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## Actantial construction of career guidance in parliament of Finland's education policy debates 1967–2020

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine the objectives and meanings of the career guidance provided in comprehensive education as set out in discussions in the Parliament of Finland. We approach the topic through an exploration of parliamentary sessions concerning three major legislative proposals for reforming compulsory education in Finland.

The premise is that the parliamentary discussions concerning guidance provided in comprehensive education reflect the rationalities that underpin guidance in different eras in Finland and elsewhere. Examining these rationalities provides a way to explore the principles which frame career guidance policy in Finland. Using the actantial model as a methodological tool, the analysis aims to discover the actantial positions in the parliamentary discussions and the interactions that emerge between these.

The various actantial narratives demonstrate the way in which guidance is influenced by wider ideological trends. The actantial analysis portrays a shift from the more structural corporatist approaches of the 1960s when the object of guidance was to fulfil the needs of society, towards more third way individualism in 1990s. The current reform of 2020 to extend compulsory education and reinforce guidance may represent some return to more structural approaches.

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## Introduction

Time and time again, research in social sciences, national policy discussions, and the OECD and European Union has identified fragmented educational paths, prolonged transitions from education to the workforce, dropping out from school and the mismatch between education and employment as problems that need to be solved. *Career guidance* has been offered as a response to these problems and the argument has been made that it can contribute to the successful education of young people, support their transition from education to the workforce and contribute to social justice (Watts, Sultana, and John 2010; Bergmo-Prvulovic 2014; Bengtsson 2015; Dale et al. 2016; Haug et al. 2020).

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In the 2000s, Finland's government programmes have also emphasised the importance of career guidance. For instance, the 2003 Government Programme of Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen's (Centre Party) Government identified 'fostering mobility and improving the speed of young people's education paths' as key missions. In practice, this meant accelerating the transition to, and graduation from, education by developing guidance (VN 2003; see also 2019).

This article examines the objectives and meanings for the career guidance provided in compulsory education as set out in education policy discussions in the Parliament of Finland. We will approach the topic by exploring parliamentary sessions concerning three major legislative proposals for reforming compulsory education in Finland. The rationalities underlying the parliamentary discussions are a matter of both universalistic and particularistic knowledge – they resemble simultaneously the universal pan-European and vernacular reasonings for career guidance. According to Roberts (2013) universalistic knowledge consists of a 'body of theory, principles and practice that can be applied in any place at any time and can be taught in professional courses and certified in professional qualifications'. Yet, they also demonstrate particularistic knowledge – for instance, details of the provision of career guidance offered in Finnish schools and universities, the opportunities offered by major employers in Finland and their legislative foundations.

We argue that the parliamentary discussions concerning guidance provided in comprehensive education reflect the objectives set for guidance in different eras and related justifications, in Finland and elsewhere. By examining these rationalities, our aim was to form an understanding of the principles providing a framework for guidance. Using the *actantial model* (Greimas 1983) as a methodological tool, we sought to discover the actantial positions in the parliamentary discussions and the interactions that emerge between these.

## The rationalities of guidance

We analysed the objectives and content determined for guidance using the *rationalities* of guidance. Simply put, rationalities mean ways to understand the world. They always contain certain basic features. According to Nikolas Rose (1999), first, they have an identifiable *moral* shape: they reflect conceptions of nature and the scope of legitimate power, its distribution among various agents, and the principles that should guide the exercise of power. Second, rationalities have been articulated in relation to some understanding of the nature of the governed object. In other words, these also have their own, specific *epistemological* character. Third, they are *idiomatic*: they have their own language with a particular vocabulary and manner of speaking.

Sultana (2014) has argued that guidance is underpinned by three main rationales. Drawing on Habermas, Sultana describes these rationalities as *technocratic* rationalities that favour efficiency and the use of guidance to align people with their environment, *hermeneutic* rationalities which focus on the individual and view guidance as supporting interpretation of and response to the world, and *emancipatory* rationalities which highlight the role that guidance can have in giving people a critical understanding of the world and in changing and transforming it. Sultana and colleagues go on to argue that these three rationalities are not distinct traditions, but rather are strands that can be woven together in different ways depending on the situation (Hooley, Sultana, and

Thomsen 2018). However, in most cases public policy approaches to career guidance tend to emphasise the technocratic strand, seeking often to position both individuals and career guidance as the means to some larger policy goal.

The (technocratic) rationalities that inform public policy approaches to career guidance were described by the OECD (2004) as being focused on economic efficiency, the effective functioning of the education system and its connection to the labour market, and the desire for social justice, or at least some mediation of existing social inequalities and inequities. More recently, attempts have been made to broaden the thematic palette that underpins career guidance policymaking to encompass health and wellbeing, the environment, and peace and justice, but the impact of such calls remains limited (Robertson 2021).

