

Chapter 4

A Progressive Force in Finnish Schooling?: Finland's Education Union, OAJ, and Its Influence on School-Level Education Policy



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Abstract The Trade Union of Education in Finland, OAJ, is a large organisation covering early childhood education through to adult education and training. OAJ claims to have a key role in influencing education policy and often takes up progressive stances in the media. At the same time, there has been little evidence of it contesting government policy in any overt way. To explore whether OAJ really influences Finnish education policy and in what ways, this chapter looks at education policy concerning comprehensive schooling during the period of the centre-right Sipilä Government in power from 2015–19 and then at the interests and responses of the OAJ over the same period. Employing a thematic analysis of OAJ press releases and other publications, the authors argue that whereas the Sipilä Government's education policy emphasised a more neo-liberal and individualistic approach to educational equity, the OAJ often sought to highlight a version of educational equality and its challenges associated with a democratic ideal of social justice. The OAJ also sought a longer-term perspective in Finnish education politics than was manifested in the various projects of the Sipilä Government. Overall, the chapter provides insights into Finnish education policy-making processes that involve decision-makers and working groups operating at both national and local (municipal) levels and the related positioning of the OAJ.

Since the introduction of the Finnish comprehensive school system in the 1970s, Finland has often been regarded as a country offering equal educational opportunities for all, regardless of individuals' socio-economic background or locale. However, particularly over the last decade, the Finnish comprehensive ideal of educational equality has been challenged by neo-liberal values, policies, and practices as

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economic prosperity has become the driving force of Finnish education policy.¹ Neo-liberal education policy sees education treated more as a commodity than a public good, with the key goal of creating human capital for the market.² The centre-right Finnish government led by Juha Sipilä, in power 2015–2019, often promoted neo-liberal values such as efficiency, flexibility, entrepreneurship, customer orientation, and innovation, including digitalisation.³ Tuomas Tervasmäki and Tuukka Tomperi suggest that the education policy of this government was crystallised in the perception of the obsolescence of Finnish education and the need to reform the operating culture, pedagogy, and learning methods of education, primarily using digital applications and learning environments.⁴

Our concern in this chapter⁵ is how OAJ (Opetusalan Ammattijärjestö) positioned itself in relation to the Sipilä Government, as a centre-right government promoting neo-liberal policies that education unions in many countries would be opposed to.⁶ Did it support those values or contest them, and what kinds of influence did it seek to have? By investigating these questions, we hope to address something of a puzzle about how Finnish education policy gets made. In many countries, progressive developments in education are won because of the actions of teachers and other educators working through their unions. Sometimes union opposition to government policy is rather obvious, involving strikes, protests, and the like. But in Finland's more consensual tradition for exercising power,⁷ such overt struggles are rare. Is this because the OAJ tends to fall into line with the government policy of the day or because it wants to keep its position at the centre of Finnish 'routine corporatism'?⁸ Certainly, the OAJ claims to be 'a key influencer of education policy'⁹ and yet Mirka Räisänen suggests that OAJ has always been committed to 'conservative expediency':

Questions concerning the very foundations and legitimacy of education and schooling are dissociated from the core interests of the union. Since teachers are depicted as apolitical pedagogical experts, the OAJ's mission seems to be the execution of 'apolitical politics'.¹⁰

Studying the response of the OAJ to the Sipilä Government offers good insights into this conundrum. Our chapter starts by characterising the Sipilä Government's education policy, drawing on the Strategic Programme called "Finland, the land of Solutions",¹¹ and paying special attention to key project No. 1 "New learning environments and digital materials to comprehensive schools".¹² The project outlined five objectives for the reform of comprehensive school and the measures to support them.¹³ We then move to examine what kind of response OAJ had to the education policy of the Sipilä Government using a thematic analysis of news, press releases, reports, and blog posts published in the "current affairs" section in the OAJ website during the period of the Sipilä Government.¹⁴ Finally, we discuss the extent to which OAJ views aligned with Sipilä Government views and what this can tell us about the role of OAJ in Finnish education politics. The analysis will be linked to the tradition of corporatism¹⁵ and especially consensus-seeking¹⁶ which have been identified as guiding principles in policy making in Finland since the time of the autonomy of the Grand Duchy of Finland.¹⁷ This background must be understood to make sense of how the OAJ exerts influence in contemporary education politics.

Characterising the Sipilä Government's Approach to School-Level Policy

“Finland, the land of Solutions”, published in May 2019, was a “new kind of government program” aimed at “clarifying the political will of the government and the implementation of the program and restoring collectivity to ministry work”.¹⁸ According to Juri Mykkänen, the Finnish government program is an institution that determines the content of the policy pursued by the government, as well as its operating methods. He notes that while the contents of the Finnish government programs have become more detailed, they have also become binding documents, with outcomes monitored by both the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister's Office.¹⁹ The Sipilä Government's Strategic Government Programme defined employment and competitiveness; knowledge and education; wellbeing and health; the bioeconomy and clean solution, and digitalisation, experimentation, and deregulation as the government's strategic priorities.²⁰ Each was guided by what the government called ‘key projects’, for which the Sipilä Government issued an action plan (PMO 2015) and three further revised action plans in subsequent years.²¹ According to the Parliament of Finland's Audit Committee a total of EUR 1 billion “change funding” was directed to putting the Sipilä Government's key projects in place, of which a total of EUR 300 million was budgeted for the key projects of knowledge and education.²²

The vision of the Sipilä Government's education policy was that by 2025 Finland would be:

... a country that encourages people to continuously learn something new. Skills and education levels in Finland have risen, promoting the renewal of Finnish society and equal opportunities. Finland is in the vanguard of education, skills and modern learning techniques.²³

