

Legitimacy of the Finnish National Agency for Education: a historical examination and a rhetorical analysis of the justifications for its administrative role

Research Overview

The study demonstrates how the legitimacy of the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI), the expert agency responsible for curriculum development, was established through historical conflicts and is currently justified in actors' rhetoric, drawing on a recent case in which the proposal to abolish EDUFI was withdrawn following stakeholder opposition.

Purpose of Study

In many countries, the national-level standards of the curriculum for basic education are formulated by ministries of education, making it a policy document that is strongly influenced by the political context at the time being (Ball, 1994). In contrast, the Finnish national core curriculum for basic education is developed and decided by an agency called EDUFI, which works within the Ministry's remit as an 'expert agency' (Ouakrim-Soivio & Kupiainen, 2024). In practice, based on the performance agreement with the Ministry, EDUFI has total responsibility and control over preparing the national core curriculum (Soini et al., 2021).

Past research suggests that although EDUFI is not completely neutral from political intentions, it still has wide authority regarding core curriculum development, which is supported by the institutionalized trust from politics (Uljens & Rajakaltio, 2017). However, where this institutionalized trust derives from, and how it exists now, has been understudied. In other words, although EDUFI's legitimacy is currently widely accepted

by Finnish society, its historical developments and the reasons to support EDUFI in its current state have not been thoroughly examined.

Therefore, the purpose of the study is to explore EDUFI's legitimacy through historical and rhetorical analyses. Here, legitimacy is understood as a socially constructed, generalized perception that an entity's actions are appropriate (Suddaby et al., 2017). Specifically, the study investigates the historical tensions the EDUFI has gone through since the founding of its predecessor organizations in the 19th century. It also examines how EDUFI's legitimacy is currently justified in the actors' public statements.

Research methods

The context of the data is a recent case regarding the abolishment proposal of EDUFI, which sparked significant controversy in Finland as an exceptional event that questioned the agency's legitimacy. In August 2025, the Minister of Finance, also the leader of the Finns Party, proposed the abolishment of EDUFI within her proposal of the state budget 2026. While the official reason for the abolishment was to reduce expenditure, the proposal reflected her party's critical views that EDUFI is engaging in politically biased and ideologically driven activities. Multiple stakeholders, including EDUFI, their officials, the Minister of Education, and educational and administrative experts, gave statements in public spaces to oppose this proposal by supporting the existence and legitimacy of EDUFI. As a result, the abolition of EDUFI was dropped from the draft state budget 2026, which the government decided in September 2025.

The study used data consisting of statements by relevant actors on the proposal to abolish EDUFI during the period from the Minister of Finance's budget proposal to the government's draft budget proposal, drawn from EDUFI's official website, major

newspaper websites, and social media platforms. It employed a rhetorical analysis, using the idea of “new rhetoric” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971). This is grounded in the view that legitimacy is not fixed within legal or institutional structures, but rather socially constructed and maintained through discourse (Säntti et al., 2021), which aligns with the purpose of the study to examine how EDUFI is represented in the actors’ statements.

Results and Discussion

The analysis shows that actors not only directly opposed the proposal’s claim that abolishing EDUFI will lead to budget savings, but also emphasized the professional expertise of EDUFI staff and the importance of maintaining EDUFI’s distance from political guidance. They stressed that education should be developed on a long-term basis based on expert and research data, noting, for example, that the principles of the core curriculum do not change from government to government. The fact that a proposal by the Minister of Finance, who has the authority to make such proposals, was widely opposed and ultimately withdrawn, suggests that EDUFI’s legitimacy, as expressed in the actors’ discourses, is already broadly shared in society.

Building on these findings, the discussion examines the historical processes through which this legitimacy was developed and established. It draws on official documents and existing research of EDUFI (and its predecessor, Kouluhallitus) and the Ministry of Education and Culture (and its predecessor, Ministry of Education). The study reveals past conflicts that EDUFI went through that possibly contributed to acquiring its current legitimacy. In particular, it identifies past tensions with the Ministry, as well as changing power relationships between EDUFI and politics. The study offers implications for nations seeking to design educational policy and governance systems that enable long-

term, expert-led decision-making while limiting excessive political influence.

Keywords

Finnish education, educational governance, curriculum development, legitimacy, educational history

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