### Data, research assignment and approach

The Finnish education system consists of nine years of non-tracking and non-streaming comprehensive school. After comprehensive school, students apply for entry to upper secondary education, which is a dual system in Finland, including general upper secondary schools and vocational upper secondary schools. Both these tracks last for three years, and successful completion provides access to tertiary education. Students apply for entry to upper secondary schools during the ninth grade via a general joint application. Since August 2021, compulsory education has been extended to upper secondary level, until student turns 18. Also, higher education in Finland has a dual structure, provided by universities and universities of applied sciences. Universities emphasise scholarly research and instruction, whereas universities of applied sciences adopt a more practical approach.

The purpose of this article is to examine how the career guidance provided in comprehensive education has taken shape as part of Finland's education policy in terms of actantial functions. Actantial analysis enables us to examine the variety of narratives concerning the objects and subjects of career guidance and related education policy. We ask: 1) What actantial positions can be found in the parliamentary discussions at the Parliament of Finland from the period 1967–2020? 2) How has the actantial structure of the parliamentary discussions concerning guidance changed during the period 1967–2020?

To grasp the actantial variety in terms of temporality, our data comprise the key parliamentary discussions concerning the practical implementation of pupil guidance in comprehensive education (three discussions). The legislative processes we examined were major, extensive legislative projects which sought to reform the entire Finnish comprehensive education system (see Kalalahti and Varjo 2020; Varjo 2007):

1) The *Government proposal for the Act on the principles of the school system* (HE 44/1967) processed between April 1967 and May 1968. During the process Parliament discussed the transition to a comprehensive school system and its practical implementation for the first time since preparing a resolution on the matter in autumn 1963.

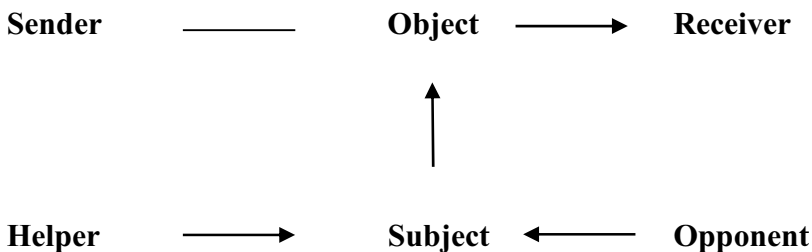
2) The *Government proposal to Parliament on legislation concerning education* (HE 86/1997), processed from June 1997 until June 1998, compiled, harmonised, and updated all education under the remit of the Ministry of Education from pre-primary education to adult education, excluding the education provided by universities and polytechnics.

3) The *Government proposal to Parliament on an Act on compulsory education and certain related acts* (HE 173/2020 vp), discussed between November and December 2020, extended compulsory education until the age of 18.

In our analysis, we used the semiotic square developed by Algirdas J. Greimas (1983) as a methodological tool. We used it to analyse the semiotic dimensions concerning career guidance (in a broad sense) in the parliamentary sessions and tensions that occurred between the dimensions. The premise for our textual analysis using Greimas' *actantial model* is that, in discussing the guidance occurring in comprehensive education in the Parliament, the Members of Parliament, the Government, and the opposition do this in the form of a narrative resembling a small-scale play, which we illustrate by using the actantial model.

In accordance with Greimas' actantial model, we use the three parliamentary discussions to distinguish between characters playing specific roles in the different phases of the narrative. As a rule, our analysis is concerned with looking for structural features that occur in all the parliamentary discussions we examined. The actantial model includes actors and actions known as *actants*. These include *subject*, *object*, *sender*, and *receiver*; in addition, the narrative may contain secondary actants (*helper* and *opponent*). Actants may be divided between several characters in a narrative or merged in the same characters. Any entity may function as an actant: a person, an idea, or some other abstract concept. A specific *actor* can be involved in several different actants ('play different roles'); similarly, several different actors may illustrate the same actant ('the actor playing a role may change'). (Greimas 1983.)

In a narrative described by the actantial model, the basic premise for actions and each narrative is the distance of the subject from the value-object it pursues (Figure 1). At the core of the actantial narrative lies the subject's aim to seize a desired object. Therefore, the subject can be the performer of a task; for its part, the object is the target or objective. The sender refers to the element initiating the task – one or more concrete persons or more abstract ideas – leading the subject to its task. By doing so, the sender determines the value objectives for the activities and serves as the justifier and motivator for the subject's actions. In turn, the receiver is the element that assesses the success of the subject's action and rewards or punishes the actants at the end of the narrative. The helper supports the subject and promotes the subject's ability to perform the set task. The opponent is a counterforce that the subject must defeat in order to accomplish the pursued goal.



**Figure 1.** The actantial model represented as a square (Greimas 1983, 207).

(Greimas 1983.) In addition to the above, we have included the addition to the actantial model presented by Eero Tarasti (2000) in our frame of analysis: an *auxiliary object* through which the subject may obtain the actual value-object.

