

Rinne, Risto; Järvinen, Tero

## **The 'losers' in education, work and life chances - the case of Finland**

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## The 'losers' in education, work and life chances – the case of Finland

**Abstract:** Finland has been remarkably successful in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies conducted in the first years of the new millennium. The variation in achievement is low and the educational level of Finnish young people is high in an international comparison. Also, dropout rates are lower in Finland than in many other countries. In this article, the main patterns of post-compulsory graduation and dropping out of education, as well as aspects of social exclusion of Finnish youth are examined. While the overwhelming majority of young people in Finland manage to cope well, an increasing minority seems to be at risk of educational and social exclusion. Establishing educational equality has been at the centre of educational policy in Finland since World War II. However, the current tendency revolves around expediting efficiency and, more generally, serving the economy. These steps towards a neo-liberalistic educational policy threaten to marginalise an ever-growing number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and increase the risk of exclusion.

### 1. Introduction: Finland at the top of the world ranking

As a result of globalisation, and in particular the increased influence of supranational organizations, nation-states have come under increasing pressure to follow neo-liberal orthodoxy in educational policy and planning. By examining the policy documents and practices of the World Bank, the OECD and the European Union, the significant influence of free-market neo-liberalism in thinking about educational reforms and policy-making becomes clear, and almost no nation-state can avoid this profound influence on education.<sup>1</sup>

It is important, however, to keep in mind that even if the same policy discourse enters the policy systems of different countries, policy implementation is a highly complicated and fortuitous affair. National policy-making is always inevitably a process of *bricolage* or, in other words, a matter of borrowing and copying fragments of ideas and amending locally-appraised approaches, theories, research, trends and fashions. Many policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit-or-miss affairs that are tinkered with and re-worked. These policies are subsequently inflected by complex processes of influence and ultimately re-created in a national or local context of practice (e.g. Ball 1994; 2001).

<sup>1</sup> Many studies related to supranational/global influences on national educational policies have recently been carried out within CELE, University of Turku (e.g. Kallo/Rinne 2006; Niukko 2006; Seppänen 2006; Kallo 2009), but in the framework of this article it is not possible to concentrate on those in detail.

The OECD differs from the other supranational organisations in that its influence over the educational policy of its member states is based on information management. The OECD has neither made any legally binding decisions nor has it issued any obligatory educational policy recommendations. On the other hand, the OECD has become established as a kind of '*éminence grise*' with respect to the educational policy of industrialised countries (Rinne et al. 2004; Kallo 2009).

Furthermore, the OECD has been quite diligent in producing and publishing country reviews, as well as thematic reviews concerning educational issues. In addition to organizing numerous meetings and consultations on educational politics, its impressive book series, 'Education at a Glance', in which countries are ranked on the basis of various educational indicators, has been highly influential in steering the direction of national education politics.

Countries have also been ranked on three occasions with the help of a new vehicle for evaluation, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and in each case (in 2000, 2003 and 2006), Finland has been at the very top of the ranking. The following ranking lists based on PISA studies (Tables 1 and 2) show the excellent ranking of Finnish comprehensive school students (aged 15-year, 57 countries involved in 2006). In addition, although the differences in performance of the students representing different sexes, regional areas and social backgrounds were also present in Finland, these discrepancies were comparatively among the lowest.

	Ranking	Country	Points
<b>Natural science</b>	1.	Finland	563
	2.	Hong Kong	542
	3.	Canada	534
	4.	Taiwan	532
	5.	Estonia Japan	531 531
<b>Reading</b>	1.	South Korea	556
	2.	Finland	547
	3.	Hong Kong	536
	4.	Canada	527
	5.	New Zealand	521
<b>Mathematics</b>	1.	Taiwan	549
	2.	Finland	548
	3.	Hong Kong	547
	4.	Holland	531
	5.	Switzerland	530

Source: OECD 2006.

Tab. 1: The OECD countries in comparison (Top 5, PISA 2006)

Year	Reading	Mathematics	Natural science	Problem-solving
2000	1.	4.	3.	**
2003	1.	2.	1.*	2.*
2006	2.	2.	1.	**

\* Split place  
\*\* Research results are missing  
Source: OECD 2006.

Tab. 2: The ranking of Finnish comprehensive school students in PISA studies from 2000–2006

Recently, there has been a great deal of discussion, both domestically and internationally, related to the roots of Finland’s enormous success in PISA assessments. For example, high-quality teacher education programs and particularly the superior quality of education at the junior level of the Finnish comprehensive school system have been used to explain the nation’s success. In Finland, study results have been tremendously important in confronting heavy criticism directed towards the comprehensive school. Critics of the system, in fact, appeared in Finland in the early 1990s in the wake of global neo-liberal educational politics. Indeed, without PISA, the turn of the tide of educational policy would undoubtedly have been stronger, and the post-war tradition of equality in educational opportunities might have weakened even more drastically.

