportunity and equity as applied to compulsory education. It also builds upon Chapter 6 focusing on more recent policy developments and priorities.

8.1.1. Pendulum swings

A common theme which emerged among the interviewees was a perception that education policy through the reforms in the National Curriculum in the country has a tendency to fluctuate. People interviewed had differing views on whether the growing freedom of schools characteristic of the 1990s was, in the main, a positive or a negative phenomenon. However, from a point of view of equality of opportunity, it emerged that the school-based curricula was seen as inequitable by many.

The ex-principal of Millpond school highlighted the fact that the 1990s brought with it many new freedoms to schools and municipalities: 'I see as a large education policy factor in the 1990s this kind of freedom and liberalism and competition between schools and the policy of schools taking profiles, which was very typical in the beginning of the 1990s'. The same interviewee went on to argue that:

> 'The National Curriculum reform of 1994 which was
> supposed to be municipality-based in the beginning became,
> in a way by a half-mistake, school-based so that curricula

were made at schools in Finland. And this school-based curricula period that started in 1994 was a very significant education policy phenomenon in the 1990s'.

The ex-principal argued that there were both positive and negative features present in the reforms, and that the National Board of Education had been forced to take steps towards rectifying the situation of the 1990s through the curriculum reforms of the early 2000s:

> 'in a way as a positive signal one can see that schools and teachers were trusted in that there is expertise [at schools] and [teachers] are able to do things...but an objective analysis of the 1990s shows that this freedom came too quickly, it rushed in, and was uncontrollable. And now this current National Curriculum, these foundations, are extremely tightly set up and are uniform with very little room for manoeuvre in the contents. And this was a reaction to this, could I say, uncontrollable freedom taking place in the 1990s'.

The current principal of City school also saw the changing National Framework Curricula over the last 15 years as having brought great changes to the level of schools:

> 'Ten years ago these school-based curricula were very fashionable...it was announced here as well that 'schools – take profiles – draft curricula that reflect your identities and these types of things'. And now in this latest National Curriculum the pendulum is swinging clearly backwards...so ink is just starting to dry on the decision being made when they are already thinking about how these could be changed [again]'.

The growing freedom of schools to design their own curricula and diversify was interpreted more as a negative phenomenon by the principal of Millpond school

– this interviewee suggested that the school-based curricula were 'too free' because 'subjects of different types and of too different amounts have been taught and learned at schools' (see section 8.2 for further analysis).

One of the teachers at Hillside school also saw the early 1990s as a time of growing independence for schools which had been taken back in more recent times:

> '...and now in education policy we are going towards a direction of tighter control, less freedom to choose – in a way we are returning back to the education system of the 1970s. In 1992 an opportunity was offered for this classless system, this was the direction where we were going – in a way we were in the frontline of development then, but this education policy is like art – pendulum swings...from side to side'.

A similar point about the apparent u-turn in education policy was also raised by the principal-in-post of Hillside school who noted that:

> 'and then there was a change of direction in the pendulum to the direction that more restrictions were being made and more control was put on the top... in a way this is a shame because schools were just learning to take advantage of this [growing freedom] at that stage, and I would say that schools have had the necessary resources and opportunities to make the best of this for the benefit of students...and one feels that it implies that there would be no ability to judge in the field'.

One teacher from Millpond school argued that:

> 'the previous National Framework Curriculum supported schools taking profiles to a large extent in a way that schools could design their own curricula within very loose frameworks, and the result was extremely varied...and I notice that the central government has now seen that it is necessary to take steps back and to narrow the

framework...this is a big change and I think that it's also a counter-attack towards this specialisation'.

The same teacher also thought that the current times represent a watershed in what direction education policy overall will take and referred to Finland's success in the PISA studies in effect confirming that the compulsory education system in Finland does not have to move towards a more market-oriented direction:

> 'I think our municipality-based school-network system has been recognised as being good, very strong and with a good coverage time after time, even internationally. We don't produce the top individuals in the same scale than we might be able to produce if we had some other type of system, but neither do we produce drop-outs which we have an amazingly small number in Finland. I hope from all my heart that we would not adopt this line of marketisation of schools'.

One of the teachers at the Parkview school brought the changes in the National Curriculum on the agenda as a far-reaching change:

> 'the beginning of 1990s was clearly a kind of experimentation and the National Framework Curriculum was freed somewhat – each school was creating its own line in particular kinds of way...but this new National Framework Curriculum is going take back many of the previous options [optional courses] so that theoretical subjects are going to increase [at the expense of arts-based subjects]'.

The link between financial problems and education policy trends in the 2000s was highlighted by the school governing body member, who suggested that specialisation of schools had clearly become less of an issue than it was in the 1990s:

'there has been less money and special functions have been questioned – these were in great demand in Finland five years ago but slowly these have been run down, and it feels like decisions that have been made have been made against specialist programmes – there is unwillingness for one school to be allowed to do things differently from other schools'.

This was an interesting view, which would suggest that the introduction of the area-model in the municipality was, at least partly, aimed at evening out differences between schools that had come about as a result of the specialisation trend in the mid-1990s. What is clear, though, is that the area-model restricted schools growing in size beyond their 'optimum sizes' as defined by the Local Education Board (see Chapter 6.2). In this way, equality of opportunity had a role to play in the overall decision-making although, as it appears, individual schools suffered as a result (for example Hillside school – see section 8.2).

The Director of Education expressed highly positive views about the direction to which education policy in Finland had been going since the comprehensive school reforms of the 1970s. The Director argued that:

'We have good legislation. It gives enough freedoms to municipalities to fulfil it, but it also directs. And the National Framework Curriculum sets the norms which set boundaries whereby we have an opportunity, or a responsibility, to make education services as good as possible all around'.

Furthermore, as was suggested by the same interviewee: 'we place a high value on education and this is linked to the fact that a survival game of a small nation is that the whole nation must be highly educated'. When looking at the level of spending on education in Finland over time (as measured by a percentage of GDP), it is clear that there was a drop in spending which coincided with the economic recession of the 1990s, however, Finland still spent more than the EU average (see Chapter 6.3 and Appendix 6). On these grounds, the views of the interviewee appear justified.

A teacher based at Millpond school thought that there was a certain pattern prevalent in education policy overall in that:

'there is a constant change, a cyclical change, that once a round has been completed then in a way we always return to the same starting point...in my view our National Framework Curriculum, and actually education policy in a broader sense too, has gone round that circle – the circle of going a bit wild – and I believe that now there is a will to calm this down so that we don't let our schools to become a part of this senseless market-oriented way of thinking'.

This view perhaps alludes to elements of path-dependency (Pierson 2000) prevalent in the Finnish education system by suggesting that the baseline values are those associated with the setting up of the comprehensive school system in the 1960s and 1970s (see Chapter 2), and that this is the value-base to which policy-makers will return after experimenting with other types of agendas such as elements of market-oriented reforms. It has to be noted, though, that in the light of the current trends as discussed in Chapter 6.1, the diversity and choice agenda along with attempts to increase effectiveness and quality seem to prevail as compulsory education policy priorities as argued by the Ministry of Education in its report *Education and Research 2007-2012* (Ministry of Education 2007a). These policy priorities can be seen to have replaced, at least in part, the original values highlighting equal educational opportunities at the time when the comprehensive school system was set up.

8.1.2. Do people still believe in the 'common school'?

What are the basic beliefs and values of the people interviewed about education policy and changes that have taken place within the comprehensive school system over recent decades? And what do these values say about the interviewees' conception of equality of opportunity? These issues are focused on next.

The first type of issue to emerge was related to the value of education in a broader sense of the word, and was discussed by the ex-member of the Board, the area-governing body member as well as the principal-in-post of City school and one teacher at the school as shown below.

The issue of the high value traditionally placed on education in Finland was referred to by both the ex-member of the Local Education Board and the area-governing body member. The ex-member of the Board argued that the comprehensive school system was valuable in 'that all are educated together and that we have the common school where it is a richness to [be together] with different kinds of people'.

The area-governing body member, on the other hand, pointed out how he had personally experienced this phenomenon when visiting Finland in the 1970s (this interviewee was originally from Germany):

> 'I saw then that even from the forests of Eastern Finland people were educated really far and high – with special efforts and with equality of opportunity...in Germany they tried to establish comprehensive schools in the 1970s, but unsuccessfully. And now these PISA results suggest that those countries that have comprehensive schools got better results'.

Similar issues were raised by the principal of City school who thought that overall Finnish education policy over the last 50 years had succeeded in producing good results. The principal argued that: 'us Finns have succeeded in creating well-being within the Finnish society so incredibly well after all – we do take care of the weak quite well and those top projects also proceed'. A teacher at City school, on the other hand, claimed that: 'in my view the common school has been positive for the whole development of the Finnish society'.

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The ex-principal of Millpond school argued that in the comprehensive school system any form of 'raw neo-liberal competition [is]...a very problematic and negative phenomenon'. He argued that in the light of the traditional equality of opportunity within the Finnish comprehensive school system competition between schools was not needed either: 'competition between comprehensive schools where there would be a 'dropping game' – a game where the least successful would suffer from a reduction of resources...or would be thrown out of the train'. The ex-principal went on to argue that the excellent results of Finnish children in the PISA studies prove that the comprehensive school had succeeded:

> '...the PISA results are in my opinion one of the most convincing examples of the value placed on the comprehensive school in Finland where one education policy interest has been to safeguard good resources for each individual school and the standards of education as equal and as similar as possible regardless of whether schools are...in the countryside or in cities'.

Some interviewees saw the increasing freedom given to schools as having led to more competition between schools in the city, which was a second larger theme to emerge related to values of interviewees. The issue of managerialist reforms in education policy was brought up by some interviewees in a more negative light while others talked about the possible positive sides to competition, for example through the maintenance of developmental motives at schools as discussed below.

One of the teachers from Hillside school expressed very negative views about the injection of competitive measures within schools and described the overall situation as:

> 'we live in such a swamp because these modes of action of ours have been taken from private companies' management models and evaluation models since the beginning of 1990s –

as if learning, growing and development could be measured

by the signs of minuses or pluses of euros'.

The same interviewee went on to say that the specialisation trend led to worsening relationships between schools:

'In the beginning everyone wanted to take profiles in order to show, in a way, their own necessity and through this one can perhaps understand why we took on these specialisms. But now it has changed in a way that...I am sure that people are digging a pit for one another'.

While the current principal of Parkview school thought that there should be no need to introduce competition between schools because: 'I would say that it does not have to be organised since it probably comes naturally in any case', a teacher from City school argued that education was not a commodity: 'I don't think that education and education policy should be 'free' in a way that it is something to be traded with like it was business – it is not business...and Finland should put brakes on in these kinds of developments'.

Unsurprisingly, the ex-principal of Hillside school who was the pioneer of the classless teaching pedagogy at the school argued that specialisation of schools is in itself a good idea: 'it would not have to be that far-reaching but there ought to be supply. I think it depends on whether there is demand for that supply or not – if there is no demand then there is no need keeping it up'. According to the ex-principal, diversity of schools would not be likely to lead to differentiation among schools, and that the main point would be to ensure that all schools maintained their development motivations: 'this would assume that there should be some motivation to develop at all schools so that no-one would stay behind thinking that 'we are all right like this' – a school should stay ahead of its time'.

Similar points were raised by the current principal of Millpond school and the area-governing body member. The principal of Millpond school argued that it is important for schools to maintain a motivation to develop:

'In order for working communities to function well and innovatively and with enthusiasm, there should be continuous internal development. If we do things the same way year after year then the working community will wither and satisfaction will die with it'.

The area-governing body member also suggested that in a way some competition can be a positive feature since 'it is a kind of way to assure quality – in a way it creates pressures, but on the other hand it creates a united ethos at schools'.

One teacher from City school was somewhat doubtful about the constant need to change education policies under the influence of globalisation, which can be seen as a type of an external policy driver, and interpreted the increasing freedom in negative terms:

'sometimes one feels that it would be nice if some research was directed towards looking at why we have ended up with such a good education system and what is the basis of it – we don't have to change just for the benefit of changing, there are enough changes taking place in other things in society all the time'.

Globalisation is indeed an issue which has framed recent education development trends and priorities as discussed in Chapter 6.1 – globalisation is seen as an opportunity but also as a challenge to Finnish society as well as its education system. The Government's manifesto (Council of the State 2007: 1) argues that:

'Climate change and globalisation strengthen mutual dependency between nations and citizens...creativity, know-how and high standards of education are prerequisites to the success of Finland and Finnish people. The school must strengthen everyone's chances to learn'.

This view makes the link between external pressures and education policy clear – the education system must ensure that the nation is prepared to succeed in the increasingly global and interconnected world – and as discussed previously in different contexts, school diversity, choice, quality and efficiency are often seen as offering solutions to achieving 'success' in this competitive environment.