In order to develop comprehensive education (key project 1), the “New Comprehensive School” project was established, to make Finland:

a leading country in education, competence and modern and inspiring learning by modernising the learning environments of comprehensive education, utilising the opportunities of digitalisation and new pedagogy in learning, and strengthening the skills of teachers.²⁴

The New Comprehensive School Program was guided and supported by a steering group for reforming comprehensive schools chaired by Minister of Education Sanni Grahn-Laasonen.²⁵ There were five objectives set for this key project, along with measures to support them.²⁶ The first objective was “Vision work by Comprehensive School Forum”. This forum, consisting of a cross-party parliamentary group (also chaired by Minister of Education Sanni Grahn-Laasonen), an action group, and a researcher group, was to clarify the goals and visions for the future of comprehensive education. It published the *Finnish Basic Education—Excellence through Equity for All*²⁷—commitment in the spring of 2018 which in turn led to four priority goals: (1) management and competence development; (2) long-term development,

funding, and support for curriculum implementation; (3) learning support, individualised learning pathways and more flexible basic education; and (4) the school as a promoter of well-being.²⁸ The aim was to put these goals into practice through the *Paras koulu -kampanja* (“Best School campaign”) to build the highest quality and most equal comprehensive schools in the world. In addition, the Comprehensive School Forum brought together different actors and partners to envision the future of Finnish comprehensive schooling in workshops organised around Finland. In these workshops, the “new comprehensive school” and its goals were envisioned through six themes: learner-orientation, new learning environments, new curriculum, renewed operating culture of the school, the digitalisation of teaching, and the development of teachers’ skills. These themes were each accompanied by a vision and some goals and ways to achieve them.²⁹

Objective 2 was “Developing teachers’ skills throughout their careers”. The Ministry of Education and Culture set up a Teacher Education Forum of more than 60 teacher educators and others to create guidelines for the development of teacher education and to promote its reform process. It drew up a Teacher Education Development Programme for the reform of initial and in-service training of teachers that argued they must continuously develop their skills, e.g., by using their creativity and experimenting, making extensive use of new learning environments and research, and being part of national and international networks. To increase collaboration and networking, the Teacher Education Forum launched a total of 45 different “teacher education development projects” and networks intended to strengthen links between initial teacher education and in-service training, cooperation, the teacher education curriculum, the ability of teachers to innovate, digitalisation and career development.³⁰

A third objective was “reform[ing] the comprehensive school to meet the needs of the 2020s”³¹ by promoting, coordinating, and reforming the experimental, development, and innovation activities of schools. On top of the previous developments, *Kokeilukeskus* (‘Innovation Centre’) was established to promote “systemic change” in the operating culture of education and to accelerate innovation activities. This Innovation Centre, which was established under the auspices of the National Board of Education and began operations in 2017, was based on the idea that educational issues cannot be solved within the field of education alone.³² It aimed to support the “renewable ecosystem” and allow “best practices” to spread nationally.³³ It has had co-operation projects with both Finnish and foreign researchers, the Finnish think-tank *Demos-Helsinki*,³⁴ *Majakka* (“The Lighthouse”³⁵) and *Loisto* (“The Brilliance”)³⁶ networks of the National Board of Education, the *HundrED* social enterprise (see the introduction to this book) and the Finnish municipalities.³⁷ The Innovation Centre concluded that “there is a lack of deliberate pilot action in the field of education; alongside traditional project development, a new kind of deliberate experimental development and co-development is needed”.³⁸ To promote this “change in operating culture”, the Innovation Centre launched a one-year pilot program in 2018, where the selected projects will have the opportunity to develop their innovations through peer support and feedback.

Objective 4 was a “Tutor teacher for each school”.³⁹ This continued “digi-tutor” experiments of the previous government whereby tutor teachers promoted the digitalisation of teaching and supported new pedagogies. In order to promote the networking and development of tutor teachers, regional coordinators were appointed and national tutor days and workshops were organised. In addition to tutor teachers, many municipalities also involved “student agents” in tutoring activities.

The fifth and last objective was “The internationalisation of Finnish education”. This sought to accelerate the connection of Finnish education and teachers to the world and to promote Finnish education exports.⁴⁰ A report about ‘Global Education Brand Finland’ was prepared⁴¹ and the goal of internationalisation was promoted through participation in international networks such as the Atlantic Rim Collaboratory (ARC), a global think tank network for education systems led by Andy Hargraves which includes what the MEC described as “thought leaders” such as Sir Ken Robinson, Michael Fullan, and Pasi Sahlberg.⁴² There were also many other forums intended to “provide international partners with information about Finnish comprehensive school, teacher education and their continuous development”.⁴³ The 2019 MEC report lists a total of 44 different international conferences and meetings in which the New Comprehensive School program was involved or where the program and its implementation were presented.⁴⁴ These conferences and meetings included visits to Finland by educational delegations from different countries, the World Bank’s visit to Finland, the International Summit on the Teaching Profession 2019⁴⁵ and the BETT Conference in 2018.⁴⁶

From this broad summary, we can conclude that the Sipilä Government’s policy with regard to comprehensive schools centred on ‘modernising’ reforms, around innovation, digitalisation, internationalisation, and the like.⁴⁷ In this respect, it was not dissimilar to the aspirations of reforming governments in many other countries, with two exceptions. First, there is little overt discussion of privatisation and reducing the role of the state. The state remains firmly at the centre of policy, albeit drawing on alliances with private actors. Second, there is a great deal of consultation with and involvement of those within the education sector. Both of these reflect longstanding corporatist features of Finnish politics and policy. What is not clear from this overview is the nature of the discussion and debates that went on within the various fora, whose arguments held sway in the contest of ideas, and what the OAJ might be most concerned about.

