
The Curse of Success: the impact of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment on the discourses of the teaching profession in Finland

MARJAANA RAUTALIN & PERTTI ALASUUTARI

University of Tampere, Finland

ABSTRACT In the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is an international comparative learning assessment measuring young people's knowledge and skills, Finland has been ranked at the top in the two rounds conducted and reported so far. In this article, the authors examine the discourses within which Finland's PISA results have been interpreted by the teaching profession in Finland, and how these interpretations of Finland's PISA success together with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's PISA may affect national education policy in the future. The main question posed is how do teachers interpret excellence so as to support their attempt to improve their working conditions, when the international success of Finnish education could also be used as proof that all is well. The data comprise editorials published in the official organ of the teachers' trade union in Finland, *Opettaja-lehti*. The analysis shows that in the editorials, success is explained mainly by the expertise of Finnish teachers and their university education. However, the editorials also argue that there is a discrepancy between the good PISA results and the present meagre investments in the education system, the deteriorating school network and the poor appreciation of the education system in Finland. Thus, the editorials use the national PISA results to demand more resources for the Finnish education system.

Introduction

Finland has recently been basking in educational glory due to its achievements in various comparative surveys of educational attainment in comprehensive schools. The recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study, led by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), has turned the Finnish education system and, more precisely, the Finnish comprehensive school system into a success story (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, 2004). In the study which aims to measure 15-year-old-students' learning performance in reading literacy, mathematic literacy, scientific literacy as well as problem solving, Finnish teenagers have scored top marks in two rounds conducted and reported so far.[1]

Compared with the previous OECD indicator studies Finland has participated in, the PISA study and the results achieved in it can be considered exceptional. According to the study, the learning outcomes of Finnish comprehensive schools are excellent. Thus, especially at the government official level in Finland, it has been argued that the existing practices in national comprehensive schooling should not be altered. Rather, it has been concluded that the Finnish education system has proved exemplary in international comparison and thus can serve in many

respects as a model for those countries that have scored lower than Finland (see, for example, Laukkanen, 2005, 2006).

Considering the PISA study from the viewpoint of teachers in Finland, the national success appears interesting. Finland's PISA results were published at a time when there was a lot of public discussion about Finnish teachers being very dissatisfied with the general appreciation of their profession and with their general working conditions. Various studies conducted in the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium reported teachers' complaints about growing workloads, more difficult students, low pay and low overall respect for the teaching profession in Finland (see, for example, Salo & Kinnunen, 1993; Viinamäki, 1997; Simola & Hakala, 2001; Virta & Kurikka, 2001; Syrjäläinen, 2002; Webb et al, 2004a, b). Among other things, the studies argue that teachers' dissatisfaction is due to the insufficient economic resources in the national education system and the central educational reforms introduced in Finland in the 1990s (see, for example, Syrjäläinen, 2002; Webb et al, 2004a, b). Hence, it is interesting to see how Finnish teachers as a profession view the PISA results, in which the Finnish education system is argued to be both of high quality and efficient in international comparison.

The reactions of Finnish teachers to the national PISA success are particularly interesting from the viewpoint of the sociology of professions. In the sociology of professions it is argued that along with changes in society, the representatives of occupational groups tend to join forces and create strategies in order to ensure certain priorities for themselves in the new situation.[2] The trade union of Finnish teachers, the OAJ (the Trade Union of Education in Finland), and its official organ, *Opettaja-lehti*, have been particularly active in defending teachers' interests amidst past societal changes in Finland.[3] Hence, the reactions of the trade union and of its official organ are particularly interesting when studying the response of the profession to the national PISA success. The analysis of *Opettaja-lehti's* editorials is especially interesting in this respect: the editorials typically list the profession's official opinions on political issues, and state officials and policy makers seek them out in the editorials.[4]

The analysis of the teaching profession's reactions to the national PISA results is relevant, since it reveals one part of the process through which policies concerning education are to take shape in one OECD member country. In this case study, our aim is to scrutinise the impact of the OECD's PISA study on Finnish education policy.[5] The case study is part of a larger research project entitled 'Knowledge Production, Power, and Global Social Change: the interplay between the OECD and nation states', which analyses the role of the OECD in global governance. We believe that although the OECD does not have any formal jurisdiction over its member countries, it has been fairly successful in directing the socio-political development in them. By giving its member countries comparative statistical information on their performance, by making recommendations about how to improve, and by applying peer pressure to the governments of its members countries (Pagani, 2002), the OECD has set the standards for desirable social development, thereby contributing to defining the future direction Western economies are to take in their development (Alasuutari, 2005). Nevertheless, in contrast with other international organisations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund or the European Union (EU), the OECD's influence on national policies does not emanate from budgetary power or its ability to issue sanctions. If anything, its power to affect national policies, and thus the socio-political development in its member countries, is based on the quality of its advice and expertise as perceived by its member countries (see, for example, Dostal, 2004, p. 446). It has been argued that in the field of education, especially OECD indicator studies [6], which provide member states with systematic rankings on their educational performance, have become increasingly effective in creating competition between different member countries, thus affecting national education policies (see, for example, Laukkanen, 1994; Rinne et al, 2004).

Of course, the forms of governance to be adopted and the policies to be brought into play in an individual member country are always an outcome of intricate processes where the suggestions presented by the OECD and the views and interpretations of various national actors concur, thus yielding new forms of knowledge and practices. That is, the direction the policies are to take in an individual OECD member country is never attributable to one single actor. Rather, the totality is always an outcome of a dense network of social relations and material conditions, coupled with conflicting and converging definitions of the situation.