### **Actantial analysis: guidance in parliamentary education policy discussions**

In this section we present an actantial analysis of the way in which career guidance was discussed in three parliamentary debates on comprehensive education. We begin with the Paasio I government in the 1960s, move on to look at the Lipponen government in the 1990s and conclude by looking at the Marin government of the late 2010s and early 2020s. By contrasting these three periods we can see how the nature of the debates on career guidance have shifted across time and under pressure from different contextual and ideological influences.

#### ***The 1960s: guidance to screen and sort the talent potential***

In the 1966 general election, the Left won a majority of seats in the Parliament. The Government (Paasio I) was formed by leftist parties and the Centre Party under the leadership of Rafael Paasio (Social Democrats). The subsequent period, which became known as the ‘popular front era’, was marked by a clear leftist hegemony and a strong emphasis on social planning, as construction of the welfare state emerged as a key item on the political agenda. As part of this development, the comprehensive school question was unambiguously recorded in the government programme: ‘The Government will take action to implement comprehensive education in the form of a comprehensive school’ (Government 1966).

In the changing political situation, the Government submitted a proposal for an act on the principles of the education system (HE 44/1967 vp) based on a report by the comprehensive education committee in April 1967. The comprehensive education system presented in the legislative proposal could be compared to the universal right of citizens to health care in a welfare state. At the same time, guidance was to become a distinct subject mentioned in the national core curriculum for comprehensive education and the distribution of lesson hours.

In the first narrative analysed for this article, the sender-actor is, at first, a rapid and all-encompassing change in society and production, and the new kinds of requirements this sets for the education system.

*The increasingly advanced mechanisation and automation of production, new energy sources, resources and working approaches, and computers and other devices developed in electronics are driving the development of production technology at a rapid pace. (HE 44/1967 vp, 1 [Sender]).*

As a result, the number of workers needed for performing simple tasks was declining, while the need for ‘researchers and highly educated workforce’ (HE 44/1967 vp, 1) was growing. Meeting the growing need for highly educated workforce required harnessing the nation’s stock of human capital; in practice, this meant that each young person would have to be provided with an opportunity to complete ‘education corresponding to his potential’ (HE 44/1967 vp, 2). A demand for equipping pupils with fundamental

knowledge and skills was identified in addition to a need to ‘guide them to adopt an effective studying technique and seek to instil in them a desire for constantly learning new contents and develop their competencies for further education, also for the purpose of possible re-training needs’ (HE 44/1967 vp, 3).

The second sender is pupils’ individual needs. As pupils were perceived increasingly as individuals, a need for comprehensive education to provide them with increasingly individualised study opportunities was identified. The school was tasked with providing information about alternatives while the parents were responsible for selecting the pupil’s study plan:

*Guiding the pupils through syllabi and the selection of subjects to complete studies aligned with their personal aptitudes will enable adapting the education to better correspond with the pupils’ various capabilities – –. (HE 44/1967 vp, 5 [Sender]).*

The third sender was concerned with fairness: as the popularity of grammar schools grew, those graduating with only folk school qualifications had a considerably poorer labour market status. The division of pupils into two groups at the age of around eleven occurred too early from a human perspective. It also led to wasting potential:

*The duality of our school system providing pupils with comprehensive education has never been harmonious with children’s ordinary aptitude structure as the division is based on an idea that children are divided into two, clearly distinct groups. (HE 44/1967 vp, 4 [Sender].)*

A cohesive, nine-year comprehensive school designed to foster the talents and potential of the entire cohort by identifying the various abilities and recreational activities of children emerges as the value-object set by the senders. The value-object is pursued through the accomplishment of tangible auxiliary objects: The need to provide pupils, considered more individually than before, with an opportunity to have individual study plans is identified. This was to be accomplished through syllabi in mathematics varying in terms of their scope and optional subjects. Guiding pupils in making choices requires exploring their aptitudes and hobbies over a long period, starting in primary school:

*In upper stage of comprehensive school, all pupils must be provided, within the confines of subject syllabi and, to a limited degree, also optional studies, with an opportunity to select a study plan aligned with their aptitudes and recreational activities, and those who have completed the school syllabus must be provided with equal opportunities for continuing their studies with certain prerequisites (HE 44/1967 vp, 7 [Object]).*

To respond to the changes in business and societal structures, Finland’s comprehensive education must provide ‘subjects and practical exercises that relate essentially to the business life and increase the prerequisites for making choices on a profession’ (HE 44/1967 vp, 21 [Object]). In practice, this requires that the core curriculum for comprehensive education includes ‘lesson hours reserved for both educational and instructional guidance and career counselling’ (HE 44/1967 vp, 21 [Object]).

The message of cohesive comprehensive education fostering talent and potential and supporting the (limited) educational and career choices of pupils was addressed to a range of receivers. As well as improving the opportunity structure of individual pupils and their families, it is also seeking to create an increasingly highly educated workforce oriented to lifelong learning who can play their role in the economy, and to contribute to a wider societal project of equality.