How Did the OAJ Respond?

In order to look at the concerns of the OAJ during the term of the Sipilä Government, we examined all news, statements, press releases, reports, blog articles, and other publications published in the “current affairs” section of the OAJ website over this time (i.e., 29.5.2015–6.6.2019).⁴⁸ Here we describe all of these as ‘releases’ of one kind or another. Unfortunately, redesign of the website means that some releases for 2015 and 2016 had been lost but the years 2017–19 were complete. In total, we

found 644 different releases that were published by the OAJ during the time of the Sipilä Government, of which 178 were about comprehensive education. Ten main concerns were represented in 140 of the releases as presented in Table 4.1 (note that some were themed under more than one concern).⁴⁹

We now turn to a discussion of these main OAJ concerns. As with our account of the views of the Sipilä Government, we stress that these are only the most public of OAJ perspectives, we expect that much policy work is being achieved ‘behind the scenes’ in countless networks and meetings that we do not have access to (see Kallunki, Kauko, and Pizmony-Levy in this book). It would require a different methodology, for instance retrospective interviews with policy makers, to uncover a richer picture.

The Realisation of Educational Equality in Finland

Many of the OAJ releases in this area (26) were to do with educational financing and “education cuts” by the Sipilä Government. Concerns were expressed about spending cuts under the Katainen Government and Stubb Government (both prior to the Sipilä Government) and the Sipilä Government itself, which according to the OAJ totalled €2 billion.⁵⁰ These funding cuts were seen to be more prominent in the government programme than others. The OAJ considered the reduction of permanent core funding for education and, at the same time, the increase of various fixed-term development funding to be especially concerning:

Education has core funding, targeted funding, and development funding. The most important aspect of the overall level of funding for education is the level of permanent funding and the changes made to it. Increasing fixed-term development funding can easily create a false impression that funding for education is increasing.⁵¹

The OAJ argued that funding cuts were related to a decline in educational equality in Finland:

In the same time cycle with education cuts, municipal education services have become increasingly unequal over the last twenty years. The parliament has decided to increase inequality among Finnish comprehensive school pupils.⁵²

The perceived problem was that “various short-term projects and fragmented grants cause inefficiency in development work and encourage short-term development solutions”.⁵³ In 2019, the OAJ urged the future government to repay its “investment debts” for education as soon as possible by proposing a long-term education growth program for the next term, which would mean investing more than one billion euros in education.⁵⁴

The theme of equality in Finnish comprehensive education dominated in 25 releases. OAJ’s concern was about the “erosion of equality” in Finnish education:

According to research and PISA results there are clear signs of an erosion of educational equality. The school is no longer able to level out social differences as before. Low levels

Table 4.1 Main concerns of OAJ releases related to comprehensive education

Realisation of educational equality in Finland (n = 94)	Teachers' working conditions (n = 46)	Other topics (n = 41)
Educational financing and "education cuts" by the Sipilä Government (n = 26)	Teachers' well-being at work (n = 18)	Issues of indoor air quality in Finnish schools (n = 17)
Equality in Finnish comprehensive education (n = 25)	Student-teacher ratio and group sizes in comprehensive education (n = 14)	Digitalisation of education (n = 13)
Social exclusion: Extension of compulsory education (n = 23)	Teachers' annual working time (n = 13)	Bullying and sexual harassment in schools (n = 11)
State of Finnish special education and learning support (n = 20)		

of education are passed down from one generation to the next. Although the majority of Finns are doing better than ever and living standards have risen, there is a growing number of people in Finland whose opportunities to build a good life and security are increasingly weak. Those who would benefit most from education will receive it the least.⁵⁵

A repeated argument in OAJ's publications was that urgent action must be taken to ensure educational equality in Finland. In the spring of 2016, the OAJ launched its own campaign for equal education, the progress of which was widely reported during the Sipilä Government's time in power. At the beginning of the campaign, the OAJ published a "Roadmap for Equality" which could be used as a basis for joint debate".⁵⁶ According to the Roadmap:

The quality of education services must not depend on the family's place of residence, language, socio-economic or cultural background. Services must be publicly funded and their quality and accessibility must be controlled nationally. The task of education is to open the way for everyone.

The OAJ also launched a "Baton for equality" intended to stimulate discussion in the form of various events, campaigns, and publications on how educational equality could be secured in Finland. The baton circulated through nine organisations and companies and finished up at an equality seminar organised by the OAJ for party representatives in February 2019, just before the 2019 parliamentary elections.⁵⁷ In addition, the theme of equality pursued by the OAJ continued in the OAJ's 2019 parliamentary elections campaign "Koulutus ratkaisee" ("Education is crucial"). The OAJ campaigned on 37 proposals to "cut off the vicious spiral of education", five of which sought to address the problem of "erosion of educational equality".⁵⁸

Another noteworthy concern in this equality area was social exclusion (23 releases). Here the problem was seen to be that "[t]he pursuit of efficiency and results in education have increasingly led to a lack of time to meet every child and adolescent in a respectful and unhurried manner [and] loneliness has increased".⁵⁹ The issue of social exclusion was raised in OAJ's support for extending compulsory education. It was argued that social exclusion resulted from a decline in educational attainment in Finland:

The most educated Finns are in their forties, as the level of educational attainment rose until their age group, but began to decline after them. The decline is worrying, as education improves e.g., quality of life and personal well-being. The decline in educational attainment is weakening employment and is an obstacle to labour market renewal.⁶⁰

The OAJ promoted expanding compulsory education as a way to raise the level of competence of Finns and reduce early school leaving. Its model for compulsory education published in March 2018 stressed that extending compulsory education would achieve greater educational equality in Finland.⁶¹ The OAJ would later claim that an extension of compulsory education which began in August 2021 was influenced by its own campaigning.