In order to identify the impacts of the OECD's PISA study on the decisions to be made in Finnish education policy and how the reactions of the teaching profession contribute to them, we pose the following research questions: *What are the discourses used in the editorials of Opettaja-lehti when the national PISA results are discussed? How are the interpretations of the PISA results and their implications used to justify the policy measures proposed?*

The OECD is a much-cited international intergovernmental organisation (IGO), but its role in global governance has been only poorly understood.[7] In the field of education, there are studies available that discuss the impact of the OECD on national education policies, but these studies analyse the role of the OECD only indirectly (see, for example, Vickers, 1994; Henry et al, 2001; Rinne, 2004, 2006; Rinne et al, 2004; Kallio, 2006; Niukko, 2006a, b). In most of these studies, an attempt is made to show policy convergence either by an analysis of official government interviews or by comparing the recommendations given in OECD reports and national reforms. However, the actual mechanisms explaining the impact of the OECD ideas and recommendations on the decisions made at the national level have not been studied. In an earlier article published in this journal, Risto Rinne et al (2004) argue that the OECD has had a major influence on Finnish education policy (p. 475). The way they arrive at this conclusion is to highlight the problems, criticisms and recommendations the organisation has put forward and pointed out to Finland in its periodic country and thematic reviews, and to contrast these with the reforms actually realised in the Finnish education sector. However, based on the analysis presented in the article, it does not become evident whether the reforms carried out in Finland are due to the influence of the OECD education policy, caused by domestic challenges, or are because other international organisations have pursued similar ideas.

In this particular case study analysing the impact of the OECD's PISA study on Finnish education policy, our aim is to probe the very roots of social change in one OECD member country. By analysing the ways in which the results of the OECD's PISA study are *used* by the OAJ, in this case in the editorials of *Opettaja-lehti*, our aim is to show how these interpretations are likely to contribute to future decisions in national comprehensive education.

The present article is organised as follows: first, we present the empirical data, methods and theories used in the study. Second, we briefly discuss the results achieved by Finland in the PISA study. Then, we move on to examine the four ways in which the national PISA success and the potential causes of it have been interpreted in the editorials of *Opettaja-lehti*. Finally, we discuss how the interpretations presented in the editorials of *Opettaja-lehti* are likely to change Finnish comprehensive education and whether these changes will serve the interest of Finnish teachers.

The Data, Methods and Theories

The Status of the Empirical Data

The empirical data used in the study consist of editorials published in *Opettaja-lehti* during the period January 2001 to October 2005. The results of the first round of the PISA study, that is to say of PISA 2000, were published on 12 December 2001, whereas the results of the second round, of PISA 2003, came out on 7 December 2004. The empirical material therefore covers not only the time between the two studies but also a period of almost one year both before and after the publication of the PISA results. This is significant inasmuch as our aim is to show how the discourses within which teachers in Finland discuss their professional standing have changed as a consequence of the national PISA success. With the analysis of the editorials we are not able to encompass the whole gamut of Finnish teachers' views or opinions in relation to the PISA results. This is not even our objective. Rather, our aim is to analyse the discursive frames within which the national PISA results have been interpreted by the official organ of the trade union, *Opettaja-lehti*, and how these interpretations may affect the decisions to be made concerning comprehensive education in Finland. As noted in the introduction, due to its long and close connections to the trade union, *Opettaja-lehti* has played a significant role in determining the direction of the national education system. Therefore, it is interesting and important to study its role, particularly in introducing to the agenda viewpoints that serve the interests of teachers as a profession.

The Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The methodological approach used in this study can be characterised as discourse analysis. We refer to the term 'discourse' as defined and used by Michel Foucault (1972). According to Foucault, discourse can be defined not only as a group of signs or statements (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) belonging to the same discursive formation, but also as a practice that systematically forms the objects of which it speaks. Thus, the term 'discourse' refers not only to the use of signs designating things, but also to the 'more' that renders them irreducible to language and to speech. According to Foucault, the central object of analysis is exactly this 'more', which needs to be revealed and described (Foucault, 1972, pp. 55, 131). Foucault's characterisation of discourses looks at language use not only from the viewpoint of meaning – i.e. how signs designate things – but also from the viewpoint of action – i.e. how signs also form and affect the reality in which they are used.

The productive nature of discourses in Foucault's theory is also closely related to the emphasis that knowledge and power are intertwined and affect each other reciprocally. Power, in this sense, does not refer only to repression – i.e. to a person's (or institution's) ability to carry out his or her will – regardless of resistance (Weber, 1978, p. 926). Rather, it is seen as productive in a broader sense – i.e. as a network of dominance entangled with knowledge and with manifold subject positions and identities of the actors involved (Foucault, 1972, 1980; Alasuutari, 1996, pp. 18-22; 2004, pp. 34-35, 69-70).

When analysing the editorials of *Opettaja-lehti*, we therefore pay attention not only to the discursive frames within which the national PISA results are interpreted, but also to the various identities and subject positions produced when the national PISA results and the potential causes of them are discussed in *Opettaja-lehti*. According to Foucault (1972), it is not unimportant what kind of interpretations of reality are produced in each context, because each interpretation of the situation, when materialised in organisational forms, gives rise to new discourses and forms of knowledge, which in turn affect the attitudes and practices to be adopted by the actors involved. For instance, if the national PISA success were accepted as attributable to the good planning of national education and to the felicity of the reforms carried out nationally, this may have as a consequence that the prevailing practices in national comprehensive schooling will not be altered.