Specialisation

What about the issue of specialisation itself – how did interviewees perceive specialisation of schools and the creation of differentiation and diversity within the comprehensive school network? And how do these views compare with those of the main political parties on school diversity and selection within the comprehensive school system?

Some interviewees raised the issue of specialisation as something that had far-reaching impacts on the comprehensive school system as a whole. This is an area which raised some very strong opinions among the people interviewed – while some were totally against the idea on the grounds that it did not fit in with the values of the comprehensive school ethos, others were broadly in favour or had more or less neutral views about specialisation.

The ex-principal of Millpond school suggested that the new emphasis on specialisation was highly significant because it differed so dramatically from the traditional conception of the 'common school' – now such issues as 'schools taking profiles' by creating a unique and distinct ethos, and by introducing specialisms was commonplace. This, according to the ex-principal, marked a beginning of a 'new era for education policy' – the creation of more freedom for schools and municipalities. According to this interviewee, specialisation on the whole was fine providing that it does not bring with it inequalities:

> 'if there are clear common structures which guarantee
> equality of opportunity for students then within that, in my
> view, there can be a certain amount of specialisation that

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would derive from, for example, teachers' specialist knowledge and... resources which schools have at hand'.[43]

The current principal of Millpond school argued that specialisation was acceptable, but it was not necessary:

> 'School-based curricula...create enthusiasm within the [school] organisation which generates good things in everything else, but there is no need to specialise as such. I don't believe that the creation of some mathematics specialisms in primary schools would lead to a creation of genius mathematicians...but that basis from where the talented people arise has to be broad enough'.

The Director of Education who was interviewed alluded to the highly trained teachers in Finland as a resource that can be utilised at schools or by schools in a form of specialisation, although denying that this would lead to competition between schools in municipalities (except in Helsinki as suggested by the same interviewee). This interviewee argued that: '...if there are [in schools] some arts-oriented or natural sciences-oriented teachers then they can, as individuals, take that forward or a school can adopt that as a specialism through the pedagogic know-how of its staff'.

One of the teachers at Hillside school pointed out that specialisation to an extent was acceptable, but added somewhat ironically that 'I am one of those people who support the common school, so that we do not have 'cat-stroking' and 'ice-hockey' secondary schools – a good quality basic standard must be maintained', and therefore 'aiming for speciality...might not be necessary'. It is clear from this assessment that some specialisms have a tendency perhaps to go too far, as alluded to by the teacher.

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[43] It has to be remembered that Millpond school's specialism in English-weighted teaching began, partly, as a result of the expertise of some teachers in English-language. Furthermore, there were apparent inequities in terms of polarisation of the student population in the early stages of the programme before the expansion (see Chapter 7.3).

On a broader level, the changing educational landscape based on the rise of neo-liberalism was seen by some as sitting somewhat uncomfortably with the Finnish tradition of equality of opportunity.

Out of the four main political parties (the Left, the Centre Party, the Social Democratic Party and the Conservatives) the Left is, unsurprisingly, most directly against specialisation on the grounds that it is not compatible with social justice or societal equality. According to the Left, specialisation and the accompanying selection represent neo-liberal education policy which is a threat to educational equality of opportunity because it can lead to exclusion and increasing polarisation and divisions within the comprehensive school system – the local school should remain the best option for all children (Vasemmistoliitto 2007: 27, 30). Some of the people interviewed expressed views which were in tune with more left-wing views, as discussed below.

As the ex-Board member suggested, this 'Americanisation by the back door' does not fit with the Finnish culture and tradition 'where work and death have made us equal'. Furthermore, gradual 'Americanisation' could change the long-established social equality since, as it was pointed out by the interviewee, notions of social equality have not been as highly valued in the 'New World cultures' as they have been in Finland, for example. The ex-Board member also highlighted that it is important to remain critical of new trends and be proud of the existing traditions, but without closing all doors from outside influences. The same interviewee expressed somewhat sceptical views about specialisation itself and thought that:

> 'I don't think that a school should just randomly start to value one specific thing and start to specialise in it...I think it should start from the students and parents...there is also a problem with the fact that a school is so slow to change – if they establish a school with a specialism in sports and then...people and children change but the school will be in the same mould for the following 20 years'.

Some interviewees were broadly speaking against the idea of specialisation. The principal of Parkview school did not truly accept specialisation of comprehensive schools and argued that although specialisation can exist to a certain extent, at a broader level it is not necessary (see Chapter 2 for a discussion on the history of music classes):

> '...I don't mean that it [specialisation] should be dug out all together – music classes and these types of things have existed for a long time – but specialisation of schools can very quickly lead to differentiation of schools, and then we are close to a parallel education system'.

The area-governing body member, on the other hand, argued that:

> 'one of the main functions of schools is to bring unity in a way that we should still be constructing the same society – not so that some people are only sports people, others musicians and others physicists – society does not need this. Especially when our further/higher education[44] is so well organised that we know that any needs for specialist learning will be fulfilled'.

And one of the teachers based at Millpond school suggested that there were several strengths associated with the comprehensive school system:

> 'One of the strengths of the Finnish education system is that even now parents can send their children to a local school and believe and trust that it is a good school, that results are good. And I would not agree with demolishing this but probably we are going towards that with this specialisation of schools and schools seeking their own profiles and niches'.

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[44] See Appendix 5, the education system chart, for a description of the further/higher education route.

One of the teachers from City school also alluded to the culture of increasing freedom, and an apparent paradox within the Finnish education policy:

> '...it is curious that...we get a huge number of foreigners after the surveys [the PISA studies] to see what the reasons are behind the better results of the Finnish education system in comparison to the German one, for example. At the same time we are seriously going somewhere else. I think it fights against this equality of opportunity and the whole common school'.

The ex-Chair of the Local Education Board argued that: 'although I belong to the Conservative Party I really hope we don't venture into any private school system – it has been one of my leading principles that we must have good public schools [municipality-owned and run], which do not compete with one another but are all equally good'.

This view is interesting since, in the main, the Conservative Party promotes the development of specialisation and specialist provision for the talented children as well as the right of parents to choose a school for their children (Risikko Committee 2006:6). The ex-Chair's opinions thus seem to be more attuned to the view that, if all schools are equally good, then perhaps there is little or no need for parental choice policies – clearly not the kind of ideology that the Conservative Party appears to be advocating.

Finally, there were those who had more or less neutral views about specialisation. On the political spectrum, these views can perhaps be associated with the somewhat diluted middle-ground views on diversity and choice in comparison with the more polarised views from the Left and the Right. Educational equality of opportunity remains an important aim for both the Centre Party and the Social Democratic Party with the former emphasising regional equality (Keskusta 2006) and the latter children's right to good quality education at a local school regardless of socio-economic or regional background factors (Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue 2005). Both Parties, however,

highlight an individual's right to receive education suited to his or her unique needs (ibid.). As discussed previously, this view recognises the needs of both the less and the more talented children to receive specially tailored education (see Chapter 6.1) – issue which will be further developed in the following parts of the chapter.

The current Chair of the Local Education Board thought that although there can be some specialisation through schools taking profiles, competition should not become the main driver or motive: 'more likely equality of opportunity so that we are able to organise fair teaching for all [children] in grades 1 to 9'. The same interviewee went on to emphasise that equality of opportunity was in fact very important: 'regardless of where you live, on what side of city you live, regional equality of opportunity and this kind of equality between different socio-economic groups should be an enormously important thing'. This would suggest that for this interviewee equality of opportunity in its traditional regional/socio-economic conception remains the more important goal with which specialisation and differentiation of schools should not interfere.

The Head of Education for Development at the Education Office expressed similar views to those of the Chair of the Board, namely that schools should be able to specialise to an extent:

> 'a school can become unique – it is then the product of that community – but the educational provider (i.e. municipalities) must keep an eye on this so things won't get over-the-top, especially in comprehensive schools when we are talking about small children...there is no need to specialise too much'.

And the principal-in-post of Hillside school remarked in somewhat contradictory terms: 'I don't believe that competition in basic education is necessary, but it would be good if there was a degree of specialisation although this can change and take more competitive forms...I can't say which way it would be better as such'. It is clear that this interviewee was uncertain about the

relative advantages of specialisation and whether specialisation of schools should be encouraged or not.

The contemplation of one teacher based at Hillside school perhaps summarises this more mixed, and politically middle-ground, way of thinking:

> '...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...'.

8.1.3. Individuality and communality

It is interesting to note that a strong common theme emerged that united many of the interviewees in their interpretations and ideas on equity and equality of opportunity. This interpretation combines both individuality and communality aspects – a view that both are needed in comprehensive schools while neither should take precedence over the other. Despite the rise of a more competitive individualism in compulsory education over the last decade and a half or so, many still believe that some of the older elements of a stronger equality of opportunity in the form of the 'common school' are needed alongside rising individualisation. How did interviewees differentiate the notions of individuality and communality? And, what role did they see these concepts to have in the current comprehensive school system?

Individuality was an aspect, which was emphasised by many interviewees including those in the Education Office and principals and teachers at schools. Individuality could, perhaps, be best characterised as student centred learning as it will be seen in the sections below, and is interesting in a number of ways.

First, the emphasis on student centred learning could be seen as a feature of the attempts to increasingly individualise comprehensive education – the focus is now on an individual rather than a larger group of students. This reflects the 'individualisation thesis' which shifts the focus from group attributes (e.g. social class and gender) into an individual, and thus a decline of the collective, whereby 'the individual himself or herself becomes the reproduction unit of the social in the lifeworld' (Beck 1992: 90). The idea of different needs of different kinds of learners can be seen to be behind this interpretation, and has been brought more strongly onto the agenda by educational policy trends and legislation in the 1990s and 2000s. Differentiation of schools by specialisation can be seen as one measure supporting increasing individualisation of the comprehensive school. Second, it is also interesting to note that most interviewees did not think that 'individuality' was something that traditionally had not been a part of the comprehensive school ethos. Instead, many thought that it is an aspect, which is important and something that should be further developed. This raises the question as to whether increasing 'individualisation' could lead to more prominent differentiation of schools and increasing competition as has happened in the capital, Helsinki, for example. This issue will be further developed and discussed in section 8.2.

Indeed, some interviewees thought that development of schools to cater for different needs of students was an important issue. The ex-principal of Hillside school strongly argued for this kind of development, but criticised the municipality for not allowing schools to develop further (see section 8.2). Interestingly, the same interviewee denied that differentiation of schools was related to competition to attract more students as such – it was merely serving the interests of parents and children in the city, who have different needs and requirements: 'opportunities for individualisation should be offered in schools so that they [children] and parents could tell what they need...what interests them'. Individuality was therefore seen as important by this interviewee, and ideally, should be developed so that every child would receive an individually

tailored curriculum.[45] This point was also taken up by the ex-Board member who thought that the classless teaching pedagogy was valuable and should be developed further because it allows flexibility since 'one's chronological age is not the same as one's developmental age' as this interviewee expressed it.

The ex-principal of Millpond school also argued that it is a reality that different groups of students have different needs. In this way, individuality was conceived by the ex-principal as a concept embodying the specialist needs of both weaker and more talented students. This was a logical consequence of the trend of integration and inclusion nationally and locally, which was one feature of the Basic Education Act 1998 making it necessary for municipalities to take into consideration children's differing needs (see Chapter 6). The integration of special needs students into mainstream classes, for example, necessitates a more individual approach to teaching and learning, as the ex-principal suggested. Similarly, more talented students should be taken into consideration by appropriately supporting them. The issue of integration and inclusion will be focused on in more depth later in the section.

The principal-in-post at Parkview school on the other hand argued that although the common school had succeeded in educating all-ability children to a high standard as learning outcomes have proved, this had especially benefited the academically less talented children. But, as the principal suggested, some form of special treatment through differentiation might be needed:

> 'we should provide more challenges to the talented children, and the about 20 per cent of children need extra support in one way or another...according to my understanding the easiest way to arrange this would be to create groups of different ability-levels where children would get teaching according to their own abilities. We would not need this in all

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[45] It has been discussed previously how Hillside school developed its 'classless' teaching pedagogy where each child had an individual curriculum plan.

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subjects, but mathematics is one such subject which often creates learning difficulties...'

The principal of Parkview school pointed out that in a way this arrangement would be similar to the system in operation at the beginning of the comprehensive school movement when there were different ability-level groups in some subjects. But crucially, according to the principal-in-post, what would be needed is a milder, more diluted, form of 'special treatment' in a way that does not create inequities in access to further studies (this was a problem with the old pre-1984 system which led to its eventual abandonment in 1984 as seen in Chapter 2).