The state of Finnish special education and learning support was a specific OAJ concern in the area of social exclusion related to the Basic Education Act revised in 2010 (20 releases). At that time, a 'three-tiered support' system was introduced in

preliminary and comprehensive education, with the aim of ensuring better access for pupils to the learning support they needed.⁶² This was carried out through inclusion, where special support students were placed in general education groups but an OAJ release called this practice into question:

This so-called inclusion works well if the group's activities are supported, for example, by a special needs teacher working with the class or subject teacher. Placing pupils with special needs in a general education group without support is the worst possible situation and yet unfortunately common.⁶³

It was also argued that in some municipalities the approach taken to three-tiered support had been a cost-saving measure.⁶⁴ In April 2017, the OAJ published a report that highlighted unequal learning support across Finland because it had not been put into place in all municipalities and schools. The "education is crucial" campaign mentioned earlier also called for learning support to be urgently remedied.

Teachers' Working Conditions

Teachers' well-being at work during the Sipilä Government (18 releases) emerged as a theme especially in discussions of education funding:

Increased stress among teachers and negative phenomena in schools, day-care centres, and educational institutions show that the financial resources are not adequate.⁶⁵

The OAJ took measures to promote teachers' well-being during the term of the Sipilä Government. Before the Municipal Elections of 2017, the association published a "Route Guide for Municipal Decision-Makers" in order to stress the importance of teachers' "peaceful working conditions" and ways to realise these.⁶⁶ In August 2019, the OAJ launched a "school year of well-being at work", the aim of which was both to highlight the themes of well-being at work and to reach decision-makers.⁶⁷ In May 2019, the OAJ's council sent a video statement to the government-formation negotiator asking, "How will the forthcoming government ensure that teachers have the opportunity to do their jobs well?"⁶⁸

Publications on teachers' well-being at work stressed the need for long-term, cross-government educational policymaking that would guarantee teachers' peaceful working conditions. The OAJ also emphasised that perseverance is an integral part of the teaching profession: "The top quality of Finnish education and upbringing has required long-term work. It must not be wasted with hypocritical entrepreneurial hype".⁶⁹

Discussion in this area of teachers' working conditions often revolved around student-teacher ratios and group sizes in comprehensive education (14 releases). The OAJ's stance was that the law should determine the maximum number of students per teacher and that regulating the student-teacher ratio by law could help move from "exclusion development" towards "inclusion development".⁷⁰ The importance of lowered student-teacher ratios for both teachers' well-being at work and meeting

student needs was also emphasised.⁷¹ The OAJ wanted Grades 1–2 to have a ratio of 1:18 and older classes to be 1:20. The proposed ratio also gave students receiving special support a higher coefficient. The OAJ argued that municipal decision-makers already had ways to introduce “ratio thinking” and to “strengthen teachers’ peaceful working conditions”.⁷²

Annual working time for teachers was also the subject of numerous releases (13). A change in teachers’ working hours was initiated when OAJ and KT Local Government Employers⁷³ concluded negotiations on a pilot model⁷⁴ at the beginning of 2018, and the OAJ’s Executive Board decided to launch annual working time trials for comprehensive education.⁷⁵ The annual working time provoked a lot of discussion amongst OAJ members, including, for example, whether the number of lessons taught by teachers would increase as a result of the change.⁷⁶ There was also a breakaway group of teachers on this issue which had accumulated more than 10,000 members by August 2019.⁷⁷ At the OAJ Council meeting of November 2019, the Executive Board received criticisms from the Council for its communication concerning annual working time. Questions were raised about the OAJ’s decision to close its own annual working time Facebook group in operation from January 2018 to February 2019.⁷⁸ According to the Council’s feedback, OAJ’s communication was seen as silencing the range of perspectives held by its members, and the Executive Board acknowledged the criticism it received:

The discussion on the topic should have been continued and more resources should have been devoted to it, and there could have been more extensive and polyphonic articles on the topic in the Teacher magazine as well.⁷⁹

Some Other Topics Covered by the OAJ

Issues related to indoor air quality were relatively prominent in the publications (17).

According to the OAJ, indoor air problems in schools were too common, and it commissioned research on the issue.⁸⁰ In May 2018, the OAJ welcomed a “Healthy Facilities 2028” program announced by a parliamentary working group.⁸¹ On the other hand it expressed its disappointment when “The Finnish Indoor Air and Health Program” was published in October 2018. It argued the program downplayed illness due to indoor air problems, and trade unions had been ignored during the design process of the program.⁸² Later the OAJ demanded state funding for the prevention of indoor air problems, more attention to appropriate construction of school buildings, and improvements in the legal security of those suffering from indoor air problems.⁸³

One area where the OAJ seems to have often agreed with the Sipilä Government was around the digitalisation of education (13 releases). The preface of a 2016 OAJ report suggested:

The Government has grasped at the digitalisation of education by launching a key project to support the development of learning environments and digital learning in comprehensive schooling. The differences are wide in the progress of digitalisation and national guidance and support are needed to ensure educational equality. The OAJ considers the project important and desirable and will play an active role in it.⁸⁴

Elsewhere the OAJ emphasises the role of education in teaching children and young people digital skills:

It is increasingly important to prepare children, young people, and adults to cope safely, responsibly, ethically, and critically in a progressively digital world, but equally socially, creatively, open-mindedly, and with confidence in their abilities. Without this knowledge, one can end up excluded in a digital society. If this skill is not learned in education, then where? The education sector must be at the forefront of digitalisation.⁸⁵