In this research project, by carrying out case studies on the uses and effects of OECD knowledge production in Finland, we also aim to make a contribution to the theoretical discussion about international influence on social change in individual nation states. In this discussion, the key question is often formulated by asking whether, under what conditions and in what ways policy convergence takes place. Critical assessments of policy convergence studies and of theories and empirical studies of international institutions point out the challenges for future research and theorising. According to Bennett (1991), studies on policy convergence among advanced industrial states are often based on an overtly deterministic logic, a static conception of convergence and an unclear specification of the aspects of policy that are supposed to be converging. In a similar vein, Martin & Simmons (1998) criticise earlier research for focusing on proving that institutions matter, without sufficient attention to constructing well-delineated causal mechanisms or explaining variation in institutional effects. The critics recommend that more attention be paid to domestic politics rather than treating the state as a unit (Bennett, 1991; Garrett & Lange, 1995; Cortell & Davis, 1996; Martin & Simmons, 1998; Botcheva & Martin, 2001; Kastner & Rector, 2003). This is because, if IGOs affect global social change, they do so by influencing social and political developments and decision making in nation states, and such influences presuppose mechanisms. On the other hand, the policies that the IGOs expect or recommend the nation states to implement do not come from out of the blue; the issues on the agenda are brought there by representatives of nation states. The totality is a dense network of social relations and material conditions, coupled with conflicting and converging definitions of the situation.

To capture the complex nature of the impact of IGOs on a single nation state, we approach the case using the governmentality framework developed by Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1991; Rose & Miller, 1992; Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999). We not only study the OECD knowledge production and publications, but also the ways in which different actors in a member country are active in defining the OECD special projects agenda, and the way they use or make references to the OECD reports in justifying or criticising political decisions both in official documents and in the media.

The governmentality framework is useful for analysing whether the role of the OECD is due to its ability to affect the frameworks and discourses within which national economies and economic and social policies are perceived and assessed, including the criteria by which the OECD countries are compared with each other. In this continuously ongoing process, including different subject positions from OECD civil servants all the way to voters, political parties and non-governmental organisations, dominant discourses are materialised in organisational forms, which in turn give rise to new discourses and forms of knowledge.

The PISA Results for Finland

In the first two PISA Studies conducted and reported thus far Finland has been placed among the top countries (see note [1]). The PISA study has proved, among other things, that the uniformity of students' performance between different regions and between boys and girls is Finland's special forte. The differences between the strongest and weakest results in Finland are also among the smallest of the countries surveyed. According to the study, the variation in performance is only very slight between various language groups. In addition, the survey revealed that socio-economic background has a lower impact on Finnish students' performance than elsewhere in the countries surveyed (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, 2004). The OECD has also credited Finland for the efficiency of its education system: according to the latest OECD *Education at a Glance* report, in Finland the good results at the comprehensive school level are achieved with average resources in education, i.e. with average expenditure on, and time used for, education when compared with other OECD and EU countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006).

However, unlike many other OECD indicator studies, the PISA study does not include any analysis of the factors contributing to country-specific results. The more specific analysis of country-specific results and the reasons contributing to them stay at the national level. In Finland, the ministry in charge of implementing the PISA study at the national level, the Ministry of Education, has so far financed and published, in collaboration with the Institute for Educational Research at the University of Jyväskylä, two, more thorough, PISA reports (Väljjarvi & Linnakylä, 2003; Kupari & Väljjarvi, 2005a). These reports, including ministry-level interpretations of the national PISA results and the factors contributing to them, constitute one of the basic instruments when examining the PISA study's impact on national education policy. For instance, along with the credit given to Finnish educational reforms and national teacher training, the reports also point out issues of development. The reports suggest, among other things, that the few shortcomings in the national learning performances could be remedied by considering alternative teaching methods and materials (Väljjarvi et al, 2003, pp. 195-197; Kupari & Väljjarvi, 2005b, pp. 229-232). Where the ministry presents its views on the national PISA results in its reports, the teaching profession aims in its own publication to bring out teachers' interpretations of the results and the reasons behind them.

The High Level of Expertise among Finnish Teachers

Considering how the national PISA results were received in the editorials of *Opettaja-lehti*, we observed that the attitude towards Finland's PISA results was very positive throughout the period studied. One of the main ways of coming to terms with the national PISA results was to emphasise that Finland's high ranking in the PISA assessments is due to the high level of expertise among Finnish teachers. One proof evinced is a reference to the average investments in education in Finland compared with other OECD countries:

The learning performances of Finnish comprehensive school students have again been found in an international comparison to be excellent. The OECD report 'Education at a Glance' acknowledges Finland not only for the quality of its education but also for its regional and gender equality.

Since here the costs of education are only on the OECD average, quality is achieved through good work. The results are attributable to the teachers. According to the report, Finland's

success is explained to a large extent by the university-level education of the teachers and the skill naturally accompanying this. (*Opettaja-lehti*, 26 September 2003)

In the above quote, the good national PISA results are explained by Finnish teachers' high standard of professional expertise, resulting especially from their university education. The argument that the good results are attributable to Finnish teachers is further strengthened by the claim that because the resources used in education in Finland are only 'on the OECD average', the PISA success cannot be understood in any other way than as resulting from the high level of professional expertise among Finnish teachers.