2. Comprehensive schools – delayed selection of pupils

According to international research, educational inequality is a common feature of all nations. However, the extent of the inequality and the force of its impact depend largely on variations in the architecture of institutional and program arrangements. These include issues such as comprehensive or more selective schools, early or delayed selection, as well as public versus private schooling (Lamb 2009).

The Finnish comprehensive school includes primary and lower secondary schools and is uniform in nature; in other words, different tracks leading to different educational outcomes are not part of the system. Students are selected for different educational routes only after completing their compulsory schooling, at the age of 16 (Rinne/Järvinen 2010).

However, inside the comprehensive school there is an extensive special education system for at-risk students, which has been systematically and rapidly expanded since the comprehensive school reform in the early 1970s (Kivirauma 1989; Simola, Rinne/Kivirauma 1999; Jahnukainen 2003; Myllyniemi 2008). Special education can be either full-time or part-time in nature, the latter alternative being more common. The number of special education students in Finland is high by international standards. Approximately 8% of those in comprehensive school can be classified as full-time special edu-

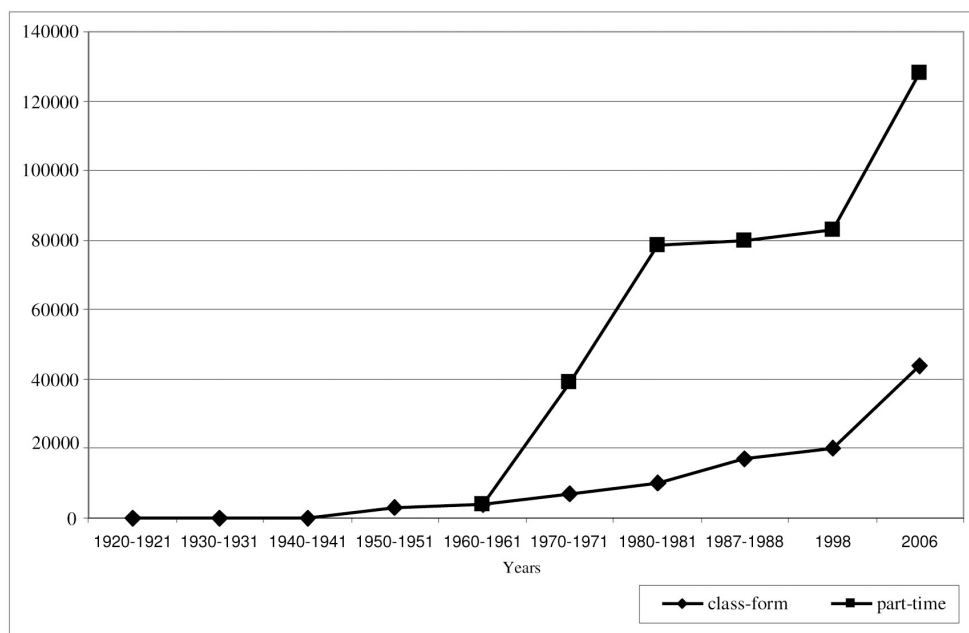


Fig. 1: The numbers of pupils participating in special education in Finland during the years 1920–2006 (Rinne/Kivirauma 2005; Statistics Finland 2008).

education students (officially transferred to special education) and some 22% as part-time special education students (Kivirauma/Rinne/Klemelä 2004; Statistics Finland 2005; 2008).

This new division within the common comprehensive school is not only a question of the growing numbers, but also of the growing proportion, of students entering into the special education track. The proportion of pupils transferred to special education in Finnish primary schools, for instance, has consistently increased over the past ten years (Figure 2).

One reason for the large share of special education students in Finnish comprehensive school is that in Finland, when defining disability or deciding who needs special educational support, diagnostic labels are rarely used. In most cases, pupils are referred to as having learning difficulties in a certain academic area. In other words, students who experience such difficulties receive special education services without formal diagnostic assessments or labels. Although the law recommends a psychological or medical evaluation, this assessment is not required. Recommendation for services is left to teachers, who thus enjoy a large amount of authority in determining who among their students needs remedial instruction. Parents are also involved in the decision to transfer a child to a special education track (Itkonen/Jahnukainen 2010).