This view is in accordance with the Conservative Party's education policy manifesto which argues for the introduction of flexible ability level groups in some subjects such as mathematics and Finnish language at comprehensive schools (Risikko Committee 2006). Interestingly, as discussed in the previous part, the principal of Parkview school expressed views on specialisation which were more in tune with those of the political Left than Right in that specialisation of schools is problematic because it can lead to differentiation and polarisation between schools. This suggests a more 'mix and match' approach in applying political ideas to educational policy and practice.

The issue of finance and ongoing financial difficulties in the municipality arose as a factor which was seen to limit the possibilities for individual teaching by some interviewees (see Chapter 6 for a discussion of economic developments in the case study municipality).

Both the current and the ex-Chair of the Local Education Board made an interesting point that related to financial issues limiting the possibility to develop and offer more individualistic teaching. The ex-Chair of the Board suggested that:

'all the time that we talk about different types of learners, we should consider their needs on a more individual basis...but

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now that class sizes are getting larger here, for example...then without doubt this limits the opportunities as to how individual teaching can be in practice'.

The current Chair of the Board recognised that while there should be opportunities for more individualistic teaching and learning this was in practice limited by poor finances in the municipality: 'the financial side dictates that...there aren't enough opportunities for that in practice'.

The ex-Board member, on the other hand, argued that in a way equality of opportunity had been negatively affected by the ongoing financial difficulties in the municipality:

> '...these savings will have an impact on the weakest students
> – we have to reduce the number of teaching assistants, reduce
> support teaching [hours] and teaching for special needs
> students...and then maybe at the other end the more talented
> students won't get the required attention'.

Other interviewees also raised the issue of funding in relation to the individual approach to teaching. One of the teachers at Hillside school argued that although the individual approach is important, possibilities for this have in fact reduced in practice: 'the contact between a student and a teacher – the amount of that contact is paramount – but at the same time possibilities for this type of contact keeps reducing all the time...'. And as one of the teachers based at Parkview school argued, although teaching should, in theory, be individual as the Framework Curriculum dictates, in practice this has not been realised due to financial constraints. The teacher went on say: 'one can say that this individual teaching is a question mark on the basis of small financial resources'.

Indeed, the problematic state of municipality finances and its effect on educational services in municipalities was raised by a group of MPs from different political parties in the Parliament in 2005 (Finnish Parliament 2005). The group presented a question to the Government requesting deliberation on

the issue of whether the Government was aware that many municipalities were struggling with ongoing financial difficulties and subsequently had to severely cut educational expenditure and services resulting in school closures, larger class sizes and endangering of support teaching and services for SEN children. It was also argued that 'more and more duties are placed on municipalities and schools, but without sufficient funding – it would be fair that with new duties come extra funding towards educational services' (ibid: 1). In addition, the main Teachers' Union (the OAJ) has been arguing for the need to reduce class sizes – by legislative backing if necessary – on the grounds that smaller class sizes are needed in order to ensure the well-being of students as well as to improve working conditions of teachers (OAJ 2006). The ensuing debate is ongoing at the time of writing in 2008, but has raised important issues relating to the provision of educational services at the local level which clearly have relevance to the municipality under examination.

The current principal of Millpond school also alluded to finances as limiting possibilities for more individualistic teaching but in addition raised some more philosophical views:

> 'it is good if [teaching] could be very individualistic but always in practice resources have to be taken into consideration...but anyway I don't see that it would be the time given by the teacher and differentiation of teaching that would be the most essential part of individualistic teaching – I do believe it is the attitude of the teacher and the adult towards the student and the child. And if we could achieve this: that the teacher, the teaching work and the situation in the class would encourage students to believe in themselves and in what they do – this would be the most essential thing and it would also carry forward the individual's learning'.

Some of the people interviewed thought that more talented students did not really need to be separated out in any way from the rest, for instance by providing different teaching materials and modifying educational aims. These

views tended to place a special emphasis on the comprehensive school ideology prior to the reforms in the 1990s – the ideas of communality and a stronger view of equality of opportunity based on regional and socio-economic considerations associated with the political centre/centre-left as discussed earlier in the chapter.

The area-governing body member argued that the common school has catered for more talented students in a sufficient way: 'here [the talented children] do get challenges and they lift the rest and take responsibility for the rest – when I am good at something it is not beneficial only for me, but for the whole group. That is fabulous!' Although the principal of Millpond school had broadly similar views to those of the area-governing body member in that he believed the talented can benefit from being in a mixed-ability group by supporting and helping others, for example, he also argued that it would not be such a problem to provide some different teaching materials specifically for this group of children. But crucially, though, as the principal suggested: 'a talented student can normally take advantage of [teaching in mixed-ability groups] and learn and take the best pieces out of it in so many ways'. Finally, one of the teachers at Parkview school supported the old comprehensive school ideology based on the principle of socio-economic equality of opportunity and argued that it had been 'the most marvellous invention'.

How, then, did interviewees characterise aspects of communality – the element that for many complemented the concept of individuality in constituting equality of opportunity in practice?

Communality was characterised as students learning to work together with other children and adults from various different backgrounds and cultures. This aspect was seen as important by many interviewees, and was proposed to be a complementary concept to individuality rather than a contradictory one. On a more general level, communality in its traditional conception can be seen to be more in tune with the values of the comprehensive school when it was set up in the 1960s and 70s (see Chapter 2) unlike individuality, which is a newer addition to the comprehensive school as discussed in Chapter 6. However, the

Finnish Government (Council of the State 2007: 1) has also recognised a need to strengthen communality in arguing in its manifesto that 'we need new communality. In building the Finnish welfare society the Government wants to clarify the relationship between individual responsibility, common responsibility and societal responsibility'.

Questions relating to interactions alongside social and ethical values were seen as the cornerstones of communality by the ex-principal of Millpond school. This interviewee suggested that communality was crucial, perhaps even more so than individuality: 'a school should be constructed from a viewpoint of building a strong culture of communality, when the question of individuality becomes less black and white'. The principal-in-post of Millpond school had views that largely echoed those of the ex-principal. The principal argued that individuality has to co-exist within the concept of communality: 'a student's individuality has to grow within the social context and within a group...I would say that when the focus is too much on individuality then it is easy to slip into things and values that are rather selfish'.

The concept of community was also brought up by the Director of Education in the context of individuality: 'supporting individuals as a part of a community – and communality is the basic element in that'. It was seen as paramount by the Director of Education that the focus on individuality should bring about the fulfilment of each person's capacities as fully as possible regardless of the level of talent of individuals – underachievement was seen as a dilemma and as something that could be prevented by focusing on individuals' differing needs. The ex-Board member had similar views to those of the Director and argued that individuality within communality presents a challenge to the Finnish comprehensive schools system:

> 'I think that what we have tried to achieve from the 1970s onwards as long as we have had the comprehensive school...where the aim has been individuality within communality...how people who have found their individuality can function together [as a community]'.

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There are more recent elements to the concept of communality, which pose new challenges. The growing numbers of children with immigrant backgrounds alongside the integration of special needs students within mainstream schools are issues that can be seen as challenges to education policy in municipalities, and to the Finnish education system at large. Language problems and cultural barriers are among the challenges immigrant students may have to face when entering schools alongside a more general integration issue. Integration and inclusion of special needs students, on the other hand, has been an important feature of the local education policy agenda in the case study municipality in recent years as discussed previously (see Chapter 6.2).

8.1.4. Integration and inclusion

In addition to bringing benefits to children with special educational needs (SEN), for example by bringing services closer to these children's homes as well as making services more readily available and more flexible (Education Office 2004 – see Chapter 6.2), it is clear that the policy of integration and inclusion of special needs children has also created several difficulties. According to the ex-Chair of the Local Education Board, the trend of inclusion and integration was beneficial for children with SEN, but that there also are inherent problems: 'we have more and more children with SEN – children with learning difficulties or behavioural difficulties – and when these children are placed in a large group...with only one teacher, then this makes teachers' work very challenging'. The ex-Chair went on to suggest that the municipality had taken many distinctive steps towards achieving inclusion, which gathered pace during the 1990s: 'we have closed down one school for children with SEN and we have set up these area-small-groups...and this has been such a long process which teachers do not tend to like'. The Head of Education for Development at the Education Office thought that the integration of SEN children was highly positive trend: 'we have brought the resources of teaching for SEN to the normal schools whereby these children have had the opportunity to attend the local school more and more'.

Many interviewees pointed out that a likely reason for teachers not having been that enthusiastic about the policy of integration and inclusion was because the workload of teachers had increased as a result since the policy had not brought with it the required extra resources, as seen below. This issue, as discussed above, was also brought up a group of MPs as a parliamentary question to the Government in 2005. And, as a survey of over 500 Finnish teachers in 2006 found out, 56 per cent of those who took part thought that their time was not enough for students – and crucially that only in a small number of cases (13 per cent) had class sizes been reduced with the inclusion of SEN students (OAJ 2008).

The area-governing body member suggested that more work for teachers had meant that: '[the teachers] notice that they are unable to give children the support they would get in some specialist teaching'. This, then, may raise doubts about the real benefits to special needs students if they do not get the support they would need in order to be able to get the full benefit of integration and inclusion. One of the teachers at Parkview argued that in order to have a successful and beneficial integration policy, class sizes have to be small. If class sizes were not small, as the situation in the municipality was according to this interviewee, then this raises the question of whether 'we are doing integration for some other reasons', alluding to the integration policy as a way to save money. Indeed, as discussed earlier, due to ongoing financial difficulties in the municipality an increase in class sizes has taken place. It is important to remember, however, that integration and inclusion policies have been endorsed as a national policy priority and have been shown to be beneficial for SEN children (see Chapter 6). In this sense, the issue of whether integration and inclusion policy represents a cheaper way to teach SEN children can perhaps be argued to become less black and white.

The Director of Finance of educational services in the municipality made some interesting points relating to the integration and inclusion policy from the financial side. The Director of Finance suggested that a general view at the

Education Office was that the integration model was a cheaper way to organise teaching for children with SEN since 'we do not have those separate school buildings and specialist schools with expenses linked to those'. Importantly, though, as the Director pointed out, the integration model had meant that more children who need some form of assistance were identified and received the help they need – many of the services were now closer to children at their own schools which had improved access. The same interviewee also argued that financial resources directed to services for SEN children had not been cut as much as basic education services in general under financial difficulties in the municipality: 'generally speaking we have not cut funding from services for SEN'. This, then, can be seen as a benefit for SEN children and subsequently enhancing equality of opportunity for these children.

Both of the teachers at City school thought that one challenge with integration was partly related to a lack of funding – and these considerations are well supported by trends in municipality finances as discussed in Chapter 6. According to one of these teachers, 'teachers should be given resources or training and help which means adequately trained assistants'. This concern was also expressed by the other teacher:

> 'This integration – how the integration of special needs students has been carried out without extra resources. The situation in a school like ours where we have many of these kinds of students begins to be quite chaotic – groups of over 30 where there can be 6-7 special needs students'.

Furthermore, as the same interviewee teacher pointed out: 'I am not that keen on the policy of integration, but it is absolutely necessary to have considerably smaller classes – and to get other extra resources in the class if this is to continue'. The principal of Millpond school also argued that integration of special needs students was problematic if it was not co-ordinated and planned in a sufficient way. As the principal suggested: 'a special needs student cannot be just be placed within a normal class and then tell a teacher 'deal with it', with an assistant or not, because it will create opposition and anxiety. This needs to be

properly planned'. One teacher from Parkview school pointed out that the way integration had been carried out in the municipality was problematic, also, because teachers at mainstream schools had not been properly trained. The teacher argued that 'in principle I see the policy of integration in positive terms if there were more resources', partly because the current practice had meant that often SEN children had just been placed at mainstream classes when a specialist school had been closed.

Finally, the ex-Chair of the Board made an interesting observation, which perhaps unites the views of many interviewees above:

> 'Maybe the comprehensive school ethos has been enhanced
> along the way [through integration]. But when resources have
> not followed these lines of political decisions then, for
> example, in integration we are unable to use all the support
> functions that there should be in place'.

This view, too, makes the link between policy trends and their financial implications clear. The policy of integration and inclusion may be beneficial for strengthening the aim of equality of opportunity, however, in practice this may be more difficult to achieve since available resources for properly addressing the policy are lacking – a realisation also addressed in a parliamentary question to the Government in 2005 as discussed in the previous part. The above views clearly highlight both economic rationales alongside equality of opportunity considerations as underlying the implementation of policies designed for SEN children.

In addition to the integration and inclusion of SEN children within mainstream schools, the integration and inclusion of children from immigrant backgrounds has become an issue of importance with the rising numbers of immigrants in Finland alongside new legislation. As discussed previously, all children should now be treated individually by taking into consideration each individual child's needs and requirements (see Chapter 6). Multiculturalism represents an area which has gained in importance in the 1990s both at national and local levels.

Some interviewees raised this issue when discussing individuality and communality aspects with regard to equality of opportunity, but a majority of interviewees did not bring up the issue of multicultural society and schools.

