

# Imperfect Finnish

How do we draw the right education policy lessons from the success and recent decline of Finland's schools? **Gabriel Heller-Sahlgren** of the Centre for Market Reform of Education shares his thoughts

Ever since the first Pisa results were published in 2001, the Finnish education system has been lauded as a role model for the rest of the world. Politicians and journalists have travelled to the Nordic country with high hopes to uncover the educational policy secrets behind its strong performance – and emulate them in their own countries.

Common explanations of Finnish success in media stories since the early 2000s include a strong focus on equity as well as the absence of standardised tests and market reforms. They highlight collaboration and autonomy among teachers, who are trusted to do their jobs without high-stakes accountability. This trust is then generally linked to teacher education, which only accepts about 10% of applicants, who graduate with master's degrees, ensuring high-quality teachers with high societal status. And, finally, Finnish schooldays are quite short while children complete relatively little homework, thus giving them time to play. The idea is that “less is more” when it comes to generate high attainment in Pisa.

However, nobody offered any real evidence in favour of this story. People merely looked at Finland and found what they were looking for, while ignoring

everything else. Such ‘confirmation bias’ is at the heart of global education policy, which has ignored research that convincingly can separate causation from correlation.

We should thus not be surprised that the strongest available research does not support the most common explanations for Finland's success. Indeed, studies indicate that independent-school competition generates higher Pisa scores and does so to a lower cost. Similarly, other studies find positive effects of more instructional time and homework on such scores, while others support the idea that school league tables also have a positive impact.

## Stagnation and decline

This explains why Finland's supporters have been unable to understand its recent decline in Pisa and other tests. All of their explanations for its success were still applicable, but now they were suddenly related to stagnation and decline instead. Given the research highlighted, it in fact appears more likely that Finland achieved its good results despite the characteristics emphasised, not because of them.

Indeed, a cursory look at the historical trajectory of Finland's education policy and performance shows that it was pretty much impossible for the common explanations for Finland's educational transformation to hold true.

For example, Finland's autonomy and trust in teachers are relatively new phenomena. Until the 1990s, the education system was centralised and heavily controlled by the state. The national curriculum was prescriptive and detailed, with teachers being forced to record what they taught hour by hour in class diaries to ensure they delivered the mandatory content. There was also an active school inspectorate and all textbooks had to be approved by the National Board of Education. This is indicative of the distrust of teachers among the establishment at the time.

And, as the chart overleaf shows, Finland's lower-secondary scores in international tests started to increase long before the emphasised policies were implemented. In fact, the reforms upheld as the reason behind Finnish success are more related to the stagnation and decline. Finland's results improved radically under the old education system and began stagnating soon after the reforms were implemented.

This is also evidence that the reforms to teacher education were the key to improving performance. Teacher education was only reformed in the mid-to-late 1970s, when it was moved from teacher colleges to universities and master's degrees were made mandatory also for primary school teachers. But the country's performance accelerated before any teachers educated under the new



regime had entered the labour market, let alone formed a substantial part of it.

### Finnish success

In other words, both research and history disprove the popular explanations for Finland's performance, which accelerated mostly under the old, centralised education system. While this is not proof that the old system was behind the improvement stage, it is enough to refute the idea that the current one had much to do with it.

To understand Finnish success, we must instead go back to the 19th century, when Finland was an autonomous region in the Russian Empire with institutions inherited from hundreds of years of Swedish rule. During this period, Swedish speakers – comprising about 15% of the country's total population at that time – made up the country's economic, cultural and political elite, while Finnish speakers practically lacked both a national identity and culture. This created a strange situation: Finland was a state before it became a nation.

In this situation, the Fennoman nationalist movement, with its Swedish-speaking vanguard, realised that the success of their project to create a Finnish nation was dependent on education. However, access to formal schooling was very uneven in Finland at this time. Whereas compulsory education was introduced in the rest of

Scandinavia from between 1814 and 1848, Finland only introduced it in 1921, the same year as Thailand, and it took another 25 or so years to ensure it covered all children in the country.

This is why Finnish teachers were so important, both in and outside schools. They became known as 'candles of the nation' and were role models and educators of the whole population, a mission that lasted long into the 20th century. Education was part and parcel of the creation of the Finnish nation as such, which gave teachers unparalleled societal and political importance. Since independence, internal threats, such as the civil war in 1919, and external threats, such as the wars against the Soviet Union and the latter's pressure on Finland during the Cold War, ensured that the importance of education in this respect remained strong.

Teachers' role as model citizens in the nationalist movement motivated an extremely selective admissions process to teacher education, and draconian rules for the lucky few who made it. For example, teacher candidates were not allowed to smoke or go to dance clubs, while also having to adhere to strict dress codes and dating rules.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Finnish teachers were relatively highly educated already prior to World War II – and their status was sky high. The trace of this status remains today

in the form of strong competition to Finnish-speaking teacher education.