At the same the OAJ stresses that Finland should focus on the equal promotion of digitalisation nationwide and had concerns about, for example, the lack of digital equipment provided by employers, i.e., municipalities, insufficient in-service training of teachers to the pedagogical use of digital tools and materials and the common experience of increased workload by teachers due to digitalisation.⁸⁶ Broader issues around individual freedom, privacy of personal data, the importance of personal interaction and preserving the pedagogical freedom of the teacher were also canvassed.⁸⁷

A final key topic was bullying and sexual harassment amongst children in both schools and on the internet (11 releases). The prevention of bullying and harassment was featured in OAJ's communications throughout the Sipilä Government's legislature and was also one of OAJ's demands to the forthcoming government in OAJ's Parliamentary Election Campaign.⁸⁸ In May 2018 the OAJ asked:

The rest of the government term must be other than talk about SOTE [Finnish acronym for health and social care], preparing for upcoming parliamentary elections and making promises. Actions must be taken. One has to ask how the bullied one is doing. Is the government's promise to take a stand against bullying coming true?⁸⁹

According to the OAJ, more robust measures were needed to prevent bullying. It supported Tiina Elovaara's [Blue Reform political party] legislative initiative, in which both comprehensive and secondary education institutions would be required to report and address bullying and monitor its cessation.⁹⁰ The Sipilä Government also received praise from the OAJ for its work to prevent bullying and harassment. For example, it was pleased with the guide published by the National Board of Education in March 2018 on preventing sexual harassment, which the OAJ had helped to prepare. In OAJ's statement, the association emphasised that sexual harassment reported by a child or adolescent should always be addressed in the educational institution, regardless of whether the harassment occurred at school or elsewhere.⁹¹

Conclusion: Characterising OAJ as an Actor in Finnish Education

Returning to the question of how much the OAJ supported or resisted the centre-right Sipilä Government we caution again that a lot of policy work, both informal and formal, remains out of sight of our analysis here. We can therefore only present

a partial picture but some rather obvious points can be noted and some more subtle patterns as well.

An obvious starting point is that there is no discussion of overt resistance by the OAJ to the proposals of the Sipilä Government, for instance through strike action or campaigns that refuse co-operation with particular policies. One reason for this may be that it is averted by the highly collaborative approach to policy development in Finland which was mentioned in the introduction of this book and which our own discussion has shown continued, at least in a formal sense, during the Sipilä Government. OAJ continued to be called regularly to the meeting table, for instance, we know that OAJ's Olli Luukkainen participated in the steering group of the New Comprehensive School project from December 2015 to February 2019.⁹² But there are also some signs that the OAJ did not in any case dispute many of the developments under the Sipilä Government, rather only wanting to take a slightly different perspective and not one that was particularly critical, at least certainly not by the standards of academic scholarship on the impacts of neo-liberal education policy. Anu Kantola (2015) explains that this consensus-seeking is a key to political success in Finland, especially today when the party-political landscape is constantly expanding.⁹³ This finding suggests that the OAJ prefers to work 'inside the tent', a positioning that has clearly worked for it historically and which Finnish educational politics continues to allow for and encourages. It is difficult to envisage an issue getting to the point where the OAJ would instruct its members to take overt protest action in the way that is common in many other countries.

Sometimes we see the reluctance to criticise government through omission. For instance, we see little commentary by the OAJ of the Sipilä Government's emphasis on ideals and practices traditionally associated with the business world: its emphasis on vision work, various innovation and pilot projects, networks and collaboration, a culture of change, digitalisation and internationalisation. Admittedly, these features can be considered as a continuum of various New Public Management-type reforms that had been carried out in Finland since the governments of Holkeri (1987–1991) and Aho (1991–95).⁹⁴ We also note that there was not a lot of discussion by the OAJ of the breakaway group of teachers who were unhappy with what the OAJ was proposing about changes in teachers' working hours, although that controversy had received attention in the Finnish media. Perhaps the OAJ finds it more important to present the image of being a united and consensual partner in the policy process. It is also noteworthy that the OAJ paid so little attention to the export of education (only one release) even though it was one of the big agendas of the Sipilä Government. There may be hints here of support for neo-liberal education policy as the single release (a blog post by OAJ chair Olli Luukkainen) was in favour of increasing education exports, regretting, for example, how fragmented the field of Finnish education exports was and how difficult it had been for education export actors to obtain financing for their business.

More often than omission, it seems that OAJ found political utility in generalities that cover up differences in perspective. The most frequent and important of these were in the area of educational equality and equity, the debate that dates back to the establishment of the Finnish comprehensive school system.⁹⁵ Both the Sipilä

Government and the OAJ spoke in favour of educational equality but meant different things. While the OAJ spoke about the equality of educational opportunities, i.e., everyone's "equal opportunity to complete a comprehensive school curriculum with the same principles regardless of their place of residence, gender or parents' wealth or social status",⁹⁶ the Sipilä Government emphasised rather individual educational equity, what Sirkka Ahonen has referred to as a neo-liberalist "equal opportunity for everybody to fulfil her or his capacity and aspirations".⁹⁷ It emphasises individual choices, deregulation of education, and liberalisation of school choices.⁹⁸

This important difference is underpinned by an insufficient interest in the specific mechanisms of inequality and how these are affected by the policy. For instance, the impact of 'choice' and residential segregation on equality are amongst the most serious issues that critics of neo-liberal education policy tend to raise (see for instance chapters in this book by Seppänen, Pasu, and Kosunen; and by Bernelius and Kosunen). We do see the concern in some OAJ releases about the segregation in education and training and how the socio-economic background is related to so-called "school shopping". The OAJ also encouraged municipalities to adopt a "positive discrimination model" being used in Helsinki to improve academic outcomes and retention at school, especially for low-achieving children with an immigrant background.⁹⁹ Yet these concerns were not linked by the OAJ to neo-liberal developments in Finnish education policy.

