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Chapter 3: School Boards in Finland

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Abstract

Finland is a Nordic welfare state with a population of 5.4 million people occupying a land area of 302 000 km². In today's global societal development Finland in many ways seems to be an outlier relying on policies the goals, contents and enactment of which differ from those of many other countries. Furthermore, the policies Finland relies on appear to provide outlying results concerning both the education system and the society. (Risku & Kanervio, 2013; Risku, 2014). The many-sidedly outlying character of Finland makes it an interesting case of research.

In alignment with the scope of the present book, this chapter concentrates on examining Finnish school boards. It is based on the first national study on school boards in Finland. The study was conducted by the Institute of Educational Leadership at the University of Jyväskylä and funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. In the chapter we will present the context of the Finnish school board as well as the context of the study. As municipalities in Finland have a constitutional autonomy and municipalities are the main providers of education, research on the local political body governing educational services is of great importance. On the basis of the research, a description on the demography and work of school boards is given. In addition, school board members' perceptions on the status of local provisions of education and on the future of education are reflected on.

The context of the Finnish school board

From the point of view of the present study, one can claim that the main reforms of the Finnish education system in the past decades are linked to the reforms of the Finnish society. As Risku (2011; 2014) describes, Finland was shaped into a Nordic welfare state through a centralized, norm-based and system-oriented administration in the 1970s. After the welfare state was created in the 1980s both the Finnish society and its policies began to change in fundamental ways. Concerning the society, migration to growth centres and the accelerating aging of population reached a point which made it impossible for the state to provide for welfare state services with the prevailing structures. The economic recession in the 1990s further hampered the provision of welfare services.

One cannot deal with the contemporary development of the Finnish society without having a few words on municipalities, too. Municipal structures in Finland derive from the middle ages and obtained their present form in the 1800s (Pihlajanniemi, 2006). Finland is still in the midst of reforming its municipal structures in ways that, for example, other Nordic countries did already decades ago. The 2007 Act on Restructuring Municipalities and

Services (Laki kunta- ja palvelurakenteen uudistamisesta, 2007/169) obligated municipalities to assess their services and together with other municipalities to try to find the most suitable ways to both preserve and advance their services. At least partly due to the act, 99 municipalities merged with each other at the beginning of 2009 (Kanervio & Risku, 2009). The present government compiled a white paper to diminish the number of municipalities from 336 to 66-70 (Valtiovarainministeriö, 2012). Typically to Finland, there has been a dialogue between the various stakeholders to come up with a synthesis that could realistically be enacted and that would have a successful outcome. The latest government bill (HE 31/2013) on municipal structures no longer prescribes the number of municipalities, but determines the criteria according to which municipalities are to develop their structures to be able to provide the required welfare state services.

Regarding societal policies, the centralized, norm-based and system-oriented administration started in the 1980s, besides to be unable to provide the welfare services, also to fail to correspond to people's expectations of governance in general. There came a need to transfer decision making from the state level to local ones. (Niemelä, 2008; Risku, 2011; 2014; Varjo, 2007).

It is essential to note that Finland has not abandoned the ideology of the Nordic welfare state. The preservation and advancement of the Nordic welfare state is the primary goal of the present government as well (Valtioneuvosto, 2011). However, as both the Finnish society and its policies have changed in the more and more globalizing world, it is believed that novel ways have had to be found and designed to be able to preserve and advance the welfare state. In that development, many of the international societal trends of the past few decades seem to have had a distinct but often moderate influence (see for example Laitila, 1999; Varjo, 2007). One can claim that it is the moderation that has given Finland the outlying status it today in many ways seems to have in international comparisons. Finland has tried to develop itself by first attempting to cling to those values and policies that seem to be valuable and sustainable, and then to change those policies that need to be altered in ways that do not destroy what is regarded as valuable and sustainable to maintain.

Neo-liberalistic topics and scopes have in part directed public discussion since the 1980s (Rinne, Kivirauma & Simola, 2002; Varjo, 2007). Neo-liberalism has often been seen as a rival to the welfare state (Varjo, 2007). Public discussion often includes strong doubts towards market economy solutions, as well as towards decentralization, but there are also examples of neo-liberalistic reforms like pupils', and students' right to select their school in all school forms (Laitila, 1999).