In the editorials, the link between the high national PISA ranking and the high level of expertise among Finnish teachers is also constituted by referring to features characterising the national comprehensive school system. It is argued that behind the good PISA results are factors such as selectivity, the autonomy of Finnish teachers, and that teaching is pupil-driven:

The Finnish school system and Finnish schoolchildren were accorded thanks and praise in the international evaluation, i.e. the PISA Study published in December. Young Finns were estimated to be the best readers in the OECD countries. In mathematics and natural sciences they were also ranked at the very top.

Sound reasons for the Finns' success is readily available: the Finnish teachers are of the highest level, only the so-called 'A group' makes the selection, schools and teachers act independently, and teaching is pupil-centred. (*Opettaja-lehti*, 18 January 2002)

The emphasis on Finnish teachers' high level of professional expertise is also used to convey the impression that all teachers working in Finnish comprehensive schools are perfectly eligible for their profession and that unfit teacher candidates have already been sifted out at the entrance examination stage. The emphasis on Finnish teachers' independence is used to strengthen the argument that Finnish teachers can make autonomous decisions. Using the individual teaching methods as an explanation for the good learning performances refers again to the virtues created by the Finnish teachers' training – education which has been largely acknowledged both at the international and national levels.

By the different means used in the arguments, the editorials link the PISA success to Finnish teachers' high level of professional expertise, produced by their university education. The main argument evinced is that the competent and selected Finnish teachers are behind the good results – not the successful planning of education, supportive families or even ambitious students. In this emphasis, the editorials differ from the ministerial views, according to which the national success is mostly attributable to the successful planning of national education. The editorials' views also differ from the profession's earlier views. Finnish teachers have not traditionally emphasised the role of their university education and their high level of professional expertise when defending their professional interests in changing conditions. Rather, the current 'teacherism' evident in the editorials was preceded by the professional identity constructed for the former elementary school teacher. In that identity construction, it was characteristic to emphasise the vocational character of the work and the duty to pass on knowledge to others (Rinne & Jauhiainen, 1988; see also Rinne, 1988, 1989). This kind of moral discourse can also be identified in the editorials preceding the publication of the PISA results. In these, teachers' professional interests were advocated by appealing to the vocational nature of their work (*Opettaja-lehti*, 13 September 2002; 16 May 2003). However, it could be argued that the PISA study and, along with it, the international recognition of the Finnish school system provided teachers with a stronger tool than the emphasis on vocation to further their professional interests.

Meagre Investments in the Education System

Another way of coming to terms with the national PISA results in *Opettaja-lehti* was to show that there is a clear inconsistency between the outstanding PISA results and the investments allocated to the education system. Related to this, the editorials express the fear that due to Finland's success in the PISA study, decision makers might come to the conclusion that the investments allocated to comprehensive schools should remain unchanged or even be reduced, since the system already produces good results. Possible cuts in state subsidies especially are brought into the discussion, but

a fear about the future of the teaching of the Finnish language is also expressed. It is argued that unless the investments allocated to basic education are increased, the few shortcomings in the learning performances shown by the PISA study cannot be overcome:

In the international evaluation, the PISA Study, published in December, the Finnish school system and Finnish schoolchildren came in for thanks and praise ...

In Finland the findings of the evaluation survey commanded attention at the time of publication. The decision makers took note of it in their speeches and the matter was addressed in several editorials. But then came the public holidays at the turn of the year and the matter appeared to have been forgotten. Given that the weak position of the mother tongue in our schools has long been discussed and that more resources have been demanded, the survey would appear to negate the reasons evinced for the demand. The work of the education officials in the interests of the mother tongue would appear to be going to waste and there is therefore a reluctance to flaunt the achievements of the survey, or indeed even to make mention of them.

The findings of the evaluation survey were flattering to Finland, but still do not remove the need for additional resources: the success did not permeate all subfields of the mother tongue. The survey moreover revealed that in many other subfields of education there remains work to be done, in Finland, too. (*Opettaja-lehti*, 18 January 2002)

By referring to the decision makers' silence regarding the PISA results and to the unsuccessful efforts of state officials for the improvement of Finnish language teaching, this extract argues that the situation is paradoxical: the decision makers are willing to take the credit for the PISA results by highlighting the strengths of the comprehensive schooling institution, but they are not willing to concede its deficiencies, i.e. the lack of resources. In that way, the opposite conclusion – i.e. that the good results in international comparison show that the resources are sufficient – is rejected.

Instead of drawing the opposite conclusion that the PISA results are proof of Finnish basic education being relatively well resourced and efficient, as is emphasised in the 2006 OECD *Education at a Glance* report, the editorials blame insufficient resources for the few weaknesses that the national PISA reports point out. For instance, the reports suggest that the few shortcomings in the Finnish sample could be remedied by improving pedagogy and by developing teaching materials (see, for example, Välijärvi et al, 2003, pp. 195-197; Kupari & Välijärvi, 2005b, pp. 229-232), but these suggestions are not mentioned in the editorials. This is, of course, very much in line with the other main interpretation presented in the editorials, according to which the good results are due to the teachers' high level of professional proficiency. Taking up the suggestion to consider other teaching methods and materials for better performances would have undermined that argument.

The fact that Finland excelled in the PISA study in spite of low unit costs in education was also used as grounds for demanding more resources for basic education:

If it was possible to applaud Finland and the Finnish school system by reason of the PISA Study some time ago, the recently published OECD report 'Education at a Glance' tells a very different story. It shows that with regard to the level of costs, Finland is well below the average for the OECD countries. Whereas the average cost of a single pupil in the entire school system is on average 6,400 Euros in the OECD countries, the corresponding figure for Finland is 6,000 Euros. This, too, provides reason to demand a full rise in unit costs ...