Mira Kalalahti and Janne Varjo have shed some light on differences in perspective around equality in Finnish education. They point out that the concepts of equality of educational opportunities and individual educational equity were already mixed in the Finnish political debate during the Katainen Government in power from 2011–14. At that time, the contradiction from the point of view of equality was caused by dual goals of preventing segregation but emphasising the rights of the individual. They suggest these contradictions can be explained by the way equality had already become an unquestioned value in Finnish education:

Equality can also be thought of as such a special and central part of the Finnish post-World War II education policy discourse that its conceptual analysis has remained superficial and the connections of its content to selected socio-political perspectives have not been specified.¹⁰⁰

A further general feature of the OAJ's releases was the way they reflected frustration with a fragmented policy programme where different projects come and go. Although the OAJ did not directly criticise the development projects of the Sipilä Government, it seems the OAJ wanted this Government (and others) to have a longer-term perspective on Finnish educational politics. This question of the timeframe for politics and policy could be attributed to what Anne Maria Holli and Saara Turkka call "the hybridisation" of the Finnish political advisory system. As a result of this hybridisation, political preparation is divided between ministerial working groups and increasingly diverse project-based working groups.¹⁰¹ In any event, the OAJ will likely need to respond to pressures in both the Finnish political advisory system¹⁰² and in educational practices that call for a rapid capacity for renewal from both teachers and education policy.

Overall, our investigation into the OAJ's response to the Sipilä Government leaves us with the central question of why the OAJ was unwilling or unable to develop a more pointed critique of Government policy during that time. Was it because it is not ready to leave its comfort zone as an "apolitical" promoter of teachers' professional interests, free from political allegiances?¹⁰³ Or did senior OAJ officials agree with much of the direction of education policy at this time? (Olli Luukkainen's response to education exports seems to suggest this). Perhaps the OAJ was necessarily reflecting the perceived position of its membership and could not afford to develop any feistier critique of education policy? These questions remain for us and we hope future research will provide some answers.

Finally, we note that in recent times with the COVID-19 crisis, the OAJ did take a more oppositional stance to current Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government and municipal policy. During the first 'lockdown' in spring 2020 the OAJ argued strongly against this government's intention to quickly open contact teaching to the youngest comprehensive school pupils¹⁰⁴ and to open schools to everyone at the last minute before summer break.¹⁰⁵ The OAJ also deplored the intentions of many municipalities to lay off teachers during the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps in these changing times we will see some breakdown in the tacit understandings that have informed the way OAJ has acted in the past. Certainly, there should be no assumption that the nature of the OAJ's relationship with the Marin Government or future governments will remain the same, and indeed the pandemic may be a trigger for some rather different approaches.

Notes

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2. See, for instance Ahonen, S. 2002. From an industrial to a post-industrial society: Changing conceptions of equality in education. *Educational Review* 54(2): 173–181.
3. See Prime Minister's Office. 2015. *Finland, a land of solutions. Strategic Programme of Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's Government*. Government Publications 12/2015. https://vnk.fi/documents/10184/1427398/Ratkaisujen+Suomi_EN_YHDISTETTY_netti.pdf/8d2e1a66-e24a-4073-8303-ee3127fbfcac. Accessed 21 Dec 2021.
See also Tervasmäki T., M-A. Okkolin, and I. Kauppinen. 2020. Changing the heart and soul? Inequalities in Finland's current pursuit of a narrow education policy. *Policy Futures in Education*, 18(5): 648–661. doi:10.1177/1478210318811031
4. Tervasmäki, T. and T. Tomperi. 2018. Koulutuspolitiikan arvovalinnat ja suunta satavuotiaassa Suomessa. *Niin & Näin* 2(25): 164–200.
See also Lempinen, S., and P. Seppänen. 2021. *Valtio koulutuksen liiketoimintaa edistämässä: Digitalisaatiolla 'osaamisen ekosysteemiin'*. In *Koulutuksen politiikat: Kasvatustieteellisen tutkimuksen 3. vuosikirja*, eds. J. Varjo, J. Kauko, and H. Silvennoinen, 73–110. Jyväskylä: Suomen Kasvatustieteellinen seura.
5. Financial support for this study was provided by grants from the Finnish Cultural Foundation, Varsinais-Suomi Regional Fund, and Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation.