The influence of the 1990s European trend of shifting from state-led centralization to democratic individualism can be clearly identified both in the social and education policy of Finland. Administration is no longer regarded to have only one right form, but the form is considered to vary according to the context. (Ryynänen, 2004). Decentralization has become a significant driver, and municipalities have today a constitutional autonomy how to organise themselves and their services. The State can, however, still be argued to have a central role in societal guidance, development and decision making (Kanervio & Risku, 2009; Laitila, 1999). How the State succeeds in its role, is given criticism. Among other issues, there are perceptions that education policies and their goal settings are not based on the real situations of schools, but on theoretically ideal starting-points. (Hannus et al., 2010).

In addition, there seems to be a general consensus that, for example, the formal status of the principal has changed dramatically in ways that resemble the ideology of the New Public Management. More and more autonomy, management and leadership have been transferred to the municipal and school level. (Alava, Halttunen & Risku, 2012). Today's

superintendents and principals are no longer merited teachers who are promoted for their good service as teachers, but managers and leaders who are responsible for the budget, personnel and efficiency of their schools (see Aho, Pitkänen & Sahlberg, 2006). In the rapidly and dramatically changing operational environment, superintendents, principals and teachers, often feel pressured by contradictions between goals, expectations, needs and resources (Ahonen, 2008; Kanervio & Risku, 2009; Souri, 2009; Suomen Rehtorit, 2005; Vuohijoki, 2006).

In Finland the education system is divided into three main tiers. The main tiers are basic education, upper secondary general or vocational education, and higher education as described as follows. (Aho et al., 2006; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013; National Board of Education, 2013). The following description well illustrates the moderation Finland has had in the development of its education system.

Municipalities are responsible for providing basic education in the nine-year comprehensive school which is based on a single structure. Local authorities assign pupils a place in a local school, but pupils are free to enrol in other schools, too. In 2009, there were almost 3 100 comprehensive schools, and the network covered the whole country. The number of schools has been declining steadily during the last decades. About 45 % of the schools had fewer than 100 pupils. The largest schools had over 900.

Prior to basic education children can participate in pre-primary education. The participation is voluntary, but municipalities are obligated to provide the service. In 2009, 99.4 % of 6-7-year-old children attended pre-primary education, about 70 % of whom also took part in day care.

Municipalities, joint municipal authorities, registered associations or foundations can apply for licences to provide general upper secondary education from the Ministry of Education and Culture. In 2009, there were 398 general upper secondary schools and 43 other institutions providing general upper secondary education. Their number has been decreasing consistently during the last years in the same way as that of comprehensive schools.

The Government decides on the general national objectives of basic and general upper secondary education and on the allocation of the time to be used for instruction in different subjects. The Finnish National Board of Education decides on the national core curriculum. The education provider is responsible for compiling the final more detailed local curriculum and a yearly work plan on the basis of the national guidelines. Municipal school boards are thus not merely deciding on 'blue prints' of state policies, but have genuine autonomy and power in the local curriculum development. There is no inspection system, or pre-inspection of text books.

The regional state administration comprises six Regional State Administrative Agencies. The agencies are coordinated by the Ministry of Finance, but they function under the guidance and supervision of their respective ministries. The duty of the agencies is to foster regional parity by executing all legislative implementation, steering and supervision functions in the regions. The Swedish-speaking province of Åland is self-governing. (Ministry of Finance, 2009.)

Education in Finland is generally free of charge for the students. Education is funded as part of the statutory government transfer system for local authorities, joint municipal authorities

and private education providers. The amount (€/student) is calculated according to the unit price determined in advance for the subsequent year by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Concerning basic education, the statutory government transfer covers 34 % of the operating costs. For general upper secondary education the percentage is 42. The subsidies are paid direct to the education provider and are not earmarked for a particular purpose. The rest of the operating costs remains with the education provider to cover. There are no decrees determining the student/teacher ratio, except for special need classes in basic education. Again, local authorities and thus municipal school boards have a lot of autonomy in their decision making.