The budget-makers should hold fast to two basic tenets: welfare and information society Finland. The young people are in a decisive position. The politicians could make funding for education and improving the financial position of students a point of honour – and not only in their pre-election and ceremonial speechifying. Finland cannot and should not compete with quantity and cheap prices; in knowledge, skills and expertise we can be among the best in the world. (*Opettaja-lehti*, 26 September 2003)

In this extract, Finnish pupils' high level of achievement in learning skills in spite of low unit costs is not considered proof of the efficiency and good quality of the education system. Instead, the editorial takes up the low unit costs as evidence that Finland is lagging behind the OECD countries' average. Thus, the rhetoric turns the OECD average into a norm that should be at least achieved, if

not exceeded, by raising the unit costs. In the last sentence, keeping the unit costs low is associated with 'compet[ing] with quantity and cheap prices', which is juxtaposed with the goal of excelling in knowledge, skills and know-how.

In the second paragraph, the requirement for more resources for education is also justified by the premise that Finland's status as a welfare and information society must be defended. This is done by arguing that young people (education and students' economic status) are in a crucial position in this respect.

The same theme – linking education to the defence of the welfare society – occurs in many editorials. Through this association, the editorials address the concern that the state subsidies allotted to municipalities are shared out in such a way that other municipal welfare services, such as social services and health care, receive a much bigger share than education (for example, *Opettaja-lehti*, 17 May 2002; 5 December 2002; 10 September 2004). As a remedy, the editorials suggest that to ensure sufficient resources for basic education, and thus Finland's future as a welfare society, subsidies should be earmarked for education (for example, *Opettaja-lehti*, 10 September 2004).

The Deteriorating School Network

One of the ways of interpreting the PISA results was also to argue that the good and homogenous learning achievements of Finnish teenagers are due to the principle of equal comprehensive education. In this context especially, the role of the extensive school network was emphasised. In this emphasis, the editorials agree with the argument presented in the national PISA report: the uniform quality of the results is due to the equal learning opportunities in Finland (Väljörvi et al, 2003, p. 196). However, the editorials also argue that if the plans of the government of Finland are carried out, the high and homogenous quality of the learning achievements will be endangered. According to the concern expressed, despite the good and homogenous results achieved by Finland in the PISA study, the decision makers in the government are about to make cuts in the school network in order to cut the costs of education:

The report of the globalisation group considering the future of Finland was submitted a week ago to Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen ... In addition to labour market issues, the report addresses the importance of education and expertise to Finland's success in the global economy. The report gives exceptional credit to teachers and teacher education, but also expresses concern about the attractiveness of teaching as a profession. After this acknowledgement, however, the report becomes critical. Just as Finland has achieved some repute in the PISA Study and other studies, there comes a call to tighten our belts. The report initially deems it positive that basic general education is within the reach of every Finn, but then requires that the network of schools be cut and studies at upper secondary level restricted. It is claimed that resources are 'needlessly' expended on maintaining school premises.

It is good that the report calls for improvements in the teaching aids in comprehensive schools and in the teachers' working conditions, but paradoxical that this should be brought about by cuts in the network of schools. If we begin to thin out the network of schools, we shall be sawing off the very branch for which the globalisation work group applauds Finland: equality in education and equal access to education. Although, according to the report, the call to adapt notably concerns towns, what is left unsaid is that the schools in the remote areas have already been adapted. Apparently there is no longer any need to improve teachers' working conditions in the schools outside the built-up areas. It seems that the praise and the demands were written by two different individuals. (*Opettaja-lehti*, 19 November 2004)

In this editorial commenting on the report of the working group on globalisation organised by the government of Finland, the author contrasts the praise given to Finnish comprehensive education with the recommendation that the school network should be cut in order to save on the costs of school premises. It is argued that it is illogical to both applaud the education system and to suggest cuts in it – in other words, that it would naturally follow from praising the education system that the resources must be left intact, if not increased. The editorial does not mention any of the reasons given for the proposed cuts, for instance, the fact that the age cohorts are getting smaller. Instead,

the text attempts to create the impression that good results can no longer be achieved in sparsely populated areas of Finland.

The editorials also argue that the thinner school network has caused teachers to be exhausted and increased exclusion among Finnish teenagers. It is argued that due to the cuts made in the state subsidies back in the 1990s, Finnish teachers have had enormous problems in maintaining the good quality of teaching in comprehensive schools. In addition, it is argued that due to the cuts in the school network, teenagers living in rural areas no longer have the same rights to basic education as teenagers living in urban areas of Finland. This causes inequality and exclusion among Finnish teenagers. The following quotation illustrates this argument:

The annual OECD report 'Education at a Glance' compares information on education in its 30 member countries, this time for 2003 ... According to the report, the Finnish school system achieves good results even though it expends less money than the OECD average. We are some 0.9-1.1 percentage points behind the other Nordic countries measured in terms of gross domestic product (GDP). While Sweden and Denmark have increased their investments in education, Finland has stood still.

In the last decade, Finland embarked on drastic cutbacks in teaching. Among other things, most of the state subsidies withheld have not yet been restored to the schools. The deleterious nature of these measures will manifest itself when the teachers can no longer stretch with their reduced resources. The large number of those being marginalised is one warning sign of what is to come.

...