A typical part-time special education student in Finland is still in primary school and has difficulties in basic skills, especially in reading, writing or mathematics and receives

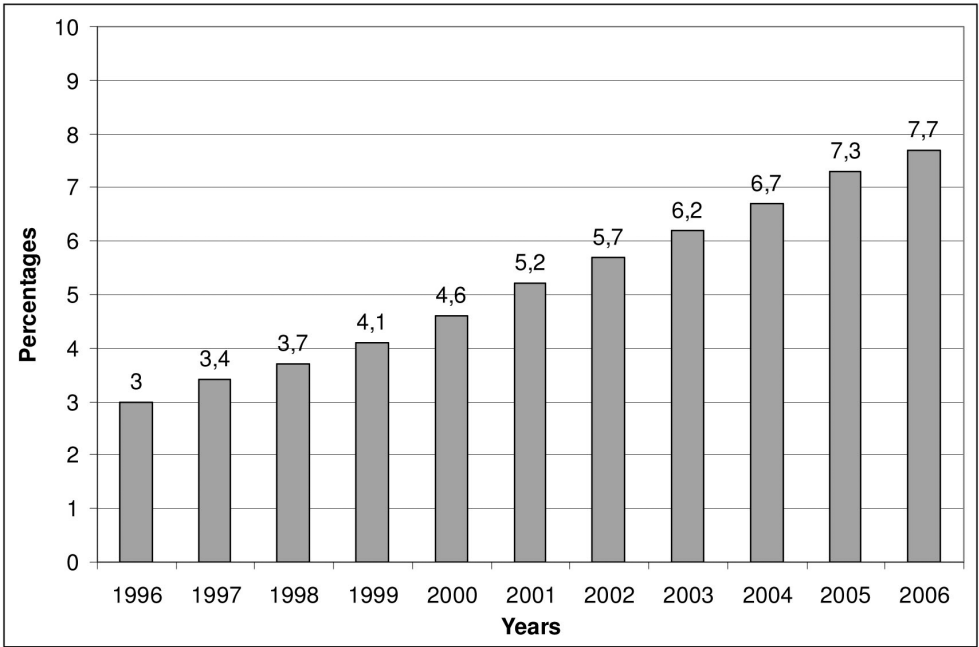


Fig. 2: The share of pupils transferred to special education (n = 44 699 in 2006) in Finnish primary school throughout the years 1996–2006 (Finnish National Board of Education 2008)

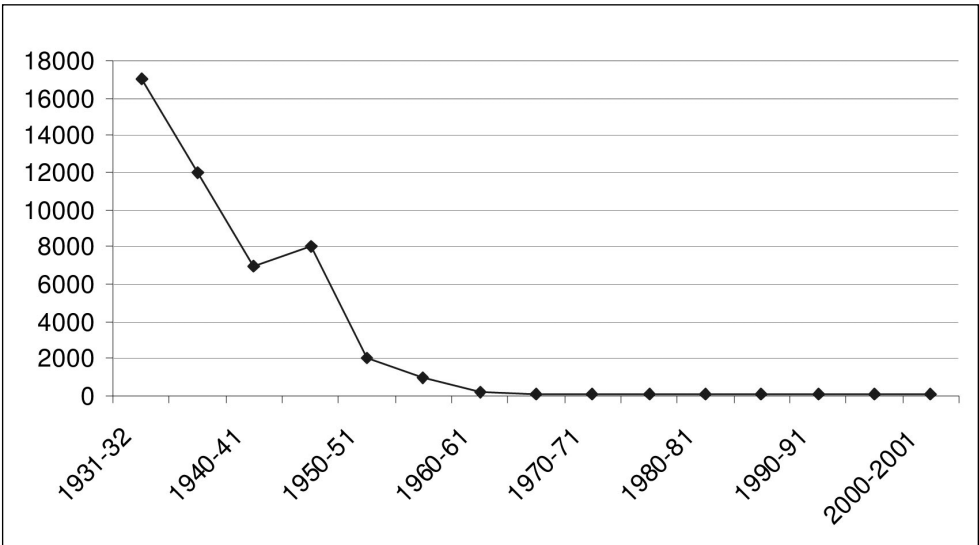


Fig. 3: Those neglecting their compulsory education in Finland during the years 1931–2001 (Rinne/Kivirauma 2005; Kivirauma 1989:28; Statistics Finland, KO 1996:2; Tilastokeskus 2001a)



specialised interventions during one or two lessons weekly for a restricted period (for example one year or less) (Itkonen/Jahnukainen 2010).

The extensive special education system within the comprehensive school is one of the key factors explaining why the dropout rate in Finnish comprehensive school has been minimal since the 1960s (Simola/Rinne/Kivirauma 1999). For instance, in the 2006/2007 school year, only 0.23% of the comprehensive school leavers, that is, 152 pupils, did not succeed in obtaining the basic education school leaving certificate (Myllyniemi 2008).

### 3. The main patterns of post-compulsory graduation and dropping out

Transition from basic to upper secondary education has been seen as a critical stage from the points of view of educational and social exclusion of young people. In Finland, the post-compulsory upper secondary level comprises general and vocational education. Annually, more than 90% of Finnish compulsory school leavers continue their studies either in upper secondary general schools or in vocational institutions. During the past 10–15 years, slightly more than half of the comprehensive school graduates have continued their post-compulsory studies in general upper secondary schools, whereas the share of those continuing in vocational education and training has varied between 33 to 40% (Table 3).