The subject-actor – PM Paasio’s left-wing Government – started its quest for the object by presenting the Government proposal for the Act on the principles of the school system (HE 44/1967 vp) to the Parliament in April 1967. The representatives of the Government and the opposition were quick to position themselves in relation to the legislative proposal and its objectives. Beginning with the presentation speech by Minister of Education Oittinen (Social Democrats), the representatives of the governing parties mostly assumed the role of a helper-actor, supporting the subject (left-wing government) in reaching the desired value-object (universal comprehensive school). Similarly, the representatives of the opposition parties as opponents criticised the justifications of the value-object – or at least presented a high number of auxiliary objects for its accomplishment.

In the referral debate, on one hand, the helpers supported the subject by echoing the significance of the object using the phrasing included in the Government proposal and, on the other, by further developing the means selected in the proposal by considering the impacts these may have. MP Breilin (Social Democrats) outlined ways in which the increasingly effective utilisation of talent potential would help pupils to orientate towards specific vocations as well as helping industry to find skills and labour. This would enable industry to gain access to increasingly high-quality manual and clerical workers. Career guidance would assume a key role: ‘I believe guidance activities promoting career selection should also be closely included in said education services – –’ (1967 vp, minutes 488 [Helper]).

In the present analysis, the Education and Culture Committee could potentially position itself as a helper or opponent – i.e. two different actants may be joined in the same actor. At the start of its committee report (SiVM. 1/1968vp), the Education and Culture Committee problematised the detachment of the comprehensive school reform (value-object) from the education system as a whole and related development:

*The legislative proposal has not paid necessary attention to the requirements for the youth training after comprehensive education in a manner that would ensure the availability of sufficient vocational and technical specialisations and educational institutes equivalent to general upper secondary education alongside actual upper secondary schools (SiVM. 1/1968vp, 3 [Opponent]).*

The actant positions remained unchanged in the processing of the committee report in the Plenary Hall. In addition to the themes presented above, the discussions concerned the contributions of central government and municipalities, and the status of teachers and school administration, all of these without actual links to guidance. The Act on the principles of the school system (L 467/1967) was adopted by the Parliament in May 1968. As a result, previous folk school, grammar school and middle school were merged into a single comprehensive school. As part of these reforms, pupil guidance was to become a distinct subject mentioned in the national core curriculum for comprehensive education and in the distribution of lesson hours. In addition, school psychologists and part-time special teachers were added to the non-teaching collective.

In 1960s, the direct aims given for career guidance were two-fold: to screen and sort the stock of human capital, and, to recognise pupils’ individual needs.



### ***The 1990s: guidance to prepare young people for diverse career paths***

In the second narrative we analysed, the first sender-actor was the urge to codify school legislation into larger wholes – the goal was to replace the previous ‘abundant and fragmented’ legislation with a ‘more concise and focused’ version (HE 86/1997, 1 [Sender]). However, it must be noted that the desire for compiling the legislation was also explicitly linked to the Government’s overall development goals such as the decentralisation of administration and the verification of the outcome of activities through evaluation.

Indeed, the second sender was cutting bureaucracy in the education system and increasing local decision-making power by transferring tasks previously carried out by central administration to education providers. An increased focus on the results of operations and a reduction in preliminary regulation such as legislation resulted in a need for new kinds of tools that can be used to investigate how the targets laid down and set for education are met in practice.

The value-object set by the sender – comprehensive education governed at the local level, whose effectiveness is verified through evaluation – was constructed through the ‘most significant operational renewals’ (HE 86/1997, 38) of the legislative project. Extending the right of parents to make selections on schools, which had been planned throughout the 1990s, served as the first auxiliary object: ‘– – the inclusion of an opportunity for the child’s guardians to select the school in which a child of compulsory education age completes his or her compulsory education is proposed’ (HE 86/1997, 38 [Object]).

The second auxiliary object was increasing the freedom of education providers in influencing the content of the education provided through weighted-curriculum education and the specialisation of schools. This was also a reform planned throughout the 1990s. The aim was to encourage education providers to create a profile of their education institutions by putting emphasis on specific subjects or themes. This was generally considered to ensure paying more attention to pupils’ personal aptitudes and hobbies. The third auxiliary object is the obligation set for education providers to evaluate the education they provide and its impact.

The new kinds of objectives also affected the determination of receivers. In the second narrative, the receiver was a pupil with various abilities and interests, and parents making choices on their child’s education. As a result of the aims concerning the decentralisation of administration, municipalities (as the main education providers in Finland) emerge as a new receiver. They are given new weight as receivers which the object aims to address. At the same time, the previous receivers, society, and the work force, take a backseat as actors which are at least to some extent only defined through the related determinants ‘changing’ or ‘evolving’.