The Ministry of Education and Culture in collaboration with the Finnish Education Evaluation Council, Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council and the National Board of Education determines the general framework for national evaluation on education. The framework is based on the government platforms and five-year education and research plans and includes the international, national, regional and local level.

The 1998 Basic Education Act (1998/628) and 1998 Upper Secondary General Education Act (Lukiolaki, 1998/629) obligate education providers to evaluate the education they provide and participate in external evaluations of their operations. The acts also require the salient findings of evaluation to be published. The National Board of Education is responsible for the national evaluation of learning outcomes. It has an extensive and systematic evaluation programme comprising mainly, but not solely, sample-based evaluations in key subjects. In general upper secondary education the independent Matriculation Examination Board twice a year organizes a rigorous national test which in practice every student takes at the end of their studies (Aho et al., 2006). Education providers bear the final responsibility for the quality of education and are responsible for the self-evaluation of their provision of education (Kupiainen, Hautamäki & Karjalainen, 2009; Lapiolahti, 2007 Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013), which once more underlines the significance of local authorities and municipal school boards.

Concerning the provision of basic and general upper secondary education, municipalities are the main education providers. In 2009 almost all of the nearly 3 100 comprehensive schools were municipal schools. Only 90 were private. Municipalities maintain also most general upper secondary schools. There are only a few that are maintained by private organizations (8 % in 2009). In general, educational legislation obligates the education provider and not directly the schools (Souri, 2009). The state does thus not attempt to bypass municipalities focusing initiatives directly towards schools. For example, according to most studies principals do regard municipal level decisions most important for their work (Pennanen, 2006).

There seems to be no common attempt to decouple schools from the municipal decision making either. According to Kanervio and Risku (2009), almost all municipalities (96.7 %) in Finland are still producing their educational services in the traditional way, so that the municipality acts as one profit-and-loss centre both determining the needs and producing the educational services. In 2008, 1.4 % of the municipalities had separate profit-and-loss centres determining the needs and producing the services according to the so-called orderer - producer –model. Miscellaneous other production models were used by 1.9 % of the municipalities.

Municipalities must organise their administration according to the Municipal Act (Kuntalaki, 1995/365), but the statutes allow a lot of freedom. There has to be a municipal council which confirms the rules of procedure according to which the administration of the municipality is organized. The municipality must also have a municipal executive board, election board and an inspection board set by the municipal council. Municipalities may decide independently on the establishment of other boards and commissions.

Because municipalities can organize themselves independently their organizations vary a lot. A very small municipality may have just the minimum which is decreed by law. In larger municipalities the organisation may be very complicated. A basic municipal organisation chart is presented in Figure 1 (Risku, 2011). In the figure one can locate both the superintendent and the municipal school office where the position of the municipal school board can be found. Since the 1945 act the role of the superintendent and school office has been to serve the school board in its decision making and manage the local provision of education (Salmela, 1946).

