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Are the High Scores in the PISA Tests an Educational Success in Finland?

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to look closer at the educational system in Finland and to consider it in terms of its educational success. It analyses historical aspects, teaching methods, cooperation between family and school, the material status. These considerations will be enriched by the practical experience gained during a study visit to Jyväskylän College of Education, a vocational secondary school in Jyväskylä.

Key words:

education, school, Finland, parent-school relations, teaching methods.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to present reflections on the educational success of Finland, whether it is a genuine or superficial one as tested by PISA tests. The theoretical reflections are complemented in this article by interviews and observations conducted during a study visit to Finland at Jyväskylä Educational Consortium in 2013.

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In connection with high scores of Finish pupils in PISA tests and those of adults in PIAAC², scholars from all over the world wonder what underlies Finland's educational success³. The stages of education appear quite average and comparable to other European countries. Children go to primary school at the age of 7, they learn there till they are 16, then they choose a general or vocational secondary school lasting three years. Regardless of the choice, the educational path is invariably open and a pupil can continue their education at higher levels, a college, a university or other forms of adults' education. What is it then that causes the success of the Finish school to be so widely spoken about?

The goal of this article is to take a closer look at certain elements of Finland's educational system and to consider them through the prism of the educational success of the country. What shall be put to analysis are the teaching methods, the cooperation between the family and the school, the material resources of schools. The reflections will be enriched by practical experience gained during a study visit to Jyvaskyla College of Education, a large vocational school in Jyvaskyla.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY

The development of Finland's educational system has undergone several crucial changes. After the regaining of independence in 1917 education was not immediately in the centre of politicians' attention. First significant changes took place in 1960, which is when an interdependence between the level of education and the economic growth was observed. It was decided that education called for major changes as it is ineffective. At that time investments in education became a priority for it is educated people that are the driving force of the country. The first reform introduced the idea of equal education for all inhabitants and that element became a priority in the system's development. Then it was also decided that children would start their education in primary school at the age of 7 and stay there till they are 16, whilst education would be unpaid for.

² PISA - Programme for International Student Assessment, PIAAC - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies.

³ G. Malaty, University of Joensuu, *What are the reasons behind the success of Finland in PISA?*, <http://www.cimt.plymouth.ac.uk/journal/malaty.pdf> [accessed on 26.10.2014].

More and more vocational secondary schools started to be created (reform of 1970) and the number of higher schools grew rapidly⁴. The latest element introduced to the educational system was the creation of first technical universities in 1994.

An important element affecting the educational success of Finland are prompt reactions to social needs as well as those of the market. Each time when politicians and local government members observed an interdependence between education and economy, with marked deficiencies in this aspect, they strove to fill that gap with relevant regulations and effective reforms. This practice is still being retained. The Ministry of Education and Culture, which shapes the educational policy of this country, issues the key document entitled *The Education and Research Development Plan*, which is established every four years and which allows fulfilment of new educational goals. Such a plan covers the entire system of education, from kindergarten to adult education. The current plan for the years 2011-2016 focuses on reduction of poverty, inequality and exclusion, stabilisation of social economy, steady economic progress, employment and competitiveness⁵. It is not only a theoretical programme, but it is accompanied by appropriate measures and financial resources.

It can thus be stated that the first element of Finland's educational success is its progressive educational policy, which does not remain constant and contributes to the continuous development of the system.

3. TEACHING METHODS

As one of the Finnish teachers says, knowledge is actually the only – apart from forests i.e. wood resources – the export material of Finland⁶. I have mentioned earlier that the educational system of this country is similar to other European systems, and the main difference consists in the choice of teaching methods, the approach to the pupil and the student. An essential element of learning is group work, solving problems and project work. It is not, however, particularly different from other systems. In Poland such methods of work are also successfully employed. Yet, it is interesting that all schools in Finland offer a comparable level of education. A pupil from the northern part of the country receives as good education as a pupil from

⁴ L. Leijola, *The education system in Finland- development and equality*, Helsinki 2004, pp. 5-7.

⁵ Ministry of Education and Culture: <http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Koulutus/koulutuspolitiikka/index.html?lang=en> [accessed on 01.09.2014].

⁶ Interview with a teacher from Finland: <http://vimeo.com/25271392> [accessed on 01.10.2014].

Helsinki⁷. Although Finnish schools practically do not “test their pupils”, they set high requirements to them, which is, however, connected with provision the sense of safety and support in overcoming difficulties. The teacher strives to arouse the pupil’s interests strengthen their self-esteem, with responsibility for learning being simultaneously acquired. A very large emphasis is put on the individual approach to the pupil, which prevents learners with difficulties from lagging behind others.

It can thus be easily noticed that an essential element of the educational success in Finland are not specific methods of scholarly work, but excellent understanding of the psychology of learning/teaching, that is familiarity with the soft competencies having a primary role here⁸. The Finnish try to make use of the potential inherent in every young man. Ensuring the pupils’ sense of safety is, in my opinion, the key element causing children to like school and to feel comfortable in it. There are no uniforms there, nor strict rules concerning the clothing, hair colour and hairdo, or ear-rings. Thanks to that the Finish school belongs to the most colourful ones I have had an opportunity to see. On the other hand, at schools there is order and observance of rules, whilst the unusually cultured conduct of pupils towards one another and to teachers surprised all the visitors.