The subject-actor of the second narrative we analysed was, again, the Government: the first cabinet of Paavo Lipponen (Social Democrats). The parliamentary discussion was preceded by preparatory work conducted by the two previous Governments, which had been carried out for most of the decade. Lipponen’s ‘purple’ cabinet consisted of the Social Democratic Party, the National Coalition Party, the Swedish People’s Party, the Left Alliance, and the Green League. Government proposal to Parliament on legislation concerning education (HE 86/1997) was submitted to the Parliament in June 1997. The

proposal concerned a wide-ranging reform of the whole of the education system from pre-primary to adult education. Only the universities, higher education institutions and polytechnics were excepted from the proposal.

In the referral debate, the Centre Party, then in opposition, assumed a pronounced role as the opponent of the subject. Key areas of criticism were explicitly concerned with the increase in optional studies and the schools creating profiles at the expense of equality. According to MP Aula (Centre), the new Basic Education Act provided too much freedom of choice at the expense of equality. For her part, MP Isohookana-Asunmaa (Centre) expressed a suspicion that the optional studies would undermine the acquisition of basic competencies; indeed, she proposed that the Education and Culture Committee should draw up a clear proposal of the 'limits to the implementation of options' (1997 vp; minutes, 2649 [Opponent]). MP Karjalainen (Social Democrats) joined the opponents in expressing doubts about the value-object of the entire legal reform:

*– do we strive for a public, harmonious system that serves all, prevents social exclusion, and serves equality through its structures and content, or an increasingly privatized, excessively individualised idea of education that accepts inequality in practice or even has this as its goal, and excludes some pupils from schools and society? (1997 vp; minutes, 2652 [Opponent])*

A view of the necessity to equip pupils with skills related to entrepreneurship in the reformed comprehensive education unified Members of Parliament across party lines: entrepreneurship should be introduced as a school subject (MP Kautto, Social Democrats) or at least 'incorporated in education activities' (MP Rehn, Centre). In a wider sense, education practices should be changed to ensure that these promote internal entrepreneurship, a responsible attitude in life, and self-employment (MP Karjula, Centre). The demands for optional content and entrepreneurship were also perceived as posing challenges to guidance, requiring well-functioning and sufficiently resourced guidance. MP Hyssälä (Centre) summarised the discussion from the perspective of resources allocated to pupil guidance:

*There is good reason to be concerned about the resources of guidance counselling. Indeed, the Basic Education Act, Act on General Upper Secondary Education and Vocational Education and Training Act must be specific in making mentions to pupil guidance to safeguard the necessary availability of guidance. The question of resources allocated to guidance counselling is crucial. (1997 vp; minutes 2659 [Helper].)*

In its committee report, the Education and Culture Committee identified that the new kinds of education policy objectives highlighted the significance of guidance. Indeed, the Education and Culture Committee included a mention in the Act on General Upper Secondary Education and the Vocational Education and Training Act, according to which a separate decree lays down provisions on guidance counselling. No equivalent provision was included in the Basic Education Act despite advice by MP Hyssälä (Centre).

*The committee emphasises that in upper comprehensive school, pupil guidance gains prominence due to optional studies, knowledge of working life, and further studies. Pupil guidance can be used to support parents in making right choices with the child. (SiVM 3/1998vp vp, 29 [Helper].)*

The committee also took a stand on increasing parents' freedom to choose a school for their child. The Education and Culture Committee added an opportunity for introducing aptitude tests in applying for weighted-curriculum education in the Basic Education Act (Section 28). The question of aptitude tests stirred a lot of discussion in the committee and the committee proposed that the use of entrance tests should not be permitted in comprehensive education (SiVM 3/1998vp vp, 32). Instead, aptitude tests should be used, but only in 'subjects with no significance from the perspective of eligibility for further studies'.

The opportunity to select a school also provoked discussion among Members of Parliament in the debate concerning the report by the Education and Culture Committee. According to MP Gustafsson (Social Democrats), it was highly significant that municipalities would pay particular attention to guidance counselling because of adapting the new Act: 'Particularly those children and young people who lack support from adults with a higher education degree or extensive knowledge of the education support in making selections should be supported with knowledgeable and versatile knowledge at school' (1997 vp; minutes, 3196–3197 [Opponent]). The opportunity to obtain guidance related to studying was considered to play a major role in the implementation of the purpose of the Act. As a result: 'The Social Democrats proposed and demanded resources for study guidance in a decree providing that the schools would have one guidance counsellor per 250 pupils, but this goal went nowhere in the negotiations' (MP Gustafsson, Social Democrats; 1997 vp; minutes, 3197). Several Members of the Parliament representing the Centre Party and Social Democratic Party expressed their immediate support for the proposal. Nevertheless, no actual amendment proposal was drafted for the formulation of the government proposal.