6. We refer here to the Sipilä Government following the convention of calling particular governments after their leader but the public face of education policy at the time was Minister of Education Sanni Grahn-Laasonen.
7. Lijphart, A. 2012. *Patterns of democracy. Government forms and performance in thirty-six democracies*, 2nd edition. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
See also Kantola, A. 2015. *Muuttuuko maan tapa? Miten Suomessa käytetään talouspoliittista valtaa*. Sitra. https://media.sitra.fi/2017/02/23212731/Muuttuuko_maan_tapa_SITRA_muistio.pdf. Accessed 21 Dec 2021.
8. 'Routine corporatism' refers to the institutionalised working group preparation through which economic groups and trade unions, such as the OAJ, have a strong position in Finnish political decision-making and preparation of laws. See Vesa, J., A. Kantola, and A. Binderkrantz Skorkjaer. 2018. A stronghold of routine corporatism? The involvement of interest groups in policy making in Finland. *Scandinavian Political Studies* 41(4): 239–261.
See also Vesa, J., and A. Kantola. 2016. *Kuka pääsee mukaan? Miten järjestöjen ääni kuuluu lakien valmistelussa. Valtioneuvoston selvitys- ja tutkimustoiminnan julkaisusarja 59/2016*. Helsinki: Valtioneuvoston Kanslia. <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/79823/Kuka%20p%c3%a4%c3%a4see%20mukaan.pdf?sequence=1&isAlloWed=y>. Accessed 21 Dec 2021.
9. OAJ. n.d. *The Trade Union of Education in Finland*. OAJ. <https://www.oaj.fi/en/oaj/>. Accessed 21 Dec 2021.
10. Räisänen, M. 2014. *Opettajat ja koulutuspolitiikka. Opetusalan ammattijärjestö ja Demokraattiset koulutyöntekijät -yhdistys peruskoulukauden koulutuspolitiikassa*. Tampere University Press. p. 14.
11. Prime Minister's Office 2015, op. cit.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–20.
13. Ministry of Education and Culture. 2019. *Uusi peruskoulu -kärkihanke 2016–2018*. Loppuraportti. <https://minedu.fi/documents/1410845/4583171/Uusi+peruskoulu+-karkihanke+2016-2018+loppuraportti/111c39fb-b2e9-b270-6778-fc0faa009661/Uusi+peruskoulu+-karkihanke+2016-2018+loppuraportti.pdf>. Accessed 21 Dec 2021. p. 7.
See also Ministry of Education and Culture. 2016. *New comprehensive School Action Plan*. <https://minedu.fi/documents/1410845/4183002/New+Comprehensive+School+Action+Plan+2016.pdf/8eef80c8-95e5-4d85-8a7c-426f6c98680c/New+Comprehensive+School+Action+Plan+2016.pdf?version=1.2&t=1487333320000>. Accessed 21 Dec 2021.
14. OAJ. n.d. Ajankohtaista. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/>. Accessed 21 Dec 2021.
15. Anne Maria Holli and Saara Turkk (2021) argue that the Finnish political advisory system has moved from a corporate to a more hybrid direction, and especially the position of researchers as corporate partners has weakened while neo-liberal features in the advisory system have strengthened. See Holli, A-M., and S. Turkk. 2021. Tieteen muutuva rooli korporatistisessa neuvonannossa: Pitkittäisanalyysi tutkijoiden asemasta ministeriöiden valmistelutyöryhmissä 1980–2018. *Politiikka: Valtiotieteellisen Yhdistyksen Julkaisu* 63(1): 54–81. https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/329164/98500_Artikkelin_teksti_191525_1_10_20210331.pdf?sequence=1.
On the other hand, according to Vesa et al. (2018; 2016, op. cit.) "routine corporatism" is still strong in Finland and instead of weakening, it has "adapted to new circumstances".
See also Rainio-Niemi, J. 2010. State committees in Finland in historical comparative perspective. In *Nordic associations in a European perspective*, eds. R. Alapuro and H. Stenius, 241–268. BadenBaden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft.
16. See for instance Lijphart, op. cit.
See also Kantola, op. cit.
17. For more information about the history of consensus-seeking, corporatism and so-called state committees in Finland see for instance Rainio-Niemi, op. cit.
See also Holli and Turkk, op. cit.
18. Translated quotation, see Mykkänen, J. 2015. Strateginen hallitusohjelma ja hallitusinstituutioiden muutokset. In *Poliittisen osallistumisen eriytyminen: Eduskuntavaalitutkimus 2015*, eds. K. Grönlund and H. Wass, 224–246. Ministry of Justice, Finland. p. 241.

19. Ibid.
20. Prime Minister's Office 2015, op. cit. p. 12.
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21. Prime Minister's Office, 2015, op. cit.
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23. Prime Minister's Office 2015, op. cit. p. 18.
24. Translated quotation. Ministry of Education and Culture. 2019. Uusi peruskoulu –kärkihanke 2016–2018. Loppuraportti. <https://minedu.fi/documents/1410845/4583171/Uusi+peruskoulu+karkihanke+2016-2018+loppuraportti/111c39fb-b2e9-b270-6778-fc0faa009661/Uusi+peruskoulu+karkihanke+2016-2018+loppuraportti.pdf>. Accessed 21 Dec 2021. p. 6.
25. Ministry of Education and Culture 2019, op. cit. p. 78.
26. See Ministry of Education and Culture 2019, op. cit.
27. Ministry of Education and Culture. 2018. Finnish basic education—Excellence through equity for all. <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/160846>. Accessed 21 Dec 2021.
28. Ministry of Education and Culture 2019, op. cit. p. 79.
29. Ibid., p. 16.
30. Ibid., pp.19–26.
31. Ibid., p. 30.
32. Ibid., pp. 30–31.
33. Ibid., p. 31.
34. Demos Helsinki. n.d. About us. <https://www.demoselsinki.fi/about-us/>. Accessed 21 Dec 2021.
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37. Ministry of Education and Culture 2019, op. cit. pp. 31–33.
38. Ibid., p. 31.
39. Ibid., p. 35.
40. Ibid., p. 38.
41. Doyle, W. 2017. Action plan report for global education brand Finland. Ministry of Education and Culture. <https://minedu.fi/documents/1410845/4150027/Action+Plan+For+Global+Education+Brand+Finland/765e3118-475e-486e-a023-c4f88ae289f3>. Accessed 21 Dec 2021.
42. Ministry of Education and Culture 2019, op. cit. pp. 38–39.
43. Ibid., p. 38.
44. Ibid., pp. 120–123.
45. The countries that were most successful in PISA tests and had strongly increased their own level of expertise were invited to the ISTP meeting (Ministry of Education and Culture 2019, op. cit. p. 41).