	1990	1992	1995	1997	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Upper secondary general school	49	52	57	55	54	55	55	54	53	51
Vocational school	33	33	32	33	36	37	37	38	39	40
Additional basic education	5	5	5	4	3	3	2	3	3	2
No educational institution immediately	13	10	6	8	7	6	6	5	5	7

Tab. 3: *The proportion of pupils completing the comprehensive school and entering upper secondary education the same year in Finland between 1990–2006 (%) (Statistics Finland: Koulutus 1993:7, 1994:3, 1996:13, 1998:5; Myllyniemi 2008)*

General upper secondary school has been a popular choice especially among girls and young people from more advantaged social backgrounds, while boys and working-class youth have been over-represented in vocational schools. In addition, in vocational education, many fields of education are either male- or female-dominated, with technology

and transport being the most male-dominated (84% male students in 2006) and social and health services the most female-dominated field (90% female students) (Rinne 2007; Statistics Finland 2008). In 2006, half of the students who completed compulsory school, continued their post-compulsory studies in general upper secondary education (females: 60%, males: 43%) and 40% continued their studies in vocational schools (females: 31%, males: 49%) (Myllyniemi 2008).

In Finland, different upper secondary school forms have traditionally had different societal functions. The aim of the general schools has been to prepare students for higher education studies with elevated statuses, whereas the objective of vocational schools has been to produce skilled (mostly manual) workers for different sectors of the labour market. It is more typical for the general school students to continue their studies after graduation, whereas the risk of being unemployed is higher among the vocational education students. While 45% of those who graduated from the general schools in 1998 were still studying in 2005, the corresponding figure among those who had graduated from vocational education and training was only 16%. The unemployment rate after seven years from graduation was 8% among the former vocational education students, whereas it was only 4% among those who had graduated from general schools (Statistics Finland 2008).

Upper secondary general school and a school-based vocational education are not, however, the only educational alternatives after completing compulsory education in Finland. A small minority (about 2–5%) of the comprehensive school leavers continues their studies in some other educational institutions, for example in voluntary additional basic education (10<sup>th</sup> grade) or in adult education centers.

Finland also has an apprenticeship training system, although compared to other European countries, such as Germany or Norway, this has traditionally been a relatively marginal educational route. The popularity of apprenticeship training has, however, gradually increased. In 2006, 18% of all vocational upper secondary qualifications were based on apprenticeship training (Statistics Finland 2008). Furthermore, upper secondary vocational qualifications may also be obtained through competence tests independent of how the vocational skills have been acquired. In 2006, 17% of all basic vocational qualifications were obtained through competence tests (Statistics Finland 2008).

In a situation in which over 90% of those finishing comprehensive school are continuing their studies, upper secondary education can, in practice, be considered as a part of compulsory education in Finland. Annually, only 5–8% of 16-year-olds drop out of the education system immediately after comprehensive school (Myllyniemi 2008). The risk of dropping out of upper secondary education has slightly increased during the past few years. Previously, students who had succeeded best in comprehensive school almost exclusively chose the general educational route. Now, some of them are choosing the vocational track, which means that the least successful students have more difficulty getting in to vocational schools than before. In 2006, 7% of those Finnish young people, who completed their compulsory education did not continue their studies in post-compulsory education, while the proportion of early school leavers in the previous year had been 5% (Myllyniemi 2008).

Despite the increased popularity of vocational schools and the fact that the dropout rate in vocational education has evenly diminished during the first years of the new millennium, vocational schools still have the greatest dropout rate in the context of upper secondary education in Finland. In addition, among vocational school dropouts, interruption of studies almost exclusively (90% in the school year 2004–05) means dropping out of the entire educational system – at least temporarily; whereas for half of the general school dropouts, the interruption of studies means continuing in some other form of education (Statistics Finland 2008).

Interruption of upper secondary education has been more common among males than females in Finland until the school year 2004–05, when the situation changed in vocational education and training. However, dropping out of the educational system altogether is more typical for boys than girls, for whom dropping out more often means continuing in some other form of vocational education (Statistics Finland 2008).