Similarly, a proposal by MP Hyssälä (Centre) of issuing provisions on guidance in a decree was widely supported. However, it must be noted that instead of an amendment proposal concerning individual sections, the opponents positioned themselves to challenge the government proposal with a resolution proposal. MP Vehviläinen (Centre) proposed that the Parliament accept the resolution: 'The Parliament requires for the Government to ensure that sufficient preconditions for individual student guidance are safeguarded in comprehensive education'. The resolution proposal was not adopted as the MPs of the governing parties stuck to a unified agenda. Differences in interpretations resulted in making no changes in the wording of the Education and Culture Committee report. The Basic Education Act (L 628/1998) came into force at the start of 1999. Despite career guidance not being at the core of government proposal, its significance and justification had implicitly been altered: Guidance was now a vehicle to prepare young people (and their parents to some extent) for more diverse educational options and career paths. As Education and Culture Committee symptomatically stated, guidance can be now used to support parents in making the right choices with the child.

### ***2020s: guidance as a vehicle to support extended compulsory education***

One of the key objectives of the Programme of Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government was to raise the minimum age for leaving school to 18 years. This would be accomplished by introducing a range of study and support options, which may be included in upper secondary qualifications, including a voluntary tenth year of additional lower secondary education, folk high schools, workshops, rehabilitation, and preparatory

education. In accordance with the government programme, it would be ensured that personal young people finishing comprehensive education would complete upper secondary education (VN 2019).

Under the government programme, raising the compulsory education age would require the development of guidance: ‘We will improve student guidance and student welfare services, along with the capacity of comprehensive schools to provide everyone with the skills to complete upper secondary education’ (VN 2019, 164). The significance of guidance would be particularly emphasised during the transition from comprehensive education to upper secondary education: ‘In the context of compulsory education, we will develop preparatory education and guidance in transition phases to help students move on to the upper secondary level’ (VN 2019, 164).

In the third narrative analysed in this article, the sender-actor is the need to increase the employment rate, particularly among those who have only completed the comprehensive education syllabus.

*The employment rate of those who have completed only comprehensive education syllabus is constantly decreasing because of growing competence requirements in working life and a reduction of low-education and low-skill work. Completing upper secondary qualifications improves the employment potential of young people. (HE 173/2020 vp [Sender].)*

The need was underpinned by a situation in which the demands of the changing workforce were increasing the need for continuous learning. Therefore, the aim of completing upper secondary qualifications as part of compulsory education was to ensure that every young person has adequate capabilities for updating his or her competence. In turn, this would foster attachment to and staying in the labour market, making career progress, and changing one’s industry or profession as necessary.

The receiver-actor determined in the government proposal was clearly and precisely defined: the object was (at least potential) dropping out from school and/or a young person not proceeding to the upper secondary level of education on his or her education path.

In the government proposal submitted to the Parliament in October 2020, two value-objects emerged: raising the education and competence level and preventing social exclusion. In her presentation speech, Minister of Education Li Andersson (Left Alliance) summarised the objective of raising the level of education and competence as an increase in the employment rate: the higher the level of education, the better the employment rate. Any other interpretations regarding aspects such as the new kinds of competence required by the knowledge-based economy were given less prominence in the parliamentary debate. According to the Minister of Education:

*The employment rate of those who have only completed comprehensive education syllabus is around 45 per cent, while the employment rate of those with upper secondary education qualifications is over 70 per cent. Therefore, completing upper secondary education promotes employment and engagement in society significantly. (2020 vp. 3 November 2020 [Object].)*

The second value-object – the prevention of social exclusion – was constructed through several means: First, including upper secondary education in compulsory education would send a signal of the level of education that would be enough in the society and labour market of the future. Second, extending the duration of compulsory education would attach students to the formal education system for a longer time, which would also

mean that they would be covered by the guidance and support services for longer. Third, the reform outlined here would also include providing upper secondary school students with ‘free’ learning materials and school transport (i.e. financed by tax revenue). According to Minister of Education Andersson:

*Compulsory education sends a message. We use it to communicate to the young people in our society what kinds of competence is sufficient in today's and tomorrow's society. At the same time, we impose a strong obligation for society to ensure an education path for each young person also after upper comprehensive school. (2020 vp. 3 November 2020 [Object].)*

The subject-actor of the third narrative analysed in this article is, again, the Government, this time Prime Minister Sanna Marin's (Social Democrats) Government, including the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, the Green League, the Left Alliance, and the Swedish People's Party.

Two auxiliary objects, utilised to pursue the actual value-objects, were found. These were specified and politicised at the preliminary debate on the government proposal. First, if upper secondary education was free to the whole age group and financed through tax revenue, it would provide an opportunity for more young people than previously to complete upper secondary education.

*No one should have to stop or choose a recreational activity based on education costs, and no one should feel guilty about pursuing qualifications because of their family's difficult financial situation. (MP Hyrkkö, Green League 2020 vp. 3 November 2020 [Object].)*

Second, achieving the value-object would require improving the efficiency of study and career guidance, and investing in this.