The ex-principal of Millpond school suggested that the issue of a multicultural school and a school with different learners presents a great challenge for the city's education policy and schools. One of the main issues here, according to the ex-principal, is whether the aim of the 'inclusive school' can be truly achieved: 'this diversification of the student population and diversification of needs are absolutely...one of the greatest challenges for pedagogy and teaching and education'.

Similarly, the area-governing body member (who was originally from abroad but has lived in Finland for several decades) pointed out how changes in society are making the country on the whole less homogeneous than it has been in the past, and that this presents challenges for schools. Now schools have to deal with issues relating to differences in ethnicity, religion and language alongside different kinds of learners, which all mean that schools have to face different kinds of children and families than 20 years ago or so, as the interviewee suggested. The same interviewee also argued that some teachers may have problems with adjusting to the inclusion of immigrants (and special needs students) because it creates more work and thus reduces teachers' chances to achieve their desired teaching aims and objectives: '...children who come from elsewhere have to be dragged along. I have noticed that there is a long way to go yet [to improve these attitudes]'.

The ex-Chair of the Board suggested that students with immigrant backgrounds 'may have problems that are in a league of their own since the period that children are in Finnish language teaching before they start school is so short... and all the traumas embodied in these issues'. The person in charge of planning services for immigrant children in the municipality (based at the Education Office) shared this view with the ex-Chair. This interviewee suggested that the

period of one year was not sufficiently long for many children to learn Finnish language and adjust to the new culture: '...a child may have been born in a refugee camp and has not learned any language there and then the first year will go...towards learning how to live in a normal society' (see Chapter 6 for details on municipality policy). The importance of the preparatory teaching was seen as central by the same interviewee in that 'it would be much more expensive if in the beginning the learning of a [new] language was not sufficiently supported and a child would feel that he/she is not understood'. Therefore, the state should provide more financial resources to enable municipalities to extend the length of the preparatory teaching, as the interviewee suggested.

One teacher from Hillside school, on the other hand, reflected on the changes that had taken place since the 1990s and pointed out that:

> 'immigration policy has changed and it is visible in schools also – maybe in the beginning, teaching for immigrant children was paid more attention and it was made into a much bigger issue than it is now. In the beginning we even organised such events as 'international festivities' and so on'.

Overall, it has been seen that the question of individuality and communality in the context of the Finnish comprehensive school raises multiple issues in relation to values. It does appear that most interviewees had incorporated ideas of individuality, which can be seen to represent the rise of market-oriented ideas, within the idea of communality. Communality was seen by some of the interviewees as the embodiment of students and adults from different backgrounds studying and learning together as a group. Thus, there are linkages to the underlying values of the comprehensive school system set up in 1968 which was based on the premise that children from all social and economic backgrounds should benefit from uniform and inclusive basic education (e.g. Lampinen et al. 1982, Ahonen 2002 and Aho et al. 2006 – see Chapter 2). Although communality as a concept may be more closely related to the older tradition of equality of opportunity through the common school, this concept too has gone through modifications in the light of integration and inclusion.

8.2. Has equality of opportunity suffered?

What have been the effects of specialisation, and schools 'taking profiles', on equality of opportunity? Has competition increased between schools and with what impacts? What do past and present practices and policies indicate about the development of a school 'market' in the municipality – increased diversity between schools through specialisation alongside parental 'choice'? These are among the questions, which aim to elucidate the impact of the recent education policy reforms on equity and equality of opportunity in the municipality. The first part of the section will focus on analysing emerging inequities between schools in the 1990s, while attention in the latter part will be placed on the development of parental choice-type policies in the city, and the decision to close a number of schools in the municipality.

8.2.1. Are there inequities in the 'school market'?

The 1990s saw the introduction of school-based curricula, or 'schools taking profiles' to become more individual and separate themselves in one way or another from other schools – together with parental choice the beginning of a type of school market was created. What effects, if any, has this change had on schools and pupils in terms of equity and equality of opportunity? Evidence from the case study municipality indicates that there were signs of some inequities emerging. In the mid- to late 1990s school-based curricula began to take forms that were not benefiting all children equally. Why did this happen?

Interestingly, some schools in the city did not choose to specialise to the same extent as others. Differences therefore appeared in the school-based curricula – while some schools developed very thorough and detailed curricula, and had an interest in introducing various specialisms in an attempt to gain a strong identity, others did not. The reasons for this appear to be varied, but as some interviewees suggested, this could be down to the fact that individual teachers and schools on the whole did not have the required interest or know-how to go

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ahead. It has to be remembered that it was up to schools themselves whether they wanted to introduce strong specialisms or not – the curriculum was to be school-based but there were no requirements for schools to set up distinct specialisms. Various reasons and rationales for setting up specialist classes have been discussed previously and include, broadly speaking, different variations of internal and/or external motivations (see Chapter 7).

The ex-principal of Millpond school argued that:

> 'Clearly schools and municipalities could not control the development of schools and education policy appropriately and well on the whole. One example of this is that the standard of the school-based curricula was very varied – there were some really weak curricula of only a couple of pages long and there were some very carefully and well-done school-based curricula...and one can honestly say that those curricula were of greatly differing quality and content in Finland, and in different schools and municipalities. And this was clearly a negative phenomenon'.

This issue was also mentioned by the ex-Chair of the Board who argued that:

> 'when schools were responsible for compiling their own curricula, [the curricula] became extremely colourful – everyone did as they pleased pretty much, but now we are returning back to a system whereby the Education Office gives guidelines...we cannot afford all the courses that were once available for example at secondary schools'.[46]

A further problem that came about in the 1990s in the municipality was related to the freedom of schools to decide on the numbers of weekly teaching hours (which was based on the 1994 legislation). This development was also

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[46] The current Framework Curriculum from 2004 is designed to provide more detailed description of what must be included within each curriculum – in this way previous freedoms of the 1994 Framework Curriculum have been limited (see Chapter 2.4 and 6.1).

recognised by the Local Education Board which noted that because primary schools in the municipality had adopted different practices in response to the 1994 legislation children were, in effect, treated unequally (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1998). This, as the Board argued, raised questions about educational equality of opportunity as well as basic rights of children (ibid.). Although these developments were seen as problematic, the Board did not discuss how, if at all, this dilemma should be rectified.

The ex-principal of Millpond school argued that this was indeed a dangerous development because it led to inequities in terms of how much teaching students in the city got:

> 'Children living in different parts of the same city received a noticeably different amount of teaching within the same academic year, which was due to the fact that the freedom to decide the maximum hours in the allocation of lesson hours was left to schools themselves'.

It therefore appears that inequities emerged between schools within the municipality, which affected children's opportunities for education of equal amount and equal standards. However, whether schools actually started to diverge in terms of overall quality of teaching, curricula and other educational opportunities is unclear. One teacher from Hillside school made a point that reflects this reality:

> 'The objective truth as to whether we have good or bad schools – that is difficult to say. That is problematic. It is clear that if a school is located in an area where there are many social problems, high unemployment rate, then without doubt it would have an impact on children. In a way we have not got problem schools, but we have a problem society'.

The Director of Finance of educational services based at the Education Office alluded to this realisation and suggested that: 'of course our schools are in different positions – some have immigrants and the student population is

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different, and that probably affects the school and how it functions'. One of the teachers at Millpond school made a similar point in arguing that:

> 'There are areas where there are, could one say, a socially weaker student population and this is a fact. It does not make the school itself bad, but the school can get a certain stamp and a reputation if the student population is different – and this can be a consequence of the location of rented accommodation or immigrant populations, for example. There are social background factors which have an impact on the student population'.

This issue was also taken up by one teacher based at City school who pointed out that this is not really a topic that should be talked about aloud, but that certain distinctive features of schools and even their specific problems can be related to areas in which schools are based: 'if there is a lot of unemployment and many single parent families, rented accommodation, and they happen to be in the same area then these will reflect on schools in that area. And this [phenomenon] is also noticeable within our city'.

Similarly, the person in charge of planning services for immigrant children in the municipality (based at the Education Office) agreed that areas where immigrant populations were concentrated did have a direct impact on the schools in those areas: 'it does have an effect on the culture of schools, absolutely inevitably'. The same interviewee went on to suggest that: '…immigrant children…go to schools in areas where they live. But, when the housing policy in this city is such that rented accommodation is concentrated in certain areas, then those children are also concentrated within certain areas'.[47] Furthermore, this should be taken into account when planning housing services in order to prevent the 'formation of a group of 'have-nots' who the people with

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[47] It has to be noted that previously many immigrant children had to travel to a school which offered specialist serviced for them – the current emphasis on integration and inclusion has meant that services are now often available at immigrant children's local areas and/or schools (see Chapter 6.2).

immigrant backgrounds inevitably are at least in the early stages, since they are unable to get employment straight away and learn the language...families should be able to live where they want to live'.

The ex-Chair of the Board, on the other hand, argued that:

> 'This city is an extremely divided one – we have very well-off families and then very badly-off families...and the troubles of the worse-off families are clearly visible in schools as are, in contrast, those children who get everything, have hobbies, even get too much'.

How, then, did municipality decision-makers respond to emerging evidence of inequities between children in the city. And what has happened to parental choice and schools competing for the custom of local parents and children as a result? These issues are analysed next.

8.2.2. Parental choice and competition between schools

The policy of parental 'choice' or parents making preferences as to which school they would like their children to attend at first and seventh grades (aged seven and thirteen) was officially introduced in the case study municipality in 1996 (Minutes of the Local Education Board 1996). Restrictions to this policy were made in 2001 when the area-model was introduced – parental choice was limited, although it was still possible for parents to choose another than the allocated school for their children (see Chapter 6.2).[48] The reasons for this decision are interesting, as are the consequences on the schools in the city. But why did decision-makers in the city intervene with the policy of parental choice by introducing the area-model? And what did interviewees think about the limitation of parental choice – and about competition between schools at large?

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[48] Legislation (the 1998 Education Act) necessitates municipalities to allocate each child to their nearest school as a priority – only if there are places left after this allocation, can children from further away get a place through parental choice.

When interviewed, the Director of Education pointed out some reasons why there was perceived to be a need to increase oversight from the officials and political actors in education services in the municipality. It appears that the primary reason was an economic one – and this is not surprising considering the long-term financial difficulties in the municipality (see Chapter 6.4). The interviewee suggested that free school choice was uneconomical on the grounds that while popular schools were full of students and had more applicants than places available, the less popular schools had to operate with smaller numbers of students, and crucially, could not be closed on the grounds of being less in demand. In Finland, education reforms have not progressed to the level where unpopularity of schools could be used as a criterion for school closures. Obviously, though, a decision has been made to close down some schools in the area – on economic and demographic grounds, as discussed later in the chapter. This practice, then, is clearly not in line with market-oriented policies, since under the more competitive education markets, like those in operation in England discussed in Chapter Three, poorly performing and less sought-after schools can, in theory, be closed down.

Another factor, which according to the Director, made competition between schools in the municipality 'absurd' was the relatively small number of schools in the city: 'this city's volume is not enough for such a special service'. The interviewee went on to emphasise that all schools in the area were equal by arguing that:

> 'All schools in this city are equal and in an equal position –
> but of course there always is some gossip that one school is
> worse than the other and in another year it is another school
> and so on – this starts to fly from children's mouths. But
> schools themselves do not compete...with one another and
> there are no reasons for this either'.

The principal-in-post of Millpond school when interviewed also highlighted the fact that parental choice had been restricted because of the city's financial difficulties:

'In practice there is no free parental choice in this city...there were four students from elsewhere applying for this school for next year and we have such full classes, and are not allowed to set up another teaching group, so I had to tell these four that the decision is a negative one – that they will have to go to a school within their own areas or elsewhere'.

Financial difficulties in the municipality was also mentioned by the principal of City school as a factor, which has prompted decision-makers to restrict parental choice: '...there are not really possibilities for [parental] choice – strict requirements have been made on student numbers, and transport costs are no longer available'. Indeed, according to the Minutes of the Local Education Board (2006) the Board decides on a yearly basis, if necessary, the size of comprehensive schools, the number of starting places at schools, and the numbers and sizes of classes. Also, as pointed out earlier, the municipality does not provide financial compensation for travel if parents choose other than the local school (see Chapter 6.2).

How, then, did interviewees at schools interpret the limitation of free school choice and competition between schools for students, and the changes that had taken place in this policy area over the years? Did they see the restriction of the education market in the municipality as broadly positive, and thus being anti-choice, or negative being pro-choice?

The principal of Hillside argued that other schools had suffered as a result of Hillside being the most popular secondary school in the municipality in the past:

'The result of free school choice was that we always had a full house and others suffered when their houses were not full as a consequence. And now following administrative decisions students have been directed elsewhere from our school so that it would be more equal'.