	2000/-01	2001/-02	2002/-03	2003/-04	2004/-05
<b>Upper secondary general education</b> (both sexes)	4,2	4,1	3,7	3,8	3,9
Girls	3,9	3,7	3,2	3,4	3,6
Boys	4,5	4,5	4,3	4,4	4,2
<b>Vocational Education</b> (both sexes)	13,1	12,3	11,3	10,7	10,5
Girls	12,3	12,1	11,1	10,7	10,7
Boys	13,8	12,6	11,5	10,7	10,3

*Tab. 4: Interruption of general and vocational upper secondary education in Finland by gender in the school years 2000/2001 to 2004/2005 (%) (Statistics Finland 2008)*

#### 4. Explanations concerning dropping out

There have been three basic sociological approaches in the literature concerning educational decision-making (Järvinen 1998). Classical structuralists (e.g. Bowles/Gintis 1976; Althusser 1984) have argued that the actions of human beings are channeled by external constraints which leave almost no substantial room for choice. According to this view, individuals' decisions result mainly from their location in the social structure and, as such, their intentions are rather irrelevant in explaining their decisions, since the power of external conditions overrides them. In contrast, the theories of rational choice and rational decision-making assume that individuals purposefully make decisions according to their intentions, by evaluating the pros and cons of the expected outcomes of feasible alternatives, on the basis of relevant information and in light of their preferences (see e.g. Gambetta 1987, 8–11; Okano 1995, 32–33). Between these approaches are cul-

turally-attuned models that allow for the relative autonomy of the individuals in their cultural settings (Willis 1977; Brown 1987). These models begin with the experience of individuals, and only after understanding people on their own terms do these theories attempt to connect those experiences with their wider social and cultural contexts.

Studies concerning educational choices have often clustered around one of these approaches, while rejecting the possibility that different individuals may make their decisions according to different mechanisms. However, a particular individual can decide simultaneously on the basis of more than one mechanism, while he or she can also choose according to different mechanisms at different educational stages. This means that individuals, when making their decisions, behave in part through conscious choice, but also under the guidance of the structural features of society and of culture. These various principles of behaviour/action affect the way people act to a varying extent and in different ways in different contexts (Gambetta 1987; Hatcher 1998; Järvinen 1998).

Combinations of these approaches could be fruitful when trying to understand the dropout phenomenon from the perspective of individual life courses. However, when attempting to theorise and understand the dropout phenomenon, as well as the contemporary situation of so-called 'dropout' youth in a wider societal context, one can lean on those changes that have taken place in the educational and (youth) labour markets during the past few decades. From this perspective, the main line of thought is the following: as a result of the general increase in the level of education, in the difficulty of engagement with the labour market, as well as the emphasis on the correlation between completed educational degrees and unemployment, those with minimum education have the greatest difficulties in acquiring employment as well as integrating into society and adult life in general (Järvinen/Vanttaja 2005).

After World War II, educational opportunities have expanded, and educational participation has increased globally, although in various ways in countries with different educational systems and traditions (Müller/Wolbers 2003). In Finland, educational expansion has been continuous since the 1960s. In 1960, only 16% of the population aged 15 or over had completed an upper secondary education or greater. By 1999, the figure had risen to 59%. At the same time, the proportion of people with a university degree has quadrupled (Statistics Finland 1999; 2001).

On the other hand, young people's transition from education to work has become more difficult over the past few decades. The risk of unemployment has increased, and temporary work contracts have become more common. Generally, there are more risks and uncertainties related to the labour market status of young people compared to that of the adult population in Finland (Järvinen/Vanttaja 2005; Myllyniemi 2008).

The increasing educational level of the population has caused an inflation of education in Finland and strengthened the link between educational qualifications and occupational positions (Aro 2003). At the beginning of the 1990s, the unemployment rates were still rather low in all educational groups. Almost all individuals with a university qualification were employed, while the unemployment rate of those with only basic education was less than 5%. By 2005, the unemployment rate among those with basic education had risen to 14%, while among those who had completed an upper secondary or a higher education, the rate rose to 9% and 5% respectively (Figure 4).