*According to the view of the Green League, major investments are made in the support and guidance provided to young people while, at the same time, the education path is fixed as a whole. Pupil guidance is provided at the transition phases to ensure that all students can find their own paths. Support is also needed for taking care of those young people who, for whatever reason, are falling by the wayside before the end of upper secondary education. (MP Hyrkkö, Green League 2020 vp. 3 November 2020 [Object].)*

As in the two previous narratives, representatives of the Government and opposition were quick to position themselves in relation to the bill and the objectives presented. Starting with the presentation speech by Minister of Education Andersson, the representatives of the governing parties consistently took on the role of a helper, while, correspondingly, the representatives of the opposition parties assumed the role of an opponent. The helpers particularly emphasised an economic survey concerning the extension of compulsory education:

*Extending compulsory education is not only supported by recommendations by the OECD and the Economic Policy Council, but also national and international research evidence. (Minister Andersson, Left Alliance 2020 vp. 3 November 2020 [Helper].)*

It is worth noticing that in this narrative, none of those representing the opposition criticised the justifications for the actual value-objects (to increase the employment rate and to prevent social exclusion). Instead, they acted as opponents by presenting alternative auxiliary objects for accomplishing the value-object. The financial

investments required by the proposal and related allocation were deemed too high and inefficient by the opposition. As a counterproposal, the representatives of the opposition parties suggested focused support measures as a new, alternative auxiliary object:

*The extension of compulsory education is a matter of expensive and unnecessary forced medication administered for all. Extending compulsory education is unnecessary for most young people and ineffective for the rest. The real problem of upper secondary education is that some young people simply lack the capabilities required by studies and life management that would enable them to complete upper secondary qualifications. (MP Ranne, True Finns 2020 vp. 3 November 2020 [Opponent].)*

The committee report quickly prepared by the Education and Culture Committee contributed to supporting the value and auxiliary objects in the government proposal.

*According to research, completing the comprehensive education syllabus, which is currently equivalent to compulsory education, does not provide sufficient competence for coping in working life. Those without education and training beyond comprehensive education are also at a significant risk for more extensive social exclusion. While exclusion from education and working life is a financial challenge for society, it is particularly harmful from a humane perspective. (SiVM 20/2020 vp. [Helper].)*

At the same time, the report also presented relevant views by the opponents. These were particularly emphasised in a situation in which the Members of Parliament representing the True Finns and National Coalition party submitted separate protests to the committee report:

*Some of the statements submitted to the Education and Culture Committee reveal that the objectives of the proposal can also be achieved through means other than the extension of compulsory education. According to these views, instead of learning materials and school transport, appropriations should be allocated to, for instance, obtaining sufficient capabilities for further training in comprehensive education, and to student guidance as well as student welfare services and other social and healthcare services aimed at young people. Addressed issues also include a need for more effective promotion of the welfare of children and young people starting in early childhood education and care and continuing to comprehensive education and subsequent education and training. (SiVM 20/2020 vp. [Opponent])*

During the first discussion on the Act on compulsory education in December 2020, Minister of Education Andersson, who, again, served as the voice of the Government, articulated the original auxiliary objects in a manner more accommodating to the opponents' views:

*While we need an extension of compulsory education, we also need other investments in early years, we need investments in increasing contact teaching in vocational education and training institutions, and also making these investments with permanent as well as temporary increases in appropriations for each level of education, starting as early as in early childhood education and care (Minister Andersson, Left Alliance 2020 vp. 8 December 2020 [Helper]).*

The first and second debates of the amendment of the Act on compulsory education did not change the actantial settings. Extending compulsory education until the age of 18 was approved to be adopted as of August 2021 (L 1214/2020). Notably, and, for the very first time, career guidance had become a matter of explicit political interest at the Finnish Parliament, when harnessed to support extended compulsory education.

## Discussion

We have used actantial analysis to explore how guidance is addressed in the debates in Finland's parliament. Table 1 presents three actant narratives and the actors that emerge in them.

The different actantial narratives demonstrate the way in which guidance is positioned differently across three periods of reform. The narratives show a shift from more corporatist approaches through which the object is ultimately to fulfil the needs of society towards more individualised objects for policy which emphasise the importance of increasing the opportunities for individuals and families. This trend is in line with the idea of a *demand-led skills system* (Watts 2013), which places the retraining and (re-) employment of the individual at its core. Based on this rationality, guidance is perceived as a market maker (Watts 1995) that will improve the efficiency of the transition of individuals to education and the labour market.