46. BETT is a 'global meeting place for the education technology community', see <https://www.bettshow.com/bett-global-series>. Accessed 21 Dec 2021.
47. See also Lempinen and Seppänen, op. cit.
48. OAJ. n.d. Ajankohtaista. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/>. Accessed 21 Dec 2021. Data-driven thematic analysis began by organizing OAJ's releases in chronological order. OAJ's releases about comprehensive schooling (N = 178) were read several times and the main points of each release were summarised and the dataset examples that were considered relevant for the discussion of the research questions were highlighted. The summaries and dataset examples were then re-read and sorted according to their subject area into main concerns. Finally, the main concerns were categorised into overarching themes.
49. The 178 releases were themed around 22 different themes, the 10 largest of which were represented across 140 releases are presented in the table and subjected to more in-depth analysis. In the table, however, this number appears to be larger, as during the analysis many releases were themed under several different themes. There were a total of 45 releases in the 12 smaller themes (again the calculations don't match with the 140 as some releases are placed under several themes). These 12 themes are establishment of a teacher register (4); teacher dismissal protection (8); teacher qualification requirements (6); teacher salaries (1); providing foreign language teaching to all first-graders (7); trial act for Second Native Language (2); evaluation (7); the PISA debate (3); curriculum debate (2); the establishment of student and degree register & students' data protection (2); reforming the club and hobby activities of schools (2); and educational exports (1).
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 - Pulkkinen, S. 2019, March 22. OAJ's blog post. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/blogiartikkelit/koulutus-ratkaisee/2019/6-tapaa-joilla-koulutuksesta-on-leikattu--ja-miksi-sen-pitaa-loppua/>. Accessed 21 Dec 2021.
51. Translated quotation, see *ibid*.
52. Translated quotation, see Tuomisto, N. 2019, March 12. OAJ's blog post. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/blogiartikkelit/koulutus-ratkaisee/2019/eduskunta-ouuuttanut-rehorit-ja-koulutuksen/>. Accessed 21 Dec 2021.
53. OAJ 2019, op. cit. p. 11.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
55. Pulkkinen, S. 2019, February 2. OAJ's blog post. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/blogiartikkelit/koulutus-ratkaisee/2019/eri-arvoistuminen-on-pysaytettava/>. Accessed 21 Dec 2021.
56. OAJ. 2016, April 12. Tasa-arvon tiekartta. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/julkaisut/2016/tasa-arvon-tiekartta/>. Accessed 21 Dec 2021.
57. These organisations and companies were Association of Finnish Municipalities, Seta, Syl (The National Union of University Students in Finland), Samok, Moniheli, Stadin Osaamiskeskus, Securitas, Erilaisten oppijoiden liitto (the Association of Different Learners), Suomen vanhempainliitto (Parents' Association).
58. OAJ. 2018, October 5. Ratkaisuja Suomelle. https://www.oaj.fi/globalassets/julkaisut/2018/uusi_02042019_oaj_ratkaisuja-suomelle_a4_20s_kevyt_sivuiittain.pdf. Accessed 5 Jan 2022.
59. Translated quotation, see OAJ. 2018, October 5. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/nakemyksemme/2018/koulutus-ratkaisee-syrjaytyminen/>. Accessed 5 Jan 2022.
60. Translated quotation, see OAJ. 2018, March 14. OAJ's Compulsory Education Model. https://www.oaj.fi/globalassets/julkaisut/2018/oppivelvollisuusraportti_final_sivuitain_uusioppivelvollisuusmalli.pdf. p. 4. Accessed 5 Jan 2022.
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61. *Ibid*.
62. OAJ. 2018, October 22. <https://www.oaj.fi/politiikassa/riittavasti-tukea-oppimiseen-ja-koulunkayntiin/>. Accessed 5 Jan 2022.

63. OAJ. 2019, February 19. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/uutiset-ja-tiedotteet/2019/oppimisen-ja-koulunkaynnin-tuki-uudistettava-pikaisesti/>. Accessed 5 Jan 2022.
64. Translated quotation, see OAJ. 2017, April 24. https://www.oaj.fi/globalassets/julkaisut/2017/kolmiportainten_tuki_final_sivuittain.pdf. p. 2. Accessed 5 Jan 2022.
65. Translated quotation, see OAJ. 2018, May 15. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/uutiset-ja-tiedotteet/2018/tyonilo-karkasi-opettajan-tyosta/>. Accessed 5 Jan 2022.
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68. OAJ. 2019, May 10. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/uutiset-ja-tiedotteet/2019/oajn-valtuusto-vaatii-investointeja-kasvatukseen-koulutukseen-ja-tutkimukseen/>. Accessed 5 Jan 2022.
69. Translated quotation, see Luukkainen, O. 2018, May 14. OAJ's blog post. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/blogiartikkelit/ollin-blogi/2018/opettajan-tyo-on-pitkajanteista/>. Accessed 5 Jan 2022.
70. OAJ. 2018, October 5. op. cit.
71. Translated quotation, see OAJ. 2019, May 9. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/uutiset-ja-tiedotteet/2019/valtuustoterveisia-hallitusneuvottelijoille/>. Accessed 5 Jan 2022.
72. Translated quotation, see OAJ. 2017, March 23. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/uutiset-ja-tiedotteet/2017/ryhmakoko-suhdeluvut-takaamaan-opettajien-maaraa-koulussa/>. Accessed 5 Jan 2022.
73. KT stands for Finnish term “kuntatyönantaja” i.e., municipal employer. The abbreviation is also attached to the organisation's English name as well, see <https://www.kt.fi/en/about-kt>.
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75. OAJ. 2018, January 9. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/uutiset-ja-tiedotteet/2018/peruskoulun-vuosityoajan-kokeilumallista-neuvottelutulos/>. Accessed 5 Jan 2022.
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83. OAJ. 2018, October 5. Ratkaisuja Suomelle. op. cit.
84. Translated quotation, see OAJ. 2016, January 29. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/julkaisut/2016/oajn-askelmerkit-digiloikkaan/>. p. 3. Accessed 5 Jan 2022.

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