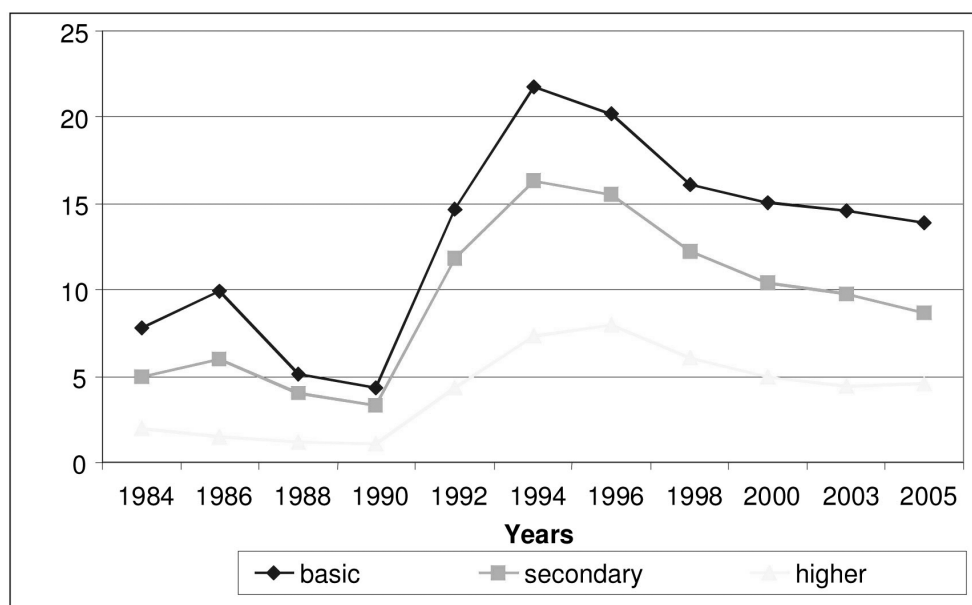


Fig. 4: The rate of unemployment according to the level of schooling from 1984 to 2005 (Rinne/Kivirauma 2005; Keiner/Rinne 2009)

We have gradually entered into a situation in which education has become a necessary – although not automatically sufficient – requirement for entering the labour market. As a result of educational inflation, the future has become harder to predict even for university graduates, particularly in the certain fields such as the Humanities (Rouhelo 2008), whereas early school leaving clearly increases the risk of social exclusion and marginalisation. The emergence of the finance crisis during the last few years has especially increased the unemployment rate of youth up to about 20%. This has greatly increased polarisation, weakened equality of opportunities, as well as diminished the possibilities for employment among disadvantaged youth.

## 5. Main predictors of dropping out and losing the game

It has become a widely held assumption that those young people who are outside all education, training or employment between the ages of sixteen and eighteen are condemned to an economically and socially marginalised future. Difficulties in the early stages in one's labour market career are perceived as leading to an increased risk of subsequent unemployment or insecure employment in later stages. Prolonged unemployment, in turn, has been found to be connected with health and social problems, and as a result with economic, social and political exclusion (e.g. Bynner/Parsons 2002; Korpi et al. 2003).

In international discourse, it has been recognised that after being outside the educational system for two years, employment opportunities are seriously diminished and returning to education becomes less probable (Vanttaja/Järvinen 2006; Myllyniemi 2008). As a result, young people between the ages of 16 and 18 who are simultaneously out of school and unemployed have been labelled 'youth at risk'. It is worthwhile to notice that in the Finnish context, the dropout phenomenon has been examined as a broader issue than solely an interruption of school, and has usually been connected with those young people who are outside both education and working life. As a result, the category of 'NEET' (Not in Education, Employment or Training) is much more appropriate than that of 'early school leavers', when speaking of dropout youth in the Finnish context.

During the past few decades, Finnish girls and boys have had an almost equally great likelihood of being outside education and working life between the ages of 16 and 18. In turn, young people from disadvantaged social backgrounds, immigrant youth, disabled young people, as well as former full-time special education pupils have had the greatest risk of being excluded from education and working life immediately after comprehensive school in Finland. These groups are not mutually exclusive, but rather partially overlap. For instance, both disabled and immigrant youth can be found within the typical group of special education pupils (Järvinen/Vanttaja 2001; Järvinen/Jahnukainen 2008).

In Finland, the children of parents in weak labour market positions, with low incomes and basic education, on average have a greater probability of being excluded from education and working life between the ages of 16 to 18 than the rest of the population (Järvinen/Vanttaja 2001; Vanttaja 2005). The connection between social background and one's educational career has long been known, and it has been documented in many studies in Finland and elsewhere (e.g. Kivinen/Rinne 1995; Järvinen 2003; Kivinen/Hedman/Kaipainen 2007). On the other hand, the educational situation of immigrant youth, including Finnish-born youth with immigrant parents, is relatively new in Finland, since the number of immigrants has increased in Finland only during the past few decades.

Unfortunately, there is no information available in official Finnish statistics related to the social, regional and ethnic background of young people outside both education and working life. However, based on the census register data gathered for research related to the living conditions of Finnish young people (Autio/Eräranta/Myllyniemi 2008), we can examine the different background factors related to being outside education and working life among Finnish young people aged 15 to 24 (Table 5).