The area-governing-body member also recognised that Hillside school had been the most affected school in the municipality following the introduction of the area-model, and commented, prior to the school closures decision (in the spring of 2005):

> 'the decision that has been made in this city that all secondary schools are kept at around a similar size has had far-reaching consequences particularly on Hillside school since in order to follow the classless teaching pedagogy there should be a certain number of students. And now...the system does not really work. And all of this is a consequence of the fact that in this city they have not wanted to close down any secondary school – everything keeps functioning in a reduced form'.

The same point was taken up by the Head of Education for Development at the Education Office, but arguably, from a different stance echoing the Director's views discussed above. The reasons behind the decision to start directing students to certain schools, and the creation of the area-model, was a measure attempting to end existing inequities that had come about as a result of parental choice as the interviewee argued: 'if competition is free then students tend to concentrate in certain schools. Then the system starts to become unequal, and that is why we created the area-model'. The same interviewee went on to describe how the new system was more equitable than the old one:

> 'in this way a secondary school, for example, is filled according to a certain number of students and not in a way that suddenly one secondary school somewhere can just grow, because it is in demand for some reason. And the next stage would be that an entrance test would be introduced'.

Given the introduction of the area-model, it perhaps seems surprising that some of the interviewees thought there to be competitive tendencies between schools in the municipality. It is likely that these interviewees were referring to

competition *in theory* rather than in practice, as discussed below, since it is evident that schools in the area cannot 'compete' for resources as such.

According to the ex-principal of Millpond school: 'the threat of reduction in the number of students is a factor, which has forced schools to…compete and try to portray a favourable picture of themselves in order to attract students'. In addition, this demographic trend has an impact on: '…the question of maintenance of teaching vacancies, resources at schools, reduction of school size…even school closures'. The area-governing body member agreed with the ex-principal's view that competition had increased because: 'there are fewer pupils…here in the centre there are three primary schools, and in a way they all have a common customer circle'.

The demographic trend of reducing number of school-aged children is one reason, which may have resulted for feelings of heightened competitive pressures between schools since the 1990s. It has been shown that the number of primary-aged children (aged 7-13) declined between 1995 and 2007, with a projection of a similar trend continuing until 2010 (municipality statistics 2007 – see Figure 6.4).

The principal of Parkview school made a similar point to that expressed by the area-governing body member in that competition had increased because there are many schools in a relative small area: 'we are in quite hard competitive situation because there are many schools in the same area – they can choose whichever of these schools since school journey…does not affect that choice'.

The principal of City school and the ex-principal of Millpond school highlighted that competition had increased between secondary schools, but not in effect between primary schools. According to the principal City school, Hillside school through its 'classless teaching' had created increased competition in the city: 'behind the curtains there has been clear competition between these [7-9, i.e. secondary] schools'. The ex-principal of Millpond argued that:

'overall parents of children in grade 1-6 schools place a high value on the fact that a school is close-by and it is easy to get to. But at 7-9 level, a journey does not matter so much if a school otherwise has a good reputation, it has additional courses and other factors, which motivate [children and parents]'.

Indeed, the view that parents of children in primary schools value closeness and easy travel to schools was backed up by the principal-in-post of Millpond school. The principal suggested that survey results of parents' opinions carried out at Millpond school had revealed this to be the case: 'the answer is that [parents] want a school that feels safe and familiar and with which [parents] can easily communicate with...and some specialisms like English-weighted teaching are of secondary consideration – they are just additions'.

A view that competition between schools in the municipality had not increased was expressed by some interviewees, which included a teacher based at City school, the ex-principal of Hillside school, the principal-in-post of Millpond school and the Chair of the Local Education Board, as elaborated on below.

First, the teacher from City school remarked that 'luckily we are not yet in such a situation in this city where we would contend that some school actually was better than another...of course it sometimes gives a warm feeling that our school did this or that, but when one honestly begins to think about this, one cannot say that a particular school would actually be better than some other school'. In this way, competition between schools had not increased.

The ex-principal of Hillside pessimistically agreed with the teacher's view above and pointed out that competition had not increased: '...not here in this city anyway – everyone does things in the same way, they walk down the same path and are glad of it'. The Chair of the Local Education Board also argued that there is no real competition between comprehensive schools in the city

'although [schools] have aimed to take profiles through...school-based curricula'.

One teacher from City school argued that no differentiation and divergence between schools in the municipality had taken place in recent times, and that if there had been some signs of polarisation in the past these had reduced. A possible explanation for this, according to the same teacher, was that parents had not utilised free school choice much in the municipality except regarding Hillside school: '...perhaps Hillside school has been one [such school that parents had 'chosen'] but that now there has been a clear policy that they don't take students except from only here [the nearby area] and it has reduced this [polarisation] in a way'.

The ex-Board member also argued that all schools in the area were more or less equal:

> 'I don't think there is great polarisation so that schools could be listed on the basis of some variable along the lines of one school being completely poor and another one being great – we have taken care of all schools. And if we think about how our Education Office and Board have functioned, then we have tried to take care of all schools so that there are no special favourites'.

As far as the policy of parental 'choice' was concerned the principal-in-post of Millpond school argued that currently there was no such thing in practice in the city, and subsequently 'there can't be competition [between schools]'. This interviewee also argued that: 'as far as secondary schools are concerned, the situation is that some schools have a worse reputation than others and on the basis of that there is some selection, but is this actual competition or not?'.

Many interviewees expressed negative views about competition in its more extreme, neo-liberal way and had adopted a type of anti-choice stance. In this

way they could be seen to be advocating the area-model adopted in the municipality – this issue is discussed next.

The ex-Chair of the Board strongly argued against competition between schools. This is an interesting view when taking into consideration that the ex-Chair represents the Conservative Party, which as discussed previously in the chapter, generally favours competitive elements through specialisation and parental choice within the comprehensive school system. The ex-Chair claimed that:

> 'We do not have to create an artificial situation whereby schools would have to compete for students – I think that is somehow repulsive. And now that we have this principle whereby children will go to a school closest to their homes, then schools will have to be equally good so that children are not disadvantaged on the basis of residence...we have to guarantee all schools good resources, equal resources to function'.

The question of whether competition should primarily be with oneself – for example by motivating individuals to develop in their professionalism – was raised by some interviewees. The principal of City school was among the interviewees who adopted a more philosophical view to the issue of competition by suggesting that: 'if [competition] becomes negative and brings with it more negative forms, then the actual matter of education and learning can become distorted...one cannot live like an elephant in a china shop and just rush around for one's own benefit only'. The principal went on to suggest that: 'competition should primarily be competing within oneself so that one aims for a better result even though there is no-one to threaten that position'.

Competition that would help and inspire schools to develop their policies was also interpreted in positive terms by the ex-principal of Millpond school, who pointed out that: 'we do need evaluation of the processes of schools as well as of learning outcomes, but not raw competition'. The ex-principal went on to

make a thoughtful comment about pressures arising from within teachers as being the most valuable pressures for improvement:

> 'their own internal will and enthusiasm to develop...is in my view important – even money is not a sufficient motive in a long run, but if the will to develop derives from teachers themselves then that is, I think, the only sure, good and healthy basis for developing schools and constructing this type of reform work'.

According to the Head of Education for Development at the Education Office, competition between schools was not needed either: 'the starting point has to be that each comprehensive school gives high standard basic education – that is a value in itself'. These views were also supported by the ex-board member who pointed out that decision-making in the Board was mainly focusing on 'trying to find the best for the students', and by the Director of Education who again highlighted the equality of all schools in the area from the viewpoint of funding: '[schools] cannot compete for resources since the Board decides on resources on the basis of the equality principle'. As seen earlier, the introduction of the 'flexible index' meant that schools in the municipality did not receive extra funding if they exceeded the optimum school size (see Chapter 6.2). This policy is in total contrast to fully-fledged market-oriented education policies where funding is linked to student numbers and schools are allowed to expand in size, therefore acting as a financial incentive.

The issue of school funding is arguably an important factor which affects equity and equality issues of schools in the municipality. According to the Director of Finance of educational services, the funding system in use in the municipality whereby the Education Office has an active role in budgeting has guaranteed equality and equity. The interviewee pointed out that the school-based budgeting model does not leave much freedom to the school level in how to use resources:

> 'That leeway...which principals have...is in practice very limited when we take these contracts that have been drawn

for them, property management and rents, [school] meals and so on. We have calculated that out of the total expenditure there is about 2 per cent leeway – what in practice is left for teaching materials and equipment purchases'.

The same interviewee went on to suggest how the current funding system was under review but that there were many likely problems with increasing the powers of principals in budgeting decisions, including a possible impact on uniformity of standards between schools:

'We have been thinking about whether we should give the euros directly to schools and schools would then start to play with [euros]. But that is problematic on the grounds of whether that would have an impact on quality in some way. Does that mean that [schools] would start to play, for example, with the length of employment contracts and whether to have qualified or unqualified [staff]? This system has in our opinion guaranteed, at least, good quality and even quality – we give resources in a way that a principal cannot and must not have an impact on what kind of staff he/she employs...'.

8.2.3. School closures

The decision to close down four schools in the municipality, including City and Hillside case study schools, was reached by the Local Education Board and the City Council in the spring of 2005 (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2005) and took effect in the autumn of 2007. The discussion in this part partly builds on the issues discussed in Chapter 6 – it will be seen that while the school closures occurred in response to ongoing economic problems and demographic changes, it also reduced school diversity in the area. The official views and justifications for the making of this far-reaching decision are examined alongside the views of teachers and principals at the case study schools.

In 2004, the Local Education Board was required by the City Council to assess the local school network and make recommendations (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2004). Furthermore, the City Council had required 10 per cent efficiency increase in the use of available schools (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2005). These requirements were based on statistical findings, which showed that between 1995 and 2004 there was a continuous downwards trend in the number of primary-aged children (aged 7-13) with a projection of a similar trend continuing until 2010 (see Figure 6.4).

The Board came up with three separate options each of which accrued different amount of savings in resources and in space – out of these three options the Board recommended the option which had the potential of making the largest financial savings as well as the largest efficiency increase in the use of space (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2004). The Board's recommended option of closing down four schools fulfilled the City Council's 10 per cent efficiency requirement (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2005).

At the time of the school closures decision the Board commented that from the savings made resources will be transferred to teaching when the financial benefits accrued from the school network decision are realised (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2005). However, as seen in Chapter Six, the Board was required to make large budget cuts in 2006. In its 2006 budget preparations the Board argued that 'the natural reduction of student numbers and the savings made from the school properties which are to be closed down will lead to a reduction of about 1.5 million euros by 2008 in education expenditure…this, according to the Board, should be sufficient' (Minutes of the Local Education Board 2005:5).

The basis for deciding which schools would be closed was chiefly based on making the most financial savings – other considerations such as popularity of schools or their defining features did not have a role to play as shown below. This is interesting since both City school and Hillside school had many specialist features, as discussed in the previous chapters. Moreover, Hillside

school had been the most different, and most popular, secondary school in the municipality. In this sense the closure of Hillside school meant that diversity among local schools declined – the classless teaching pedagogy, which was a unique feature of Hillside school, was not transferred to another school. Subsequently, it could be argued that equality of opportunity increased since competitive tendencies between secondary schools evened out as a result.

According to the Director of Education, 'there were no other options for making such a large saving in square-metres as in euros'. And, as the Chair of the Local Education Board pointed out, the location of the schools which were to be closed were crucial (both City and Hillside schools were located close to the city centre – in more expensive areas): 'we should have had time to consider more these pedagogic things, but unfortunately we couldn't – we did not have enough time'.

It is evident, though, that the issue of possible school closures had been on the agenda for a long time. As discussed earlier (see section 6.4), as early as 1992 the possibility of school closures was discussed at the Local Education Board – in this sense the issue of 'time' perhaps becomes less relevant. Several interviewees also referred to the fact that the school closures debate was long-standing, and, in some cases that the actual decision should have been taken earlier.

The music teacher at Hillside school argued, in the light of the recent developments, that one of the most important development priorities in the municipality would be that 'some sense should be maintained' and went on to argue that:

> 'last spring we were obscenely treated – these schools were being closed down and we were being told that next year the money being saved [from the closures] will be already

directed to teaching...last week it was announced that [this would happen] earliest in 2008 if even then'.[49]

The other interviewee teacher at Hillside school pointed out that the decision to close down Hillside school had affected his motivation and work he had done at the school over the years: 'I feel that the work I have done for over ten years [at this school] is not being valued one bit by political decision-makers'. The same teacher went on to say how saddened he felt about the decision:

> 'This is sad because we have been developing this [classless teaching pedagogy] since the late 1980s and we have achieved tremendously good results...I would prefer to stay developing this rather than go back to a school with so-called normal way to teach...'.