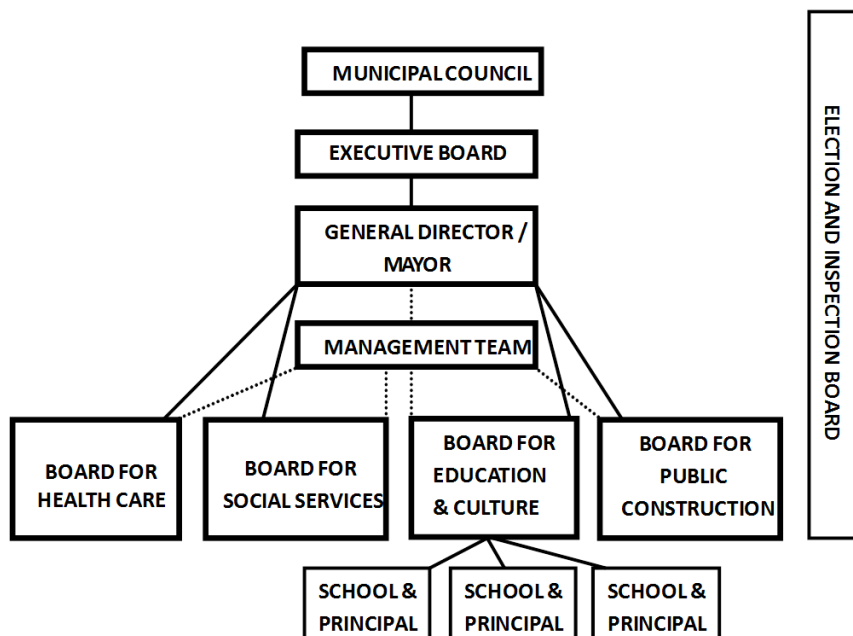


Figure 1. Basic municipal organization chart (Risku, 2011)

The size of municipalities varies a lot. About 68 % of the 320 municipalities had fewer than 10 000 people. There were only 9 cities with more than 100 000 inhabitants. About half of the population lived in municipalities the sizes of which were between 10 000–100 000. (Local Finland, 2013). As the sizes of municipalities vary, so do also the sizes of the local provisions of general education. Concerning basic education, the average number of pupils was 1 605 in 2012. The numbers varied between 8 – 46 185. About 70 % of municipalities had less than 1 000 basic education pupils in their local provisions. (Statistics Finland, 2013).

There seems to be a separate board for education practically in every municipality in Finland. According to Kanervio and Risku (2009), in 2008 only 0.5 % of the municipalities did not have a separate education board. In those municipalities, the executive board was responsible also for education. In addition, 2.4 % of the municipalities collaborated in providing education and shared a mutual education board.

The context of the present article

The purpose of the present article is to give a picture of the Finnish school boards and their role in the Finnish society and education system. The article is based on a survey to all members of school boards prior to the municipal election in autumn 2012. The survey is part of two research programmes. Nationally the survey resides with the research programme on educational leadership conducted by the Institute of Educational Leadership at the University of Jyväskylä and funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture.

The school board study is extremely essential in the Finnish context. Firstly, it is the first national one of its kind in Finland. Secondly, Finnish municipalities today have constitutional autonomy and are the main providers of educational services. As school boards are the supreme local policy makers concerning education, information about their characteristics, roles and work is fundamental knowledge about the Finnish education system. Thirdly, the municipal field in Finland is going through massive and radical changes at the moment (Kanervio & Risku, 2009), and it is important to be aware how the changes affect the local provision of education and its governance. In single municipalities, education is usually the second largest service sector after social services (Tilastokeskus, 2012a). Health care services today are more and more often provided by municipal consortia (Hynynen, 2009; compare Kuntajakolaki 1698/2009). As early childhood education is being transferred from social to educational services the role of educational services is expanding and education is more commonly becoming the largest service sector in municipalities (Haapaniemi & Ilves, 2006; Tirronen, 2009; Haliseva-Lahtinen, 2011).

Internationally the survey shares the same framework, methodology and questionnaire base as studies conducted in Denmark, Norway, Scotland, Sweden and the USA in 2011 and 2012. As Finland is an outlier in many of its societal policies as described in the previous section, Finland offers an interesting object also for international research programs. Particularly Finland is interesting because international studies on learning outcomes and on the qualities of societies indicate that the outlying Finnish policies also seem to have been able to provide very good results in an efficient manner (see for example Risku & Kanervio, 2013; Risku, 2014).

The school board survey on which the present article is based on was sent to 306 municipalities and targeted at 2745 school board members. The survey could reach individual school boards well as answers were obtained from 74.9% of the municipalities. Concerning individual school board members, however, the return rate turned out to be only 21.1%. There were significant differences between the municipalities, but in general only a few of the school board members in the individual school boards answered the questionnaire. All board members participated in the survey in merely one municipality. In addition, in only 24 municipalities more than half of the board members replied the questionnaire.