The most recent group of those marginalised is those pupils whose home municipalities are prepared to cut the future with redundancies and by closing down viable schools. The quality and cover of teaching constitutes a discriminatory factor among pupils. The decision makers are unwilling to look this threat of marginalisation in the face as it is a question of money. Nevertheless, the exacerbating threat of marginalisation is to be read in the OECD report if people so wish. (*Opettaja-lehti*, 23 September 2005)

In this extract, the demand to raise the unit costs is linked with the argument that because of insufficient spending on education, particularly in small rural communities, young people are at risk of exclusion.

In other editorials discussing this theme, the blame is put particularly on the local municipalities, which spend money on other policy areas. As a remedy, the editorials suggest that municipal taxes be raised (for example, *Opettaja-lehti*, 1 February 2002; 13 June 2003) or that educational services be secured by merging municipalities (for example, *Opettaja-lehti*, 11 May 2001; 14 September 2001; 13 June 2003; 20 May 2005). In some editorials, the deterioration of the school network is seen as a natural consequence of migration from rural areas to urban areas but, in this context, it is suggested that a certain number of 'village schools' should be preserved, because the existence of the village schools themselves helps to prevent the increasing migration (for example, *Opettaja-lehti*, 10 August 2001; 4 June 2004).

Politicians' Disregard of the Problems of Education

The fourth theme that occurred in the editorials dealing with the PISA results was the argument that although Finland has excelled in PISA, Finnish decision makers have not paid much attention to education and its problems. The fact that it has not been put on the political agenda is interpreted in these editorials as a lack of appreciation for comprehensive education. The following extract illustrates this argument:

A few weeks before the parliamentary elections in Germany, schools and education have emerged as a burning issue. The OECD PISA Study placed the German schools at the bottom end of the comparative survey, and since then there has been widespread discussion on the quality and resources of education in that country. The media have been in Finland wondering at how Finland came to be ranked first in the survey and the education politicians have been asked to account for this. Opinion polls in Germany have shown that in the opinion of the German public, improving schools and day-care centres is one of the most important election issues.

Parliamentary elections will also be held in September in Sweden. There, too, a heated political debate on schools has developed, in which both the main political parties have endeavoured to raise their profiles.

In Finland, parliamentary elections will be held in the next half year, but once again it seems that the parties are not sufficiently interested in school policy and do not consider it important enough to be included among the frontline issues. ...

The politicians are not interested in the oversized teaching groups in schools, special teaching and shortage of teachers. It is highly unlikely that the question of schools will make it even into the semi-important electoral themes. (*Opettaja-lehti*, 30 August 2002)

This text argues that there is a disparity between Finland's high rankings in the PISA study and the assumption that politicians and political parties do not see education as an important political theme. According to this argument, because the PISA results have received much attention in other OECD countries and made education a burning political issue, the same should happen in Finland, especially because the results were so good. This expected causal logic is built on the implicit assumption that politicians should bring education to the agenda as a sign of gratitude for the teachers' good work and as an indication that they consider education an important institution. Thus, because education is not on the agenda, it is argued that politicians do not attach importance to education. In this way, the text ignores the prevailing interpretation, according to which education has become an important political issue in Germany and Sweden precisely because they have not done so well in the PISA study. Typically, it is defects and problems, especially if they are related to topics deemed important, that are brought to the political agenda.

Although the editorials of *Opettaja-lehti* argue that the political decision makers should bring education more strongly to the agenda *because of* Finland's excellent performance in the PISA study, several editorials do acknowledge that education is ignored as a political issue because the PISA triumph gives the impression that everything is fine and that education is problem-free. The following quote is an example of this:

From the perspective of Finnish education policy, an important education policy report came before Parliament one week ago. Some ten years have elapsed since the last corresponding report. ...

It is true that three years is a short time for final conclusions on the effects of the new legislation, but the present problems of education and the focal areas of the future are unparadoxically bypassed in the report. The report as a whole imparts an almost glossy picture of the present state of education in schools. One could even call it laudatory, as, for example, it deems the use of lay-offs as a means of achieving savings a scourge all but overcome. ...

The importance of education to Finnish society and to the Finns surely needs no further justification. However, the further development of education needs to be placed centre-stage in the political debate. Here the report is in a significant position. ...

Since this is indeed a report, general conclusions are insufficient; there is a need for proposals for concrete measures. However, in many cases, these continue to bask in the glow shed by the general findings of the PISA Study. ...

The report sent out a totally wrong message: all is well. In the last ten years, the unit price of teaching has been brutally slashed. Recently, resources have been refunded to the municipalities, but not always reaching right to the schools. Since, once again, there is talk of tightening austerity measures, there is a real danger that the report will be an aid to cutting teaching once again. (*Opettaja-lehti*, 28 March 2002)

In this editorial, it is argued that the decision makers are ready to take the credit for Finland's PISA success but that they are not ready to recognise its problems. By referring to a cut in the unit costs of education made in the 1990s, the text argues that resources are scarce. The writer also expresses the fear that because the PISA success has sent out the message that Finnish comprehensive education is in an excellent condition, the government will again cut resources from education.

The same concern that education, particularly comprehensive schooling, suffers in the state and local municipal budget in comparison with other policy areas is also raised in editorials that do not include any reference to the PISA study. In these editorials, the comparison is made between education and other policy areas, especially social and health services. *Opettaja-lehti* argues that other areas have received more attention, whereas comprehensive schooling has gone by the board (for example, *Opettaja-lehti*, 2 May 2003; see also *Opettaja-lehti*, 23 March 2001). It is argued that because of major changes in society and because of many reforms in the education sector, education deserves more attention in politics (for example, *Opettaja-lehti*, 16 November 2001). It is also argued that even though education is recognised as one of the main themes in the government platforms, reviews and in budget proposals (for example, *Opettaja-lehti*, 2 May 2003; 5 March 2004; 27 August 2004), even then no extra money is appropriated for education, and particularly for comprehensive schooling in Finland.