The ex-principal of Hillside school argued that the school closure decision was completely wrong since:

> 'there were three propositions and the one which would have accrued the least financial savings would have been enough as a saving...but these [decision-makers] took the one which produced the most financial savings, and this felt strange'.

The principal-in-post of Millpond school suggested that the issue of school closures had been on the agenda for many years since the municipality had been in financial difficulties for the past 15 years, and 'if we have too much extra school space and properties and when student numbers have declined, then the first thing to do is to get rid of the extra space'. The interviewee went on to argue that:

> 'This is the third school network decision that has been made in the last seven years. In every decision there have been

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[49] The two teachers and ex-principal were interviewed soon after the decision had been made public knowledge. The principal-in-post of Hillside school alongside the teachers and the principal at City school, which was also closed down, were interviewed before the decision was made.

propositions to close down that school and that school, and there has been a constant battle over the fact that political decision-makers have not dared to stand behind the line of school closures...we can't have too much available school space and pay for its upkeep'.

The Chair of the Local Education Board suggested that:

'the experts [teachers and principals] agreed that this was the last opportunity to do anything sensible about this because in 10 years 1000 school-aged children have disappeared and we have just continued with the same physical structure...and these properties were extremely expensive since there were too many of them...this [decision] should actually have been made over the 10 years whereby the decisions would not have been as extreme'.

The principal of City school who was interviewed in 2004 before the school-network decision had been reached alluded to the necessity of school closures in the light of the demographic trend and the fact that:

'we have too much school space, square metres – should we pay for this space or for the actual education and teaching work...are decision-makers unable to make decisions on the school-network so that they close some schools and put the money from this into the running of other schools? We think that this city could spend more money on the actual education – now it goes towards the upkeep of walls'.

Similarly, the principal of Hillside remarked that: 'we do have many schools compared with the number of students...so the money of educational services goes towards rents and not teaching. The same interviewee went on to point out how this represented a big challenge:

'It is difficult when some schools will suffer...but in the centre of town here, for example, one of these 1-6 [primary

schools] could be closed and this would free up a valuable central-site. But this is not easy – there are many relations between people in the city and all of these kinds of this have an impact, politics has an impact and, of course, the parents at school which are under a threat of closure are very assertive and uncompromising'.

Finally, the Director of Education highlighted some of the difficulties that the school network debate has entailed and how, finally, in 2005 the difficult school closure decision could be made:

> '...in 2001 I first proposed the closure of a school and now in 2005 we have reached a decision so this is a long path. And politicians with their own mandate when they listen to individual citizens are of course in the line of fire. But, now they have risen above that to make these decisions when previously they have believed parents and not officials'.

As it becomes clear from the above, although a general feeling prevailed among several interviewees that the decision in 2005 to close down a number of schools was an inevitable result of financial constrains and demographic changes in the municipality, the decision was far from easy to execute. This is perhaps one factor explaining why a decision was not reached earlier despite financial difficulties in the municipality being present, and the issue of a more compact school network being talked about for over a decade.

All in all, to conclude the section, it appears that the introduction of the area-model has brought about more equality of opportunity for students and schools in the municipality since it has evened out competitive tendencies between schools and students. However, whether the model was introduced partly as way to save money cannot be ruled out. Financial difficulties also prompted decision-makers to close down some schools in the area, and in effect this can be seen as a continuation of previous cost-cutting measures, like the introduction of the area-model. As the Director of Finance pointed out:

'...from the management side some kind of area-model is good in order to concentrate things so that each school does not have to do everything by itself...it is also a must because we still have to make financial savings and try to direct all possible resources to teaching and basic functions...we are definitely not going to demolish this area-model under any circumstances'.

8.3. Discussion

In this final section focus is directed towards considering the following questions. What elements of an educational marketplace together with market-oriented reforms have emerged in the case study municipality since the 1990s? And, what impact has this had on equality of opportunity and equity?

Empirical evidence from the case study municipality suggests that a majority of the people interviewed still place a high value on the 'common school' with its ideological underpinnings characterized by a strong interpretation of equality of opportunity. This suggests that although the common school has been partly individualised during the 1990s, the root values of a uniform and inclusive comprehensive school remain important considerations for these interviewees. None of the people interviewed advocated a great leap towards the marketisation of schools and basic education in terms of increasing diversity, parental choice and schools competing for the custom of parents and children. Although some interviewees had broadly neutral views about specialisation of schools or were mildly in favour, a majority of the people interviewed were sceptical or expressed negative views about the phenomenon of specialisation. Only one interviewee was strongly behind specialisation by advocating that increasing diversity of schools would be beneficial for students and parents. This appears to be point to an interesting mixture of old and new ideas and values of equality of opportunity.

It is evident that competition between schools for students in its more extreme form in the Finnish context like in the capital Helsinki, has not taken place in the case study municipality. However, as some of the responses have highlighted, competition can take various different forms. As some interviewees suggested, competition has increased but for reasons not necessarily related to market reforms. In theory, some interviewees alluded to the fact that since legislation allows parental choice this can be interpreted as an element of competition by schools which, in effect, have to try to portray a favourable image of themselves in order to attract parents and children. In practice, however, the situation is different since most children go to the local school to which they have been allocated, accentuated by the introduction of the area-model discussed below. In this sense there can be very little, if any, competition between schools for the custom of children and their parents in the municipality.

A threat of closure of unpopular schools has often been seen as a feature of market-oriented reforms in education. What has happened in the case study municipality is therefore very interesting – although a number of schools have now been closed down as discussed, the unpopularity of these schools cannot be argued to be a deciding factor. On the contrary, Hillside school with a strong specialist ethos, which has been the most popular secondary school in the area was not allowed to expand, and it has now been closed down. This is in total contrast to the principles of market-oriented policies.

In a similar vein, schools that have not been in great demand for one reason or another have benefited following a string of decisions by the Local Education Board and the Education Office reintroducing the area-model, a type of school district model that existed in the past before being abolished in the early 1990s. Now students are directed to schools within their areas, and normally to the closest school to their homes. Although parental choice is possible in theory, in practice parents have to self-finance travel to school other than the allocated one reducing incentives for parents to exercise choice.

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What are the consequences of these decisions on equity and equality of opportunity? At first sight it appears that equity and equality of opportunity would have been enhanced as a result of limitation of parental choice through the area-model and restrictions of schools to expand by directing a certain number of students to certain schools. It was seen in section 8.2 how the previous system started to create inequities, which were exacerbated by the freedom of schools to design their own curricula and to specialise. In addition, the municipality has not actively encouraged schools to specialise since the peak in the 1990s – it has to be remembered that legislation still permits schools to specialise, and even introduce entrance tests, which has happened in Helsinki, creating a much stronger and competitive school market.

Legislation allows school markets to develop, yet this has not been adopted as an official policy line in the case study municipality. A more competitive market in comprehensive schools, of course, can disadvantage children on a basis of residence and socio-economic background, for example (see Chapter 3). In this sense, the decision to actively limit the development of competition between schools for students has meant that all children in the area have benefited on the grounds equity and equality of opportunity. This development has also been strengthened by the policy of integration and inclusion of children with special educational needs and children from immigrant backgrounds within mainstream schools. At the same time, it has to be remembered that financial considerations also have an undeniable role in these developments as seen – integration and inclusion alongside the area-model were partly introduced for being economically more viable options. This important rationale will be further discussed in the final Chapter 9.

To summarise, there is no real education market-place in practice in the municipality – where elements of this once existed with differentiation of curricula and expansion in the size of more popular schools, these have been further reduced and limited in recent years. Equality of opportunity and equity of access for all children in the city can therefore be seen to have been enhanced. It is evident that market-oriented education policies have neither been

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taken on board in the city's education policy-making and shaping arena nor in its schools at the beginning of the 21st century.

9. Conclusions

The research presented in the preceding eight chapters of this thesis has focused on the comprehensive school system in Finland and how it has been changing over the last 70 years or so, specifically since the 1990s. The research set out to examine and analyse the development of an education market-place in one case study municipality in Finland. An underlying assumption was that the education reforms of the 1990s had necessitated the development of more competition between local schools and that local decision-makers had to advocate a more market-oriented approach in education services in the area – after all, this seemed to be the direction towards which educational legislation was steering schools to develop.

The phenomenon of specialisation with its underlying reasons, rationales and consequences for equity and equality of opportunity, together with the relationship between the national and local policy contexts, constituted the main interest framing both the literature review and the empirical part of the research. More specifically, the first research question set out to examine how national education policies are interpreted at the local level and what role the question of finance has in these processes while the second research question examined both external and internal motives for specialisation. The third research question focused on analysing the linkages between specialisation and equity and equality and opportunity. Equity was defined as fairness of procedures and equality of opportunity as the right of all children regardless of their socio-economic background, place of residence, special educational needs or immigrant background status to have high quality education of equal standards in equally good schools.

This concluding chapter aims to highlight a number of macro and micro aspects which have arisen from the research undertaken. It is hoped that this synopsis will offer readers a brief account of both the key literature and the debates informing the research, and the outcomes of the research undertaken – the main

findings and their implications on broader social policy issues. The chapter begins with a brief recap of the phenomenon of specialisation of schools in section 9.1 – what it means and what it implies. Following this, attention moves in section 9.2 to analysing the main findings which emerged from the research impacting equity and equality of opportunity issues. Finally, section 9.3 draws some policy implications as well as makes suggestions for potential further research in the area.

9.1. Specialisation of schools – what about it?

The possibility of comprehensive schools specialising by introducing distinct specialist classes in various subject areas or by employing a broader school-wide specialist ethos has been seen to be a phenomenon which began in the 1990s, but which has continued to this day – albeit in a slightly diluted form. Specialisation within the Finnish comprehensive school system is significant because it demonstrates a number of important issues with far-reaching implications.

Specialisation of comprehensive schools can be seen as a type of new ideology which represents a rise of neo-liberal, market-oriented, way of thinking within Finnish society. This shows that the social democratic welfare state with its assumptions and ideals of social justice and an importance attached to regional and socio-economic equality of opportunity has had to give way to a more individualist and consumerist ideology. Evidently, the rise of neo-liberalism in Finland is tied with both external and internal developments which explain a part of this somewhat puzzling desire for the nation to change and transform its welfare services – including compulsory education. The role of such organisations as the OECD and the EU has been shown to be crucial, as was the economic recession of the early 1990s, which inevitably fuelled the development of the welfare society from social democracy towards more liberalistic interpretations and concerns. It is important to bear in mind that in the Finnish context the market-oriented ideology as applied to the

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comprehensive school system was not introduced primarily to raise standards as it was in countries like England and Wales in the 1980s. The system was not seen as a 'failure' but needed to be updated and modernised by bringing in parental choice and increasing diversity between schools, and thus making it more in line with education systems of much of the rest of Europe. But, why were market-oriented education reforms introduced in a more limited way? Why and how did Finland manage to prevent the launch of more fully-fledged market-oriented reforms within its comprehensive school system? The answers to these questions are not necessarily straightforward, as discussed below, and entail a number of intertwined elements.

It was seen in Chapter Two that throughout history Finland has been struggling with a form of identity crisis. Short and troubled independence with an ever-present threat from Russia throughout a large part of the 20th Century has meant that policy adaptation and borrowing have long traditions in Finland, and continue to be important determinants of policy development. In this sense, the rise of neo-liberalism and associated policy concerns could be interpreted as adaptation politics, accommodation of more continental European and Western values into Finnish national and cultural identity rather than a total desire to change and transform. The aims of increasing efficiency, effectiveness and quality of welfare state services associated with New Public Management and advocated by the OECD were taken seriously in Finland in the 1990s – and explicitly confirmed the desire of Finland to associate itself with the capitalist world.

In the field of education policy, issues surrounding globalisation and thus more competitive pressures placed on nation-states to succeed in the global arena, the rise of knowledge-based economy and concern about life-long learning have all had an impact on dictating development priorities and trends in Finland by the Government and Parliament and partly explain the emergence of market-oriented education reforms (see also Chapter 6.1). At the same time, however, the nation has remained wedded to the comprehensive school system, albeit in an altered format, and in this sense the concept of path-dependency is likely to

explain some of the underlying reasons. The comprehensive school system emerged after a long battle in political circles in the 1960s and 1970s and was eventually endorsed by all political parties. This has continued to the present day when all the main political parties still support the comprehensive school system as a cornerstone of Finnish society despite differing views as how the system could, and should, be developed (Vasemmistoliitto 2007, Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue 2005, Keskusta 2006, Risikko Committee 2006). As such this realisation offers one likely explanation as to why market-inspired education policies introduced in Finland were more limited in nature in comparison to such reforms introduced in countries like England, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three. The comprehensive school system has become an essential part of the Finnish society and culture and, as proven by international student evaluations, has also managed to produce excellent results reinforcing the comprehensive ideology as the correct one. After all, results from the PISA studies have pointed to the superiority of comprehensive, largely non-selective education systems, over selective systems – a fact which the OECD itself has been forced to recognise by beginning to recommend more equitable basic education systems where selection and parental choice play a diminished role (OECD 2007b).