The view of society as becoming progressively more individualised draws on the thinking of several postmodern theorists who focused on the changing relationship between the individual and a variety of social structures (notably Bauman 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1991). These theorists influenced both politics and career theories. During the 1990s, as the Lipponen I government were framing the purpose of guidance as being about increasing flexibility and individual choice, career theorists like Hall (1996) and Arthur and Rousseau (2001) were arguing that the world was now global and fluid with the organisational structures that individuals were used to increasingly melting away. As a consequence, career was now 'protean' and 'boundary-less' leading to the need for new individualised approaches to guidance which rejected the idea of fitting people into fixed structures and emphasised adaptability and flexibility (Bergmo-Prvulovic 2014). Indeed, in the parliamentary debates of the 1990s, many speeches concerned internal entrepreneurship, self-employment and personal responsibility.

Lipponen's government was influenced by the politics of the 'third way' which looked to theorists like Giddens for its intellectual underpinnings (Outinen 2017). Consequently, the guidance policies that it developed encouraged individuals to engage in what Giddens (1991) described as a reflexive project of the self, the process of making oneself for an increasingly unstructured global environment. This shifts the focus of guidance away from structures and towards the development of the capital of individuals (Bergmo-Prvulovic 2014; Hooley 2021). Yet, the work of the guidance counsellor is bound to questions related to structures including the school system, qualification frameworks and organisations and their recruitment processes, meaning that they are never able to become fully boundaryless.

By the time we reached the 2020s, the politics of the third way has become far more contested. The 'great recession' led to a crisis in capitalism and a swing away from third way ideology. Inevitably this is a partial process, as is demonstrated by the fact that the Social Democratic Party remain at the heart of politics in Finland. Nonetheless, the parliamentary discussions of the 2020s are providing some evidence of a return to structural approaches with the move to raise the school leaving age, funding participation in education, attending to unemployment levels and focusing guidance on preventing social exclusion.



**Table 1.** Actantial narratives of parliamentary debates on legislation concerning compulsory education (1967–2020).

Sender(s)	Receiver(s)	Subject	Value-object(s)	Auxiliary Objects	Helper(s)	Opponent(s)
Change in society and production (talent potential, re-training, continuous learning of new contents) Safeguarding individual study opportunities Unfair parallel education system	Individual pupil and his/her family  Production  Equal and fair society	Rafael Paasio's Government I (Leftist parties and the Centre Party)  Government proposal for the Act on the principles of the school system (HE 44/1967)  Universalist, nine-year compulsory education utilising the talent potential of the entire age group by identifying children's different aptitudes and hobbies	Individual curricula (different scopes for language and mathematics syllabi, optional subjects) Increasing families' freedom of choice	Representatives of governing parties repeating the value-object and highlighting the choice of vocation and guidance as auxiliary objects	Opposition parties	Alternative value-object: developing the education system as a whole  Criticism of auxiliary objects: the amount of compulsory studies should be small and the freedom to choose practical subjects should be preserved
Rebuilding the relationship between the central government and municipalities	Local agents,  Opposition criticised auxiliary objects (optional studies, profiling)	municipalities, and education providers  Government proposal to Parliament on legislation concerning education (HE 86/1997)	Paavo Lipponen's Government I (the Social Democratic Party, the National Coalition Party, the Swedish People's Party, the Left Alliance, and the Green League)	Flexible basic education governed at the local level whose effectiveness is verified through evaluation	Increasing freedom of selecting school	The necessity of teaching pupils' entrepreneurial skills (internal entrepreneurship, a responsible attitude in life, self-employment) was supported across party lines
Pupil and family making choices on education	Increasing freedom in the content of available education  Codification,	Opposition questioned the value-object (inequality)  decentralisation of governance, verifying the effectiveness of activities	The obligation of education provider to evaluate the education it provides and its effectiveness	The auxiliary object was also considered to require re-resourcing and emphasising guidance	The parliamentary discussion politicised guidance (career guidance in the Basic Education Act, resourcing in the Decree)	

(Continued)



Table 1. (Continued).

Sender(s)	Receiver(s)	Subject	Value-object(s)	Auxiliary Objects	Helper(s)	Opponent(s)
Need for raising employment rate	Young people at risk of social exclusion	Government proposal to Parliament on an Act on compulsory education and certain related acts (HE 173/2020 vp) Sanna Marin's Government (The Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, the Green League, the Left Alliance, and the Swedish People's Party)	Increasing the level of education and competence	Cost-free upper secondary education for entire age group	Representatives of governing parties supporting the selected auxiliary objects	Representatives of opposition parties offering targeted support measures as a new, alternative auxiliary object Financial costs of the proposal are excessive
			Preventing social exclusion	Improving the efficiency to study and career guidance	Recommendations by the OECD and the Economic Policy Council	

To conclude, career guidance has been an enduring political interest in Finland across the last 50 years. In terms of aims and justifications, the way that guidance has been used has varied across this period in line with broader trends and changes in educational policy and wider ideological shifts. The actantial analysis implemented in this paper helps us to see not just what the policy did, but also the ideological and practical discussions that led to that final policy position. This helps us to understand the politics on career guidance in context and to think about both what happened and also the wider horizons of opportunities in different times and localities.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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