All in all, by referring to the political decision makers' disregard for education, the editorials imply that politicians do not sufficiently realise how important education, and particularly comprehensive schooling, is for the nation. In that sense, the editorials imply, education and the people working in that sector do not have the respect they deserve, particularly because the PISA study has demonstrated what good work they have done. Through that route, the logic of the argument leads to demands for more money for education as a sign of appreciation and as a reward.

Conclusion

The main question posed in this article is how did Finnish teachers as a profession interpret Finland's number-one ranking in the PISA study in such a way that it could support their attempt to improve their working conditions, when the international success of Finnish education could also be used as proof that all is well? To reiterate the main results of the analysis, the editorials of *Opettaja-lehti*, the organ of the teachers' trade union, argued that, for the most part, Finland scored high thanks to the high level of expertise among its teachers. By claiming that teachers can take the credit for Finland's PISA results, the editorials aimed to ensure that their work will be better acknowledged and that their good training will be secured in the future. In various ways, the editorials also attacked the prevalent assumption that the PISA results are proof that Finnish basic education is in good shape. For instance, instead of considering Finnish pupils' good achievements in learning skills in spite of low unit costs as proof of the efficiency of the education system, the editorials used the low unit costs as evidence that Finland is 'lagging behind' the average of the OECD countries. The editorials also included the argument that education deserves more attention and resources *because of* the excellent results of the PISA study as a sign of appreciation for its importance. The editorials also blamed insufficient resources for the few weaknesses that the national PISA reports point out.

All in all, in order to prevent people from seeing the good PISA results as proof of the good planning of comprehensive education in Finland, *Opettaja-lehti* aimed to show that there are still a number of problems to solve in Finland regarding the quality of comprehensive education: basic education is gravely under-resourced, the school network is deteriorating, and the education sector does not receive as much attention and appreciation as it does in other OECD countries. By drawing attention to these problems, the editorials bolstered the argument that there is a clear contradiction between Finland's outstanding PISA results and the faulty planning of comprehensive education. This logic also supported the claim that the good results are down to the good work of the Finnish teachers, and that, in order to secure good results in the future too, the decision makers should deal with the problems quickly.

Interestingly, in discussing the PISA results, *Opettaja-lehti* did not make demands for better salaries, for an increase in teachers' in-service training, for a decrease in their workloads, or for putting an end to fixed-term contracts. These issues were discussed in the editorials throughout the period studied but in totally different contexts. Hence, it is interesting to ask why teachers did not demand a direct reward for Finland's PISA success, for instance, in terms of better salaries or better working conditions, particularly because it was greatly emphasised in the editorials that the success was due to the good work of Finnish teachers.

The emphasis on organisational questions may be due to the fact that the public PISA debate, especially the ministerial views, contained much organisational or system talk. From the perspective of *Opettaja-lehti*, it may have been more expedient to concur with the system talk already accepted as a basic element of the public PISA discourse and put the direct trusteeship questions aside. Instead, the editorials concentrated on highlighting the problems in comprehensive education and demanding solutions to them.

It is also noteworthy that the pedagogical issues – for instance, suggestions about considering alternative learning methods and materials in teaching – taken up in the national PISA reports did not find their way into the discourses of *Opettaja-lehti*. This could be because, by taking up these questions, *Opettaja-lehti* would have weakened the assumption about Finnish teachers' high level of professional expertise. Therefore, it was more expedient to omit the entire issue from the discussion.

The results of our analysis show quite well how the interpretations and suggested policy conclusions drawn from the PISA results by *Opettaja-lehti* are biased in the sense that they reflect the interests of the teaching profession. Needless to say, the same certainly goes for other actors in the process that the study has triggered in Finland and elsewhere in the world. Interpretations by various actors in the field may be more or less well grounded in the findings of the comparative study, but there are hardly any unbiased, neutral or accurate interpretations. In any case, in the final analysis, the objectivity of the interpretations is not decisive. What counts is the ability of the different actors to convince others of the relevance and importance of the points made, which may thus influence political decisions.

To return to the starting point of this study, the reason why we are interested in the PISA example is to highlight the processes through which the OECD may influence the policies adopted in its member countries. As we have emphasised, the end result is always an upshot of intricate processes giving rise to new forms of knowledge, and thus to new practices. Therefore, based on the analysis presented here, the question to be asked would be: what can be said about the contribution of the teaching profession to the changes caused by the PISA study in Finland? Unfortunately, at least at this stage of the ongoing case study, we cannot answer such a big question with any confidence or with the backing of empirical evidence. The themes taken up in the editorials of *Opettaja-lehti* have also been discussed in the Finnish Committee Reports for Education and Culture. However, the proposals for action in these contexts were in contrast to those presented in the editorials. For instance, the editorials of *Opettaja-lehti* mainly blamed insufficient resources for the slight interregional differences in the national learning performances that the national PISA reports pointed out. In the committee reports, by contrast, in the context of discussing the PISA results, the interregional differences in the national learning performances were seen as attributable to the inadequate and ineffective local evaluation of education (SiVM 6/2002 vp, 2002). In the committee reports, it was also suggested that the slight differences between Finnish boys' and girls' learning performances shown by the PISA study could be resolved by allocating extra resources to schools where they are badly needed (SiVM 12/2006 vp, 2006). In the editorials related to this theme, the demand was made for an increase of the overall resources in Finnish basic education. Thus, it seems that the PISA study has caused much discussion about Finnish comprehensive education – not only about its strengths, but also about its present problems – in various forums. However, the ways to handle these problems suggested by different groups of actors seem to be in contrast with each other.