Although only certain elements of market-oriented education policies were implemented in Finland, the creation of diversity and parental choice has nevertheless resulted in changes within the Finnish comprehensive school system which differed considerably from its original format. What, then, were the main changes introduced and why were they significant?

The National Framework Curriculum reforms of the mid-1990s injected extensive freedoms to the local level and to schools which were left in charge of designing their own curricula. Freedom to specialise – which could take various different forms – further accentuated differences emerging between schools and between municipalities. Crucially, specialist classes were allowed to have admissions policies to select an intake of students raising questions about equity in access to the specialist classes. Together with the clause of parental choice

explicit in the Basic Education Act 1998, school markets have been created, at least in theory, whereby schools can market themselves vis-à-vis other local schools aiming to attract children and parents who have become 'customers'. Subsequently, in some areas of the country – particularly in the south of Finland where parental choice policies have been encouraged and where there is more diversity between schools – segregation between schools has occurred. The most popular schools have been found to be those that have a number of selective specialist classes most prominently in the centre of cities (Seppänen 2001, 2003, 2006). More educated parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds apply to the popular schools more frequently than average which, it has been argued, leads to a division of student population in secondary schools along socio-economic lines (Seppänen 2006). Furthermore, 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. In the capital Helsinki, a recent decision reached by the Local Education Board strengthened the link between funding following the pupil (Board of Education of the city of Helsinki 2007). This change can be seen as giving a new lease of life for the development of more explicit school markets since there can be added incentives for schools to attract more students in order to increase their budget.

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 2004c, 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 other factors that 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. 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 in the following two sections.

9.2. Is there an educational market place in operation in the case study municipality?

This section focuses on providing further answers to the question as to whether there is an educational market place in operation in the case study municipality and draws on empirical findings which have arisen from the research as well as policy analysis carried out mainly in Chapter 6. The section is in two parts. First, attention is focused on looking at the issue of specialisation including the national and local context and the various reasons why schools in the municipality decided to specialise. Second, the broad area of equity and equality of opportunity as applied to education services within the local area is addressed, with a central question being what has happened to equity and

equality of opportunity at the case study schools and the municipality at large as a result of specialisation.

9.2.1. Specialisation, diversity and choice in the case study municipality

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.

At the national level the school diversity, choice, quality and effectiveness agenda was found to prevail as a development trend in the most recent Development Plan *Education and Research 2007-2012* drawn by the Ministry of Education and approved by the Government (see Chapter 6.1). 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 integration and inclusion, 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? Chapter Seven focused attention on the external and internal policy drivers and asked what were the main reasons and rationales motivating schools in the case study municipality to specialise. The

findings suggested that the 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 was made which also explained the main policy drivers to a large extent.

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 school and its classless teaching pedagogy was found to be the only specialism in the case study municipality that had began as a response to a *strong* internal policy driver. In this sense, the model of leadership in action can be seen to represent transformational leadership whereby 'the vision of the head-teacher on the direction and developments of a school is crucial' (Webb 2005: 75).

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 amongst 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 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 in Chapters Two and Three, 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. It was seen that 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, as seen in Chapter Eight. Both City and Hillside schools were destined to be closed because they were located at the most valuable central sites.

All in all, then, 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. This finding provides evidence against the original assumption described in the beginning of the chapter – that the legislative education reforms of the 1990s had necessitated local authorities to introduce more market-oriented policies and forced schools to compete with one another. 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 (see Table 2.1). There were more prominent rationales influencing the development of policy priorities in the case study municipality and schools – some of these issues are discussed next.

The creation of the area-model in the municipality was one particularly interesting issue which emerged (see Chapter Six) 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 and 2006).

The ongoing financial difficulties faced by the municipality were also discussed in Chapter Six. 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, discussed in more detail below, is one area where there are clear signs that financial considerations are guiding policy, yet equity and equality of opportunity 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. Chapter 6.2 discussed how the Board 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 (see Chapter 8.2). 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 (see Chapter 6.4). 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 (see Chapters 6.4 and 8.2.3).

Since parental choice has been limited by local education decision-makers, does this mean there is no competition between schools in the case study municipality? Interestingly, it was found that many interviewees still perceived there to be competition, particularly at the secondary level – why was this so?

The declining number of school-aged children is one obvious reason, which has resulted in heightened competitive pressures between schools since the 1990s. It has been shown that the number of primary-aged children (aged 7-13) has declined between 1995 and 2007, with a projection of a similar trend continuing until 2010 (municipality statistics 2007). Subsequently, the reduction in student numbers has necessitated the closure of some schools in the area including two of the case study schools, City and Hillside schools (see Chapter 8.2.3). In effect, diversity between schools has also evened out as a result, since Hillside school was the most different (and most popular) school in the area. These are interesting developments and show that competition can increase although there is not an educational market-place functioning as such.

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 (see below). 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? Furthermore a belief that that special needs students, and, to a lesser extent, 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 (see Chapter 6.1). Again, this alludes to a specific interpretation of the national context within the local decision-making arena where, as seen, economic problems have been long-standing, and inescapable, background factors to policy development. In this way, the issue of finance has implications for both equity and equality of opportunity – and becomes an intervening factor for the model outlined at the beginning of the chapter impacting the rights of all children from all socio-economic and more marginalised backgrounds across all regions to receive education of equal standards in equally good schools.

9.2.2. What has happened to equity and equality of opportunity?

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 four case study schools examined in this study following specialisation: City, Millpond, Hillside and Parkview schools. Was equality of opportunity sacrificed following the introduction of specialisms at the case study schools?

It is evident that the two primary schools, City school and Millpond school, experienced very different impacts arising from specialisation.

As seen in Chapter Seven, City school was the main site for 'official' specialisms in the municipality including the music classes, English-speaking classes and immigrant teaching. The music classes were seen to be particularly interesting for their implications for equality of opportunity and are briefly considered below.

Since music classes are strictly selective, based on a child's performance at a music test, they represent an anomaly among most specialisms at the schools as well as in the municipality. In this way the music classes could be classed as being inequitable and not conforming to equality of opportunity. Because music classes are an older specialism dating back to the 1960s (see Chapters 2 and 7) it is difficult to interpret these classes as being 'market-oriented', however. This is a curious phenomenon which shows that where selection exists, inequities are likely to emerge (see Chapter 3.1). Interview data reported in Chapter 7 alluded to the fact that children who got selected in the music classes were generally higher ability students who could benefit from smaller class sizes compared with non-music classes. If equality of opportunity (according the definition of equality opportunity adopted in this study) remains a consideration, it is evident

that this type of selection should be minimised – on this basis the music classes do not conform with the aim of equality of opportunity.

Although the English-speaking classes are also selective on the grounds of English-language skills, they do not appear to have as far-reaching effects for equality of opportunity. The English-speaking classes are a specialist service for children who have acquired a high standard of English-language skills by living abroad, for example, who wish to keep up their language skills back in Finland – clearly entry to these classes could not be without an admission test. Like the music classes, however, children in these specialist classes can benefit from smaller class sizes, which could be deemed to be inequitable. In addition, a question can be raised about the background of families whose children typically enter the English-speaking classes – are they perhaps more privileged having lived abroad, for instance, and from higher socio-economic backgrounds?

Following the closure of City and Hillside schools in 2007, the music classes and the English-speaking classes continue to function at other schools at primary and secondary levels in the municipality (the City website 2008). The English-speaking classes have been transferred to Millpond (primary) school and to Parkview (secondary) school. Both of these classes remain selective, and thus, follow their original admissions policy formats. All the services designed for students with SEN and for immigrant students have been moved to other local schools (ibid.).

Millpond school and the development of its English-weighted classes at this school provide another type of example. Developments that have taken place at Millpond school since the 1990s provide an interesting case study of how policies can dramatically change from within the school to a more equitable direction (see Chapter 7.2 for details).

It is clear from the analysis undertaken that embarking on a new initiative can have unexpected outcomes. This was the case at Millpond school when a

decision was reached to begin the English-weighted specialism. 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. In 2008, Millpond school continues its English-weighted teaching, and the non-selective admissions policy. Children from Millpond school, if they wish to continue their English-weighted teaching at the secondary level, are directed to Parkview school (the City website 2008).

The two secondary schools – Parkview and Hillside schools – also experienced very different impacts from specialisation.

Parkview school expanded in its student size as a result of education policy decision-making in the municipality, and can therefore be interpreted as a winner of the city's area-model, or as some interviewees called it, the 'equality principle'. At the time of writing, in 2008, the specialist services focusing on SEN children continue to function at Parkview school as previously. The international specialism[50] discussed in Chapter Seven appears to have diminished in importance, however, since it is not mentioned in the school's web-pages or in its curriculum. It is perhaps still possible to interpret the English-speaking classes and the English-weighted teaching, which have been transferred to Parkview school, as representing an 'international' dimension.

Of the two secondary schools, the fate of Hillside school is particularly fascinating, however. Hillside school's specialism through the non-selective

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[50] The environmental specialism, as discussed in Chapter 7, never took off the ground.

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 from under 500 in the early 1990s to the peak of 570 students in 1997 (see Figure 5.1). 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 (see 7.1 for further details). Communality, 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.

As discussed in the part above, these concepts were interpreted as being important by many of the people interviewed in the case study municipality. Furthermore, this model – combining individuality with communality – 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 communality. 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.

Following the closure of Hillside school in 2007, all specialisms from Hillside have been transferred to other secondary schools in the area as discussed above, with the exception of the classless teaching pedagogy which has been discontinued. No further specialisms have been introduced at the schools in the municipality at the time of writing in 2008.

9.3. Policy implications and further research

The findings of this research have indicated that the development of the local 'school market' represents unique circumstances prevailing in the case study municipality. 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

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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.

Appendix 1

Example of a letter sent to schools

Dear Principal,

I am a research student at the London School of Economics studying for a PhD in social policy under the supervision of Professor Anne West (Director of the LSE Centre for Educational Research), and I am writing to ask for your assistance.

My research focuses on examining decision-making processes in relation to local education policies at a municipality level. In this, special attention is to be given to examining primary and secondary schools and the Local Education Board. The research will also analyse the development of education policies in a wider national context.

I am writing to you because I would be very interested in including your school as part of my project. I believe that I would be able to gain valuable information and views for my research from the teaching staff, members of the governing body as well as you, the principal of the school. I hope that you and your colleagues will be able to assist me in this undertaking.

I understand that your time is valuable. Taking part in this research requires a minimum commitment – a single interview lasting approximately half an hour is requested, which would be arranged at the time and place most suitable for the interviewee. The information obtained will be treated in confidence and the names of the individuals, school and area will be anonymised in any reports that are produced. Furthermore, this research is independent, and is not sponsored by any outside organisation.

Enclosed you will find a research summary sheet outlining, in more detail, information on the researcher and the project itself.

I do hope that you will be willing to help with this research and look forward to hearing from you soon. All the best for the rest of the autumn term!

Yours sincerely,

Annamari Ylonen

Appendix 2

Example of questions to principals (ex-principal of Millpond school)

General

1. What is the current area you work in?

2. How long have you been working as a principal? How long of that in Millpond school? How long in other schools?

3. Did you work as a teacher before that? If yes, for how long?

Finnish education policies in the 1990s

4. In your opinion, what are the most important or far-reaching changes in Finnish comprehensive school policies from the 1990s?

5. How would you rate the overall change of direction (positive or negative or a mixture)?

6. In your opinion, has competition between comprehensive schools increased over recent years?

   a. If yes, how and with what consequences? Can you give examples of this in this city?

   b. Do you think that competition between schools is needed? Why?

7. In your opinion, should education be more individually-tailored than it has traditionally been in comprehensive schools?

   a. If yes, why and how (supporting talented children and special needs children)?

8. Should schools be allowed to specialise to a growing extent?

   a. If yes, why and how?

   b. If no, why?

Situation in the case study city

9. In your opinion, what are the greatest challenges facing comprehensive schools and comprehensive education policies in this city?

10. In your opinion, what are the best features in the current comprehensive school policies in the city?

11. And, what about the most worrying features?

12. What areas, do you think, are the most important development priorities for comprehensive schools and policy in the city? Why?

13. Are these areas linked to wider national development priorities?

14. In your opinion, are there any special features in comprehensive schools and/or education policy in the city?

The Local Education Board and the City Council

15. What has the relationship been like, in general, between schools and the local education board in the city?

16. Has this relationship changed in any way over the last decade or so?

    a. If there has been a change, how would you rate this change?