Gender and region are not very closely connected with young people's exclusion from education and working life in contemporary Finland, whereas the educational level of parents and especially immigrant status are strong determinants of young people's dropping out of those fields. The less educated the mother or father is, the greater the likelihood that their offspring is outside education and working life. In the entire population aged 15 to 24, the proportion of these young outsiders was 11.8% in 2004, whereas among those whose mother had not continued schooling after compulsory school, the proportion of youth dropouts was 1.3%. Among immigrant youth the proportion of

<b>Gender</b>	
Males	11.3
Females	12.0
Both sexes	11.8
<b>Region</b>	
Countryside	12.1
Small town	11.4
City	11.3
<b>Country of birth</b>	
Finland	11.0
Other EU-country	22.9
Countries outside EU	38.6
<b>Mother's educational level</b>	
Basic education	18.3
Upper secondary education	11.9
Higher Ed./ Bachelor's degree	7.8
Higher Ed./ Master's degree	5.7
<b>Father's educational level</b>	
Basic education	16.3
Upper secondary education	11.7
Higher Ed./ Bachelor's degree	7.4
Higher Ed./ Master's degree	5.8

*Tab. 5: The share of young people outside education and working life in the Finnish population aged 15 to 24 by gender, region, country of birth and parents' educational level in 2004 (%) (Statistics Finland: NEVK 2008; Rinne/Järvinen 2009).*

those outside education and working life was 30%, and among those born outside the EU as many as 38.6% were outside education and simultaneously without a job in 2004.

According to research, finding employment is difficult for immigrants in Finland (e.g. Jaakkola 2000; Forsander 2002.). The employment status of immigrants weakened particularly in the 1990s due to the recession, affecting both new arrivals and those who had been in Finland for a longer period. In a few years the unemployment rate among this population increased severalfold; at its worst the unemployment rate of immigrants was over 50%. In addition to high unemployment rates, the problems immigrants face include unstable work careers and, in the case of more highly educated immigrants, finding work that corresponds to their level of education and professional training, as they are usually employed in jobs for which they are overeducated. Immigrants also often tend to be employed to perform low status jobs, as it is difficult to motivate Finnish employees to accept them (Forsander/Alitolppa-Niitamo 2000; Kyhä 2006).

The problems of the post-compulsory education of immigrant youth have been examined in several studies, many of which are local in nature (e.g. Romakkaniemi/Ruutu 2001). One nationwide problem relates to participation in post-compulsory upper secondary level education. The difference in participation between immigrant youth and native Finnish youth is significant. First of all, immigrant youth complete secondary education (general or vocational) at an older age than those in the general population. Of those young people born in Finland, 65% have completed some sort of secondary education by the age of 19, while among immigrant youth over half do so only at the age of 21. Secondly, although 14% of the general population have completed only compulsory education at the age of 24, among immigrants of the same age the corresponding figure is as high as 43%. Thirdly, while one-half of all 20- to 24-year-old Finnish-born youth are general upper secondary school graduates, only three out of ten immigrants of the same age are, and among those of African background the proportion is as low as one out of ten (Järvinen/Jahnukainen 2008).

The consequences of exclusion from education and work on the later lives of Finnish young people have also been studied using longitudinal data and methods (Järvinen/Vanttaja 2006; Vanttaja/Järvinen 2006; Järvinen/Vanttaja/Aro 2007).<sup>2</sup> Based on the results of this follow-up study, it seems that on average, the assumption that unemployment at the beginning of one's work career combined with limited education has negative consequences on one's later life course holds true. Those Finnish who are outside both education and working life at the age of 16 to 18 often end up in weaker labour market positions and with lower income levels as adults than others belonging to the same age cohort. As young adults, half of the target group had been either unemployed, or for some other reason outside the labour market (for instance, on disability pension). Over half of the women and two-thirds of the men had not completed any kind of education after compulsory education, and hence still had only a basic education at the age of 31 to 33 (Vanttaja/Järvinen 2006). In addition, less than one-third of the early school leavers had managed to carve out a stable labour market career (Järvinen/Vanttaja 2006).

Although integration into society had been more difficult for those belonging to the group of unemployed early school leavers than for the population as a whole, the life courses both of exclusion and of inclusion were found in the study. Despite the weak 'societal prediction', there were many in the group of early school leavers who had continued their education at a later age and succeeded in finding their place in the world of work. About 10% had continued their education to the level of higher education and ended up in the high-income group. The correlation between one's total education and career was strong. Those who had participated in adult education, especially those who had completed a higher education qualification, most often ended up in a successful labour market career, whereas those with only basic education most often ended up out-

2 In this particular study project, the target group consisted of a 50% sample of all Finnish youth aged 16 to 18 who were unemployed and had not continued their schooling after compulsory school in 1985 (n = 6,983). The life courses of these young people were followed at five-year intervals up to the year 2000.



side the active labour force and/or in the low-income group (Vanttaja/Järvinen 2006). Also the social background of early school leavers was closely connected with the kind of labour market careers they came to have, and the link between parents' educational level and the later success of their offspring was especially strong (Järvinen/Vanttaja 2006).

## **6. Some conclusions and widening the perspective: Finland – not everywhere at the top after all?**

Finland is riding along on its fame in the OECD international educational ranking. In the latest country review (PISA 2006), Finland received first place in natural sciences as well as second place in reading and mathematics. In 2000 and 2003, Finland was also ranked among the best and awarded first place in reading in both reviews. The national success story thus seems consistent enough. In addition, in the Finnish comprehensive school the interdependent discrepancies in achievement are comparatively low by international standards.