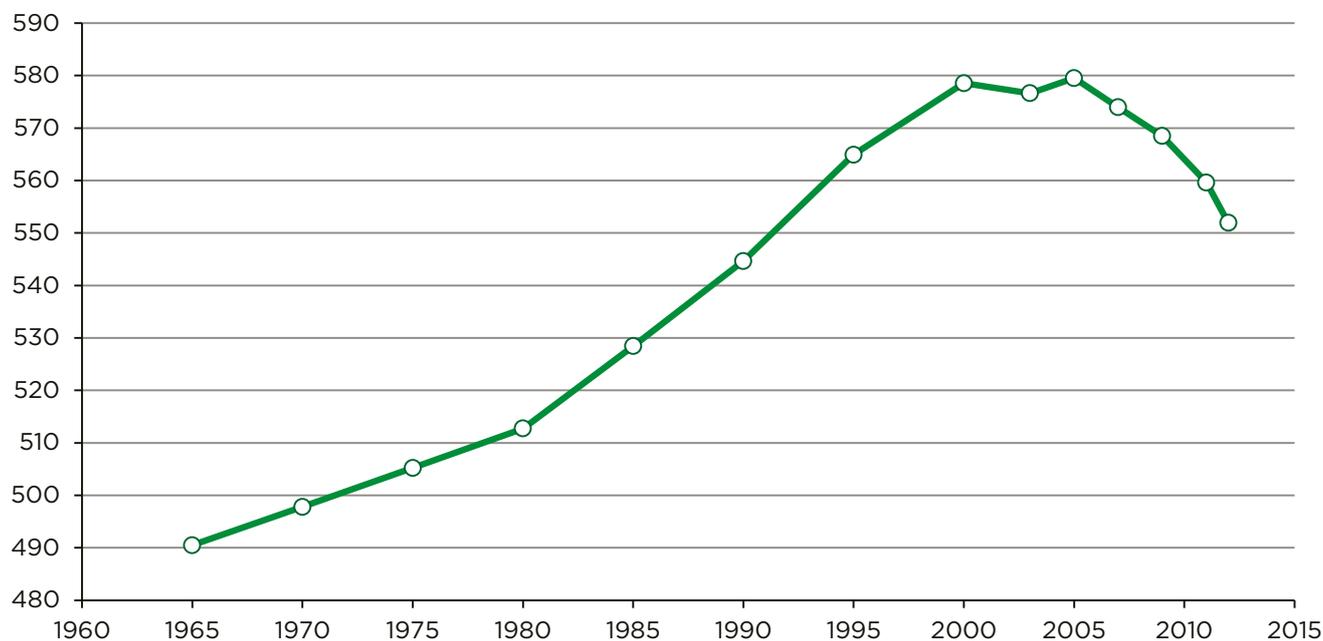
At the same time, Swedish-speaking teacher education has not been as popular, partly because the teacher profession has had lower status in Swedish Finland. The Svecomans, a Finland-Swedish counter-nationalist movement, tied their fate to an already existing nation and culture, which gave teachers less of a prominent role and consequently produced teachers of slightly lower quality. This partly explains why Finland-Swedish pupils have performed worse than ethnic Finns, despite higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

### Rapid changes

Also crucial to Finland's improvements was the country's late industrialisation and urbanisation. In 1945, 60% of the population worked in agriculture or forestry, compared with 30% in Scandinavia. Consequently, Finland was much poorer than its neighbours in the immediate post-war period. But when economic changes kicked in, they were rapid. High growth made Finland earn the epithet 'Japan of the North', indicative of its similarities to East Asian nations with strong growth trajectories.

Similar societal and economic transformations often initially generate a strong work ethic and emphasis on education, since the threat of poverty ►

FIGURE 1: FINNISH LOWER-SECONDARY SCORES IN INTERNATIONAL TESTS OVER TIME



Source: Centre for Market Reform of Education

► remains in the population. Parents became more educated and demanded more of their children. The result in Finland was a ‘development effect’, which radically raised pupil performance in the latter part of the 20th century.

At the same time, the country’s culture did not catch up with this radical transformation and remained traditional and old-fashioned. In education, this ensured a hierarchical and traditional learning environment, which remained for longer than in other comparative countries. Pupil influence and pupil-led learning were conspicuously absent from Finnish classrooms even in the early 2000s, despite reforms in the early 1990s to decrease teachers’ dominance in classrooms.

And this is important. Indeed, rigorous research suggests that more authoritative educational environments and more traditional, teacher-led instruction generate higher pupil performance in cognitive achievement tests. That is, the combination of economic and societal transformations and the retaining of an old-fashioned educational culture is key to understanding Finland’s education revolution in the 20th century.

### Same medicine

But why, then, have Finland’s results begun to fall? Well, simply because the country is increasingly becoming similar to other comparable countries. Its culture is catching up with the economic and societal changes, which have led to increasingly negative attitudes to learning among pupils. The strong work ethic and focus on education in the early stage of development in the end gives way to complacency. Indeed, research suggests that the likelihood of parents instilling norms of hard work in their children follows such a curve – first it goes up, and then it goes down. The ‘development effect’ thus appears to have reached its peak and now started to drive Finland’s results downward.

Also indicative of these changes, the educational environment and teaching practices are changing, especially with the retirement of older teachers. The 1990s reforms are now taking effect, with teaching becoming less traditional and pupils gaining more influence. Consequently, in combination with the cultural changes, results have started to deteriorate.

However, Finnish politicians have tried

to stifle the decline by prescribing more of the same medicine. For example, in the national curriculum taking effect this year, pupil influence over teaching methods has increased radically. This follows the same pattern as Sweden, where education policy has become completely dominated by child-centred ideas since the early 1990s.

In other words, the ‘true’ story about Finland’s educational rise and decline is pretty much the opposite of the established orthodoxy. The most important lesson from Finland’s success and ongoing decline – once we consult both its history and credible research – is that there are considerable risks involved with the ubiquitous drive worldwide towards more pupil-led teaching methods and less hierarchical schooling cultures. The fact that this message has not been emphasised earlier in the international debate shows how it is dominated by ideological thinking rather than proper research. If we are to avoid similar mistakes in the future, it is time for a paradigm shift in this respect. ■

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