On the whole, the PISA study has certainly given the teachers and other actors in the field of Finnish education a boost of confidence and the conviction that they are doing at least something right. It has also probably increased Finnish people's respect for the teaching profession.[8] However, it remains to be seen and to be more closely studied whether, and in what ways, the PISA study has changed or will change Finnish comprehensive education, and whether these changes will serve the interests of Finnish teachers.

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Notes

- [1] The OECD's PISA is the first international learning assessment of its kind. It does not measure the contents of individual school curricula but rather to what extent students nearing the end of compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in society (see 'What PISA Assesses' at <http://www.pisa.oecd.org/>). This is achieved by collecting information not only on student performances but also on issues affecting these performances, such as information on individual students, schools and school systems. In the first PISA study in 2000, the focus was on reading literacy. The second study conducted in 2003 focused on mathematics. The study conducted in 2006 focused on science and its results will be published on December 4, 2007. The assessment to be conducted in 2009 will again focus on reading literacy. The skills of Finnish students have been among the best in all domains assessed and reported so far. In PISA 2000, Finland finished first in reading literacy, fourth in mathematics, and third in science. In PISA 2003, Finland maintained its high level of reading literacy (first place) while further improving its performance in mathematics (first place) and science (joint first place). In the area of problem solving, which was measured for the first time in PISA 2003, Finland was placed second.
- [2] On professionalisation theory and the strategies of occupational groups to attain the status of a legitimate profession and the privileges connected to it, see, for example, Siegrist (1990) and also Berlant (1975).
- [3] Considering, for instance, the role of the trade union in educational reforms in Finland in the past, the OAJ and *Opettaja-lehti* played significant roles in negotiations concerning the national comprehensive school and the national teacher education reform back in the 1970s. In addition, the editors-in-chief of *Opettaja-lehti* have played a significant role along with representatives of the trade union in a number of wage agreements concerning Finnish teachers. For a detailed history of *Opettaja-lehti*, see, for example, the web page of the OAJ at http://www.opettaja.fi/portal/page?_pageid=95,82039&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL
- [4] *Opettaja-lehti* is the oldest weekly periodical in Finland. It is the only official publication of the OAJ and therefore is read largely by various institutional actors in the national education sector. For instance, each of the 97,000 trade union members receives the magazine as a members' benefit. In addition, every member of the Parliament of Finland and every civil servant in the National Board of Education receives the magazine. The magazine is also well read in the municipal education sector. Thus, *Opettaja-lehti* can be considered both a respected publication representing the views of Finnish teachers and a force to be reckoned with in political agenda setting in education in Finland.
- [5] This article is based on a preliminary analysis and interpretation of the editorials of *Opettaja-lehti* by Marjaana Rautalin. Based on this preliminary analysis, her text has been brought into its current written form in co-operation with Pertti Alasuutari.
- [6] In the field of education, central OECD publications also include country and thematic reviews.
- [7] See Armingeon & Beyeler (2004) for a recent ambitious, well-theorised and well-researched study about the OECD and European welfare states, analysing the impact of the OECD on national social policies on national welfare reforms. Nevertheless, the study is a good example of the problems social scientists face when trying to show the OECD's impact on national policies. Although the contributors to the study found remarkable concordance between OECD recommendations and national policies, they reject the hypothesis of a strong and direct impact. This is because the concordance can be due to the influence of other international organisations; the national reforms can be caused by domestic challenges; the policy changes can result from new constellations of domestic political power; and, finally, there may have been changes in economic paradigms, not only at the level of the OECD but also at the national level (see Armingeon, 2004, pp. 230-231).
- [8] A recent study (Väljärvi, 2006) reports that unlike in many other countries, in Finland the teaching profession is highly respected. Among the public, the teaching profession is often equated with academic professions, such as physicians or lawyers. According to the study, the teaching profession has also maintained its status as one of the most popular professions among Finnish teenagers, whereas the tendency in the other European countries has been quite the opposite.

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MARJAANA RAUTALIN is a researcher in the Department of Sociology and Social Psychology, University of Tampere, Finland. Her research interests include governmentality and, in particular, the role of the OECD in global social change. She is currently preparing her doctoral thesis on the impact of the OECD's PISA study on Finnish education policy. *Correspondence:* Marjaana Rautalin, Department of Sociology and Social Psychology, University of Tampere, FIN-33014 Tampere, Finland (marjaana.rautalin@uta.fi).

PERTTI ALASUUTARI is Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology and Social Psychology and Director of the International School of Social Sciences at the University of Tampere, Finland. He is editor of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* and has published widely in the areas of cultural and media studies and qualitative methods. His books include *Desire and Craving: a cultural theory of alcoholism* (State University of New York Press, 1992), *Researching Culture: qualitative method and cultural studies* (Sage, 1995), *An Invitation to Social Research* (Sage, 1998), *Rethinking the Media Audience* (Sage, 1999) and *Social Theory and Human Reality* (Sage, 2004). *Correspondence:* Pertti Alasuutari, International School of Social Sciences, Linna Building, University of Tampere, FIN-33014 Tampere, Finland (pertti.alasuutari@uta.fi).