One can state that the results of the present study can be considered to represent well the general status of Finnish school boards for two reasons. Firstly, the distribution of various types of municipalities and school boards in the data of the present study seems to respond well to the statistical distribution of various types of municipalities and school boards in Finland. Secondly, the respondents' political parties and genders correspond well to the results of the municipal elections in 2008 on the basis of which the school boards studied for the present research were formed.

Members and chairs of the political board

In the present study, the size of school board varied from 5 to 11. According to (Kanervio & Risku, 2009). Of the respondents of this study, 13.8 %, were chairs, 9.7 % vice chairs, 72.9 % board members and 3.6 % substitutes. The number of chairs quite well corresponds to the expectation value (11.1 %) which is obtained by dividing the number of answerers with the number of municipalities represented in the survey.

A majority of the respondents were women (57.9 %). The result differs slightly from that of Kuntaliitto (2009). In that survey 52 % of the answerers were women. The general line seems lucid; there seems to be more women than men in Finnish school boards.

It seems that many join the school board at the age when their own children are at school. Besides, membership in the school board seems to be more common after retirement than at an early age. Most respondents were 30-59 and the most typical age category 30-49. Only 2.3 % were under 30 years old making the percentage (18.0) of members older than 60 much higher. The results are in line with the information from Tilastokeskus (2009) concerning the municipal elections in 2008.

School board members seem to be fairly well educated. Of the respondents, only 7.4% had basic education as their highest education. 30.1 % had either the general or vocational upper secondary education, 36.4 % the lower university degree, 21.6 % the higher university degree and 2.1 % a scientific post graduate degree.

Concerning school members' occupational background, one can note a slight bias in the public sector. Of the respondents 43.2 % worked in the public and 38.2 % in the private sector. The figures do not correspond well with the statistics (EVA-fakta, 2011) on people's employment according to which 75 % work in the private and 25 % in the public sector. Also the percentage of board members not working (5.5 %) does not match with that of the general unemployment situation (11.6 %). Furthermore, 11.6 % were retired which well equals with the age distribution of the respondents, but is smaller than the overall share of retired people in the Finnish population.

In the public sector most school board members seem to have a performing occupational task. The portion of respondents in management tasks was significantly smaller. In the private sector the picture was more balanced. The overall percentage (17.2 %) of private entrepreneurs in the school boards was somewhat higher than the overall share (13.0 %) in the Finnish population, which may be due to Finland having so many small rural municipalities with private entrepreneurs in agriculture.

The most common occupational domain of the school board members was other services, followed by health care and education services. The total proportion (79 %) of board members in service tasks was slightly larger than the general share (73 %) of people working in service tasks (Tilastokeskus, 2011). Of the respondents 13.2 % worked in industry and 7.6 % in trade.

The proportions of representatives of various political parties in school boards corresponded fairly well with the results of the municipal elections in 2008. There were some deviations as well, however. There were more representatives from the Centre party and fewer from the

Conservative party than the 2008 election results would indicate. This might be due to the large number of small rural municipalities in Finland. Among the respondents the Centre party was the most common one followed by the Social democratic party and the Conservative party.

Most of the respondents had been actively involved in local politics for one or two terms, that is for either four or eight years. The most typical lengths of membership in the school board were accordingly four years and eight years. The results support the interpretation that school board members tend to be people who have their own children at school. More support was obtained when analysing the reasons for joining the school board. The most common reason was own interest followed by having own children at school. As other reasons were mentioned the will or opportunity to influence, own profession and having been asked. Own profession was a typical reason for retired teachers, principals and other people having worked in education in one role or another. A small proportion also informed that they had been ordered to the task.

The board as an institution on the municipal level

As earlier described legislation does not obligate municipalities to have a municipal school board, but there seems to be one in almost every municipality. In the present survey board members informed altogether 42 different names for the school board. In the same way as in the superintendent survey, the most common types of names referred to boards with a very broad remit. Basic education was included in the remits of almost all boards and typically also pre-primary education, general upper secondary education, early childhood education and day care, library services and adult education. Common service areas also seemed to be cultural services, youth services, sports services and free time services.