Further, Finnish young people are also more highly educated compared to youth in many other OECD countries, and young people's exclusion from both education and working life is less of a problem in Finland than in many other European Union member states (European Commission 2005; OECD 2008).

On the other hand, success at school, choice of educational careers and climbing up the educational ladder are still closely connected to the social status and level of education of one's parents, even in the Finland of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Järvinen 2003; Kivinen/Hedman/Kaipainen 2007). Although the significance of the home as the definer of school success has weakened during recent decades, the clear discrepancies have not disappeared anywhere. Due to the recession in the beginning of the 1990s and the simultaneous new course taken in educational policy, clear internal differentiation in the school establishment as well as the genesis of educational routes for the haves and have-nots can be seen. For instance, in relation to choices concerning upper secondary education, choosing general school is more common among children with highly educated parents than among children of less educated parents (Rinne, S. 2007), and it is even eightfold more probable for the offspring of a highly educated family to end up in a university than for a child from a family with lower education (Kivinen/Hedman/Kaipainen 2007).

It is also of utmost importance to note that Finnish children do not achieve similar top rankings (as in the case of PISA) in all the other comparative research. For example, in an international comparative study by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2004, S. 43–44), it came to light that only a small minority (5%) of Finnish children and young people truly enjoy being at school. When comparing 15-year-olds internationally regarding this issue, Finnish young people brought up the rear.

In a comparative study published by UNICEF regarding the overall well-being of children and young people, Finland ranked third out of 15 countries in 2005. Only the

Netherlands and Sweden were ahead of Finland in this study. However, even in this comparison, Finland received low scores when comparing the 'family- and friend-relations' (12<sup>th</sup>) and the "experience of subjective well-being" of children (9<sup>th</sup>). With respect to those issues, Finland's ranking was clearly below average (Kangas 2008).

In Finland, there has recently been a lot of discussion related to the polarisation of young people into categories of those who are coping well in many areas of life and those who are at serious risk of social exclusion. Fear has been expressed that these groups of young people are becoming increasingly separated from each other (Autio/Eräranta 2008). Based on available official statistics as well as recent survey studies, one can argue that, in general, this polarisation hypothesis holds true. It seems that the proportion of young people who are at risk of social exclusion has increased during the past 15 years in Finland. Firstly, exclusion from the family sphere has become more common among children and young people. Indeed, the proportion of children and young people placed outside their home or in custody has constantly increased during the years 1991–2006. Also the proportion of young people with low incomes as well as young people with mental health problems has increased during the same period. In addition, youth unemployment rates are higher in Finland than in other countries belonging to EU on average (e.g. Järvinen/Vantaja 2005; Myllyniemi 2008).

There are several differences related to the well-being of boys and girls in Finland. Loneliness, for instance is more common among young males than among young females, as is a negative attitude towards schooling. Mental health problems, in turn, are more common among girls than boys. One must note, however, that although the risk of becoming socially excluded has somewhat increased during the past 10 to 15 years, the great majority of Finnish young people are satisfied with their life as a whole, and with their health and social relations in particular. In a nationally-representative study, when asked what school grade (using the Finnish scale of 4–10) young people aged 15 to 29 would give to their overall life satisfaction, 92% of them responded at least 8/10. In all, it seems that the life situation of the majority of Finnish young people is good or even extremely good, whereas the minority of young people has serious life-management problems and severe difficulties in many areas of life. In this respect the above-mentioned polarisation hypothesis holds true (Myllyniemi 2008).

This small, although growing minority of Finnish children and youth seems to be at risk of wider social exclusion and this social truth has strong influences on both everyday life at school and on the educational system as a whole. The idea of raising the educational level of the entire population and establishing educational equality has been at the centre of Finnish education policy since World War II. For over a century, the country has struggled to guarantee the offspring of all families an optimal level of education despite their economic, social, regional or educational background or status, and regardless of gender or ethnic origin. In Finland, a traditionally strong faith in national solidarity entails that the most vulnerable members of society must also be protected.

During the past two decades, however, there have been clear signs of change in the attitude towards education. The goals and activities of education are more radically than in previous times being based on ever-hardening competition. There has been a growing

tendency to regard education as being more and more the servant of the production economy and in terms of economic investment and efficiency. These steps towards a more overt neo-liberalistic educational policy may threaten to marginalise and cause difficulties for a growing number of children and young people.

These signs of a transformation in educational policy are conspicuous enough to warrant further contemplation, and more broadly, a serious inquiry of what the future of Finnish children and young people will be like, not only regarding their academic success, but also concerning their well-being at school and the quality of their future.

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