17. How much influence does the LEB have over the school in general decision-making?

18. Does the relationship between the LEB and schools work in practice? Would you change it in any way?

19. In your opinion, how important is the role of the City Council in comprehensive school policies in this city?

Specialist classes

20. When did the school take the decision to specialise?

21. What were the main reasons for making this decision?

    a. Who were the main decision-makers (the principal, the governing body and/or the local education board)?

22. What were the consequences of the decision to specialise, in terms of:

    a. Number of applications?

    b. Monetary consequences (improvement or worsening)?

    c. Relationship with other schools in the area?

    d. Atmosphere inside the school?

23. Was the English-weighted programme popular among parents?

24. How did admissions criteria work in practice?

Expansion of the programme

25. What factors influenced the decision of the school to expand the specialist agenda to cover the whole school?

26. When and why was this decision taken?

27. Who were the main decision-makers?

    a. Was any type of voting procedure used? If yes, please explain.

28. What kind of impact did the decision to expand the programme have on admissions criteria used by the school to decide who should be offered a place?

29. During your time as the principal at Millpond school, did the school have any intentions to introduce more specialisms at the school? Why?

30. What were the main development areas and priorities at the school when you were the principal?

    a. Why these areas?

31. What aspects influence the formation of development priorities?

    a. Education Acts?

    b. Municipality priorities?

    c. Education markets?

    d. Own interest of the school?

    e. Others?

32. Would you say that there are any pressures on the school to develop its policies?

    a. If yes, from whom and in what ways do these manifest themselves?

Appendix 3

Example of questions to teachers (Millpond school)

General

1. How long have you worked as a teacher in this school? And how long of this time as a specialist class teacher?

2. Why did you want to start teaching English-weighted classes?

3. In your opinion, has the school changed in any way during this time?

    a. If yes, how and to what direction?

4. What is the relationship like between the schools in the area? Are any schools in co-operation with each other?

    a. If yes, how?

5. Has there occurred any polarisation between schools in the area?

    a. If yes, how does this show in practice?

6. Do some schools have a better reputation than others? From where does this reputation come from?

Specialist classes

7. When did the school take the decision to specialise, and what were the main reasons for this decision?

    b. Who were the main decision-makers in this (the principle, the governing body and/or the local education board)?

    c. How important were the roles played by the above decision-makers?

8. How did the programme start running, in terms of:

    a. Popularity?

    b. Admissions criteria?

    c. Catchment area (who were eligible to apply)?

9. What type of impact did the specialist class have on the school on the whole (e.g. integration and relationships between students in different classes)?

10. What type of impact did the existence of the specialist class have on parents?

Expansion of the programme

11. What factors influenced the decision to expand the specialist agenda to cover the whole school?

12. When and why was such a decision taken?

13. Who were the main decision-makers?

    a. Were teachers consulted?

    b. How about other staff at the school?

14. Were the parents in the area consulted as part of the decision-making process?

    a. If yes, with what consequences?

    b. If no, how did they react to the decision?

15. What kind of impact did the decision to expand the programme have on admissions criteria?

16. What type of admissions criteria, if any, are currently being used to select students for the specialist class?

    a. If admissions criteria aren't being used, what impact has this had on the school?

17. Are there any differences, or has there been any differences, between students in the specialist classes from those in normal classes?

    a. If yes, how?

Finnish education policies in the 1990s

18. What are the major changes in your opinion that have occurred in the Finnish education policy trends over the last ten years, and how would you rate the overall change of direction (positive or negative or a mixture)?

19. What are the major problem areas, and on the one hand, the best areas?

    a. Development of education markets?

    b. Growing inequalities between children?

    c. Possibility of ranking lists?

Appendix 4

Example of questions to the Local Education Board

General

1. How and why did you end up working in local politics (and as a member of LEB)?

2. In your view, what are the most important or far-reaching changes in Finnish education politics/policies since the 1990s?

3. How would you evaluate the changes in direction? And why?

4. In your view, what are the greatest challenges to Finnish comprehensive school? And why?

5. Has competition increased between schools in recent times?

   a. If yes, how and with what consequences? Can you give examples of these in this city?

6. Is competition needed between schools, or not?

7. Should teaching in comprehensive schools be more individualistic than what it has traditionally been?

   a. If yes, why and how (e.g. supporting more talented children)?

   b. If no, why?

8. What is the situation like in this city?

9. Should schools be allowed to specialise?

   a. If yes, why?

   b. If no, why not?

Education policy/politics in the municipality

10. What are the current development priorities of education policy in this municipality?

11. Why these areas?

12. Are these areas important in your opinion? If yes, why? If no, why not?

13. Are these areas related to wider national policies and priorities?

14. In your view, what are the most difficult features of recent education policy trends in this municipality?

15. What about the best features?

16. What are the greatest challenges for education policies in this municipality? Why?

17. Have these challenges been taken into account in recent decision-making?

The role of the Local Education Board (LEB)

18. How important do you see the role of the LEB in decision-making concerning schools in the area?

19. How much power does the LEB have in decision-making? Is this sufficient amount of power?

20. In your view, what kind of relationship have schools had with the LEB?

21. Has this relationship changed in recent times?

   a. If yes, how would you evaluate this change?

22. What kind of relationship the LEB has with the Education Office?

23. What factors influence this relationship?

Appendix 5

The Education System of Finland

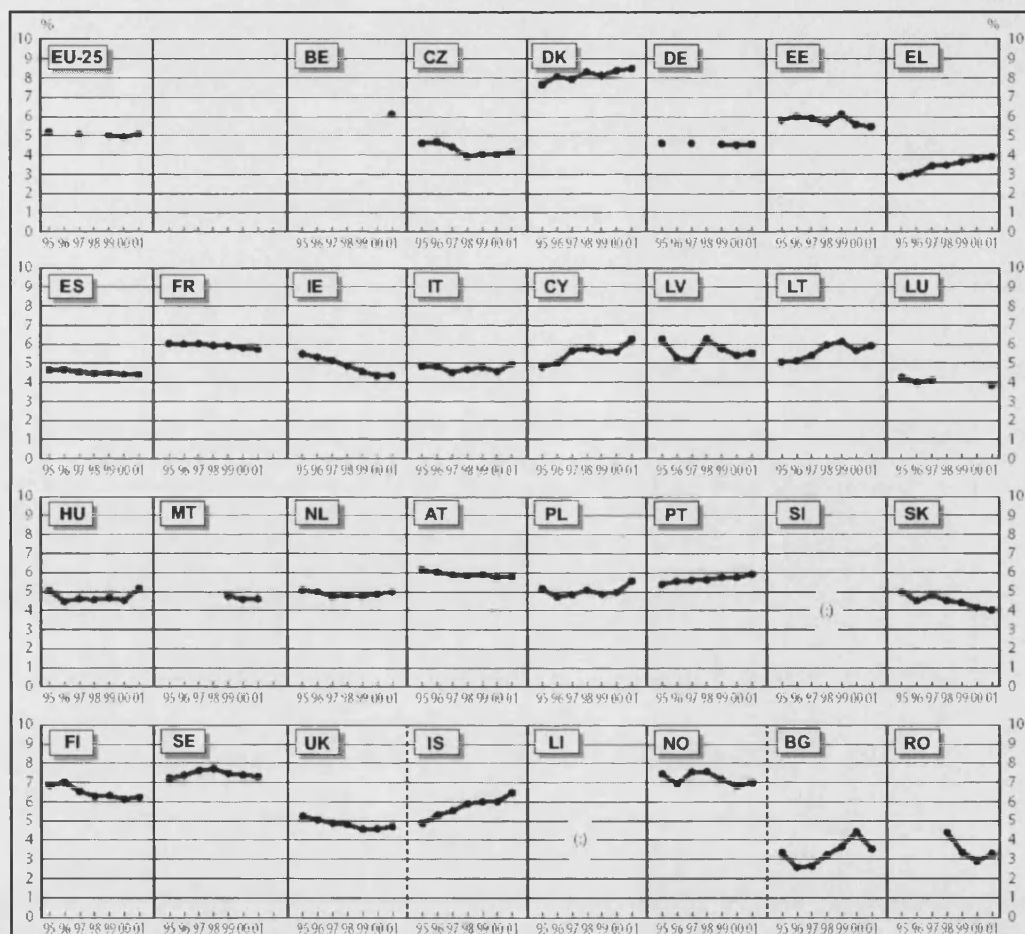**Source: the National Board of Education (2007), available at,
http://www.oph.fi/english/SubPage.asp?path=447;4699)**
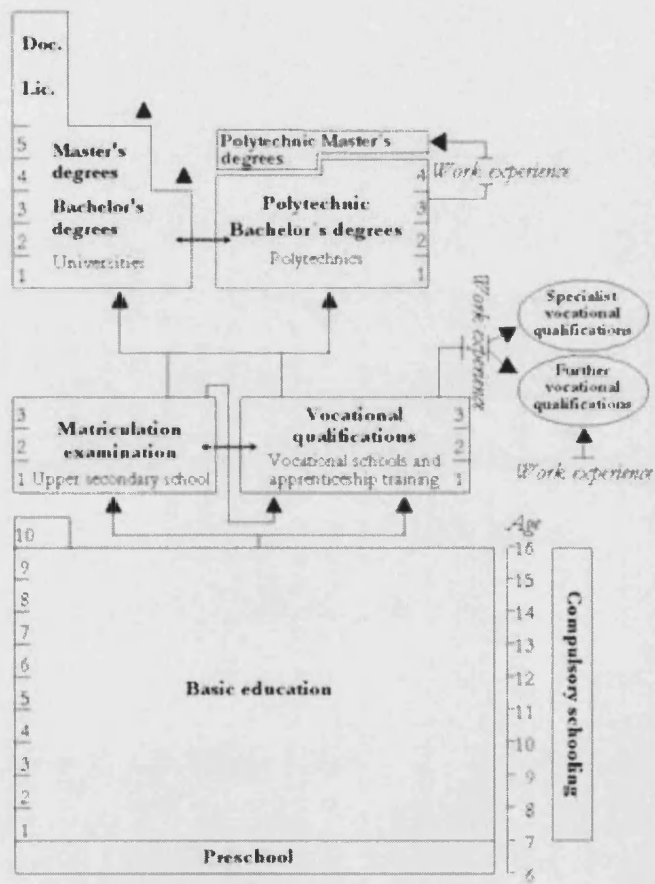
Appendix 6

Changes in total public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP by country, 1995-2001

Source: Eurydice (2008), Key Data on Education in Europe 2005: 163

Source: Eurostat, UOE and National Accounts.

	EU-25	BE	CZ	DK	DE	EE	EL	ES	FR	IE	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU	HU	MT	NL	AT	PL	PT	SI	SK	FI	SE	UK	IS	LI	NO	BG	RO
1995	5.2	(:)	4.6	7.7	4.6	5.8	2.9	4.7	6.0	5.5	4.9	4.8	6.3	5.1	4.3	5.0	(:)	5.1	6.2	5.1	5.4	(:)	5.0	6.8	7.2	5.2	4.9	(:)	7.4	3.4	(:)
1996	(:)	(:)	4.7	8.1	(:)	6.0	3.1	4.7	6.0	5.3	4.9	5.0	5.3	5.1	4.0	4.5	(:)	5.0	6.0	4.7	5.5	(:)	4.5	7.0	7.4	5.1	5.3	(:)	6.9	2.6	(:)
1997	5.1	(:)	4.4	7.9	4.6	5.9	3.4	4.5	6.0	5.2	4.5	5.7	5.2	5.4	4.1	4.6	(:)	4.8	5.9	4.8	5.6	(:)	4.8	6.5	7.6	4.9	5.5	(:)	7.5	2.6	(:)
1998	(:)	(:)	3.9	8.3	(:)	5.7	3.5	4.5	5.9	4.9	4.7	5.8	6.3	6.0	(:)	4.0	(:)	4.8	5.8	5.1	5.6	(:)	4.5	6.3	7.7	4.8	5.9	(:)	7.6	3.2	4.4
1999	5.0	(:)	4.0	8.1	4.6	6.1	3.6	4.5	5.9	4.6	4.8	5.7	5.8	6.1	(:)	4.7	4.8	4.8	5.9	4.9	5.7	(:)	4.4	6.3	7.5	4.6	6.0	(:)	7.2	3.7	3.4
2000	4.9	(:)	4.0	8.4	4.5	5.6	3.8	4.4	5.8	4.4	4.6	5.6	5.4	5.7	(:)	4.5	4.6	4.9	5.8	5.0	5.7	(:)	4.1	6.1	7.4	4.6	6.0	(:)	6.8	4.4	2.9
2001	5.1	6.1	4.2	8.5	4.6	5.5	3.9	4.4	5.7	4.3	5.0	6.3	5.5	5.9	3.8	5.1	4.6	5.0	5.8	5.6	5.9	(:)	4.0	6.2	7.3	4.7	6.5	(:)	7.0	3.5	3.3

Source: Eurostat, UOE and National Accounts.

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