It seems that municipal councils appoint to school boards both members of the municipal council and people who merely are members of the school board with almost equal shares. A small proportion of the answerers also informed themselves to be in the municipal executive board. In addition, some were members of other boards, most commonly in the domains of culture, construction and environment, social and health care, and internal inspection. Many also participated in the work of various directorates as the representative of the municipality. When one sums up the percentiles, one notes that at least some school board members are also members of several other boards.

The significance of the superintendent for the work of the school board becomes evident when asking respondents to name five most important sources of information. The superintendent was the most common selection. Principals and school office were both common selections, too. Some significance was also given to teachers and own school visits. On the other hand, parents, students, and media were not regarded as important sources of information. Information received from the trade union seemed to be quite significant but only to a few respondents. Some respondents also wanted to name themselves as important sources of information.

It does not seem to be common in Finland that school board members represent individual schools as most of the respondents informed not to represent any school. However, 18.5 % felt to represent one school, 5.5 % two and 3.8 % three. Visits too schools, on the other hand,

seem to be more usual. During a school year, most of the answerers visited schools at least once.

According to Kanervio and Risku (2009) school boards usually select the principals but very seldom the superintendents. The superintendents are most often selected by the municipal council or the municipal executive board. As about half of the school board members also seem to be in either the municipal council or in the municipal executive board, their opinion of the selection criteria also concerning superintendents is important. The selection criteria for both the superintendent and the principal seem to be very similar. Respondents valued particularly the applicants' qualification, education, experience, personality, and the correspondence of the applicants and municipal strategies. Gender, political stand and age seemed to have only little significance in the selections.

The school board's governing function

On an average Finnish school board members appear to spend 2 hours and 12 minutes in preparing for a school board meeting. Of that time 35 minutes is spent in discussing with one's own faction. In the compilation of the agenda the role of the superintendent seems to be most significant. Most typically the superintendent compiles the agenda in collaboration with his/her staff. In 26.8 % answers the agenda was prepared by the superintendent together with the school board chair. The chair drew up the agenda alone in 21.8 % of the answers. None of the respondents indicated that there would be separate working committees for the preparation of the agenda.

The strategic decisions by the municipal council and executive board and the State seem to affect the decision-making of the school boards most and be in practice of equal importance. School board members seem to consider the influence of the superintendent to be significant for school boards' decision-making, and that of the principals quite significant. On the other hand, the views of the trade union do not seem to influence school boards much, and neither seem decisions be strongly based on party politics.

More than half of the respondents thought there to be tensions between the state and the municipalities. A little less than a third did not believe there to be any tensions, and about one fifth could not make their stand on the issue. Of those who were of the opinion that there were tensions, 55.0 % answered in an open question describing in more detail what the tensions were. Almost half of the answers dealt with finance. As Hannus et al. (2010) write there is criticism towards the state for both increasing and building its demands on municipalities on ideal thinking which does not seem to correspond to the reality and resources of the municipalities. The rest of the answers scattered into several small portions, of which one could pick up tensions concerning education policy. Particularly the tensions seemed to concern the then topical issues of decreasing the intake into upper secondary vocational education and cutting down upper secondary general school network.

Important policy issues

Concerning the societal significance of education, respondents were asked to select five out of nine options and rank their selections. In school board members' opinion education seems to have a strong role in creating social justice and a democratic welfare state. The top five

selections consisted of offering every child and young the opportunity to develop him-/herself regardless his/her starting points, and advancing citizens' welfare, culture, democracy and individuals' career opportunities.

According to the respondents the strategic development of local provisions of education is based on economic and operational needs and steered by the strategic decisions of the municipal councils. Strategic development attempts to take into consideration also optimizing state subsidies, regional needs and strategic decisions by the state.

Concerning what municipal strategies are like and how they are formulated, school board members seem to think that municipal strategies particularly aim at adapting to the changes in the operational environment trying to anticipate future changes and making collective democratic processes. When formulating their strategies, municipalities seem to emphasise the views of the municipal council and municipal officials but also those of the state.

When the respondents were asked to express their evaluation of the significance of 15 topics for the decision making of the school board, none of the presented topics was considered insignificant. As the most important topic were seen financial issues. Besides financial issues respondents particularly emphasized the importance of developing schools, optimizing school network, both long-term and short-term decision making, quality issues, strategic discussions, and results in school quality evaluations. When dealing with the topics, school board members especially seem to acknowledge paying attention to marginalizing youth, increasing financial needs of schools, rapid increases and decreases in student population and school safety. Considerable attention also appears to be given to how staff is supported, management staff is recruited, and both municipal and state statutes are abided by.

When asked about how often various issues are dealt with in school board meetings, one can find the same consistency as in the previous paragraphs, but also some interesting new information about the everyday of the meetings. Financial issues seem to dominate the agendas in the same way as the list of important policy issues. Noteworthy is that short-term everyday topics appear to overtake those of strategic thinking although respondents indicated developing schools, long-term planning, quality issues and strategic discussions among the most important topics for school board meetings. Can this be a result of Kanervio and Risku's (2009) observation that municipalities seem to possess consistent long-term strategic thinking but not the resources to lead strategic development. Do every day 'burning' issues dominate discussions and decision making because there are not enough resources to lead strategic development to proactively deal with them.

Perception of educational capabilities

In general, the picture the respondents gave about the status of their local provisions of education was quite positive. They considered their supply of educational services to be competitive and their school networks to function well. They seemed to be able to recruit well-educated teachers and maintain a school culture that advances learning and teaching. In addition, in the respondents' opinion the differences between teachers' professional skills were within acceptable limits as well as the differences between the learning outcomes of different schools.

When asked to value the significance and quality of the work of the school board, the respondents also gave quite a positive picture. They regarded their work as meaningful for the development of the local schools and felt they were respected by the local schools. They also believed municipal executive boards to take into consideration the views of the school boards. In addition, they considered themselves to have the knowledge and skills to deal with school board issues, and the school boards to be able to influence decision-making in the executive board, to make strategic selections and to bring forward solutions to the problems in the local provision of education. Besides, they did not consider the wide spectrum of issues to hinder decision-making. Furthermore, the respondents were quite satisfied with how school offices are capable of evaluating schools and analysing national school evaluations.

Concerning knowledge considered essential for the decision making of the school boards, one meets no surprise as knowledge in municipal financial management was seen as the most significant one by school board members. Once more, all presented options were regarded as important, the lowest value having been given to knowledge in legislation concerning principals' work. The top comprises, in addition to financial knowledge, knowledge in students' learning environment, local education politics, curricula, and educational legislation.

Respondents evaluated management staff in local provisions of education to have good knowledge and skills in leading the provisions and schools, too. Superintendents seem to be able to lead the work of their principals and the staff in the municipal school offices the development and quality work of schools. Principals, too, were considered to have a good capacity to develop their schools and especially to establish prerequisites for the learning of students requiring special support. There seems to be quite a little variation between the professional capacities of principals in municipalities, and according to the respondents principals can quite well support also those students who are doing well at school.

Demands of accountability

As earlier described, Finland does not have any school inspection, and national tests do not rank schools. Education providers have, however, the obligation to attend to national evaluation and to conduct local self-evaluation. It can be claimed that school board members are quite satisfied with the evaluation system. They seem to think that evaluation reports compiled by the schools themselves give boards a good picture of the real quality of individual schools. They also consider national evaluations to support principals' work in developing their schools and give a reliable picture of the quality of the local provision of education. National tests as such were not considered as significant, and sanctions by the state towards municipalities not being able to meet their obligations according to deadlines did not get much support either. There was no major satisfaction on how well school boards seem to be able to make decisions on the basis of school-based and national evaluations. Information steering by the state was not considered sufficient either.

According to the respondents, the state attempts to support strategic development in municipalities particularly by legislation, funding, projects, education and guidance. Evaluation conducted by the state was not considered to have a significant role in supporting strategic development in municipalities.

Financial issues once more topped the answers when school board members were asked The open question on what elements they should follow in the superintendent's work was In the same way as concerning the frequency of topics in school board meetings, everyday issues seemed to stand out, like staff management and the preparation of decision making. Only a few of the mentions referred to following strategic planning and development. Is this an example of the Finnish trust again, or of the focus being in the everyday management instead of strategic development?

Concerning what elements superintendents should follow in their principals' work, one finds a consistency with those in regard to following superintendents' work. The top two were exactly the same: financial issues and staff management. Also new issues appeared: principals' development work (concerning for example curriculum, teachers' and students' welfare, and school safety).

Forecasting

As the survey was conducted just prior to the municipal election, school board members were asked to name the three most important issues to be dealt with during the following four-year period. The answers comprised a large variety of issues. Municipalities seem to have a large number of challenges and both be very different and have very different kind of situations. Once more, finance topped the list although also its percentile was modest (13.3 %) as well. One can claim that in general the suggestions dealt with either concrete everyday issues as school buildings, school network and group sizes, or with issues where there have been or will be topical legislative reforms as early childhood education and special education.

Concerning future challenges, respondents were asked to rate 11 options. There, too, there was a large variation between the perceived significance of the options. The top five most important challenges comprised preventing marginalization, having a genuine discussion on values, diminishing differences between schools' learning outcomes, setting maximum group sizes and decreasing the effect of gender on learning outcomes. The results well correspond to school board members views on the societal significance of education in creating social justice. On the other hand, the top five list can be claimed to include surprises as well. Finland has in all the five PISA surveys conducted so far had the smallest variation between schools' learning outcomes. Still school board members consider that issue as one of the most essential future challenges. What is there behind the perception? To be even more equal or maintaining the present status as the economy is tightening? Noteworthy is also that school members seem to strongly oppose establishing municipal elite schools and classes and increasing the number of private schools.

Most respondents did not seem to expect any major changes between the relationship of school boards, superintendents and principals during the following five years. Quite many school board members do also anticipate that both superintendents' and principals' responsibilities will expand in the future. The anticipation concerning students' and their parents' opportunities to affect their or their education and regarding the expectations for the quality of education follow the same trend. Either they will remain the same or increase.

Summary and conclusions

During the 1990s the labour division between the state and the municipalities was in many ways reversed in Finland. Municipalities were given constitutional autonomy but also the obligation to be the main provider of public services. A large minority of Finnish schools are municipal so the examination of the local provision of education is of great importance. This chapter dealt with the local political body governing educational services, the school board.

In practice all municipalities have their own school boards. The size of the boards varies between 5 -11. Most of the school boards have quite a broad remit which includes also other areas than education. School board members seem to be people who often have their own children in school or have another kind of natural connection to education. The gender distribution of school boards is fairly balanced and there seem to be people from various kinds of educational backgrounds, professions and political parties.

School board members seem to consider the work of the boards strategic, meaningful, appreciated, and having a positive impact. The strategies that steer the work of the board are decided in the municipal councils taking into account state level strategic decisions. Finance has a significant role in the work of the school board. It is something that has to be given constant attention to when trying to anticipate future changes and trying to adapt to the changes. The school boards seem to be both efficient and well-functioning. As also otherwise in the Finnish society, decisions are tried to be made through democratic discussions where everybody is given a voice and rather than voting the solution is constructed together.

The role of the superintendent seems to be central for the school board. It is typically the superintendent who compiles the agendas and on whose initiative issues are dealt with. As the school board does not select, nor resign or evaluate, the superintendent, the superintendent also has a strong position in relation to the school board. As municipalities have a constitutional autonomy and are the main provider of educational services, one may wonder why legislation does not recognise the office of the supreme education official in local administration at all. Due to that there are no qualifications for the office either. That superintendents enjoy the trust, they seem to do, however, indicates that they are well up to their task.

The return rate of the present study can be considered good concerning the school boards but only moderate concerning school board members. However, the distribution of the respondents mostly represents the overall distribution well. Also, the results of the study correspond well to those of other similar studies. Thus, one could assume that one could consider the results also to have at least some broader generalizability.

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