Equality and fairness are also priorities in this country’s education. All inhabitants have an equal access to education at the same level, regardless of the region of residence, origin, denomination or health. Education is free of charge at each level, and each child at primary school has one meal daily, books and transport to school provided for them⁹. Secondary school students have a meal provided, they need to buy textbooks by themselves, which often results in teachers not requiring a purchase of books and providing materials for learning by themselves¹⁰. When interviewed and asked why they use books during lessons, they congruently claimed that no pupil would buy them anyway as they are too expensive and used for a short time, and so both pupils and parents are reluctant to make such purchases. Teachers themselves cope without textbooks, copying necessary materials for the entire group. For the purposes of such a large quantity of copied materials, the school has provided a special point in which the teachers before

⁷ M. Castells, P. Himanen, *Spółeczeństwo informacyjne i państwo dobrobytu. Model fiński*, Wyd. Krytyka Polityczna, Warszawa 2009.

⁸ M. Lombardi, *Finland’s education system is tops: Here’s why*, BC TEACHERS FEDERATION, <http://bctf.ca/publications/NewsmagArticle.aspx?id=7988> [accessed on 01.09.2014].

⁹ *Equity in education*, National Board of Education in Finland, Koivjyva, Espoo, p. 6.

¹⁰ I obtained such information during an interview with a teacher from Jyvaskyla Educational Consortium.

starting their classes can leave materials and ask for a given number of copies to be made for the whole duration of classes.

Each pupil can count on the teacher's support in the mastery of material causing difficulties. The aim of counselling is supporting and leading pupils in their attainment of the maximum level in each subject. To this end, the whole school personnel work for the pupil's sake, strive to support everyone individually, adjust the system to the pupil and not the pupil to the system. Teachers are obligated to treat pupils as individuals and to help them in overcoming barriers and difficulties¹¹. For this purpose compensatory classes are organised, but they do not fully function the same as in Poland. There, each pupil who failed to understand some issue during the year or a long illness can come to these classes and find help in clarification of difficult concept. Hence, it is not a meeting place of weak pupils, but a place for everyone having a need to complement their knowledge or clarify certain subject matter. I would compare this type of meetings rather to teacher consultations, but on a group scale. A teacher must support the pupil in every respect, and poor results in learning are a showcase of the class leader, and this is why everyone tries hard for all to achieve an educational success. Failures cannot be avoided, but they are so few and far between that they give sleepless nights neither to teachers nor politicians. The main problem with which in the scope of education authorities strive to handle are immigrants and immigrants' children, for whom the first barrier is the language. Finland offers to new members arriving in the country free language courses.

In numerous articles and publications concerning Finnish education the statement is repeated that the educational system in Finland is underpinned by trust and responsibility¹². The trust consists in the belief that each side constituting an element of the system knows that others fulfil their duties reliably and conscientiously, and that side strives to perform their tasks at the highest level. Splendidly educated teachers selected out of many candidates are perfectly prepared for their role and do not need permanent control or supervision. At each level education autonomy has been fairly high since the elimination of school inspections in 1990. The idea is to manage schools by means of information, support and funds. School assessment is conducted by means of effects of pupils' education and on the basis of self-assessment of the school¹³. In other words, the statement "education based on trust" is underlain by the two elements:

¹¹ *Equity in education*, national Board of education in Finland, Koijyva, Espoo, p. 7.

¹² *Equity in education*, National Board of education in Finland, Koijyva, Espoo, p. 10.

¹³ *Equity in education*, National Board of education in Finland, Koijyva, Espoo, p. 13.

1. A low number of external controls. *No separate school inspectorate exists, and public authorities have resigned from running inspections at schools. Educational establishments carry out their activity in accordance with goals specified in legal regulations and national curricula. The only institution acting in a way within the control realm is the Education Evaluation Council. The Council's responsibilities cover planning, coordination, management and development of activities related to evaluation of education in common and 2nd-degree secondary schools, and also schools for adults*¹⁴.
2. Responsibilities of all subjects involved in education for their tasks. Each person involved in the process and administration of education fulfils tasks entrusted in accordance with the goals assigned. The aims of education are specified in teaching curricula¹⁵.

These two simple elements underlie the entire educational system in Finland. One results from the other; thanks to the fact that all perform their duties responsibly, control is not necessary. Paradoxically, lack of control motivates conscientiousness. However, it would be hard to transfer a similar model into Polish realities, but also to other European countries. We need to refer here to the wider concept of the nation's mentality and cultural resources, which have an extraordinary character in Finland.

Summing up, the Finnish school is characterised by the use of creative methods of work such as group work, solving problems and project work, in which the strategy of individual approach to the learner is used enabling their comprehensive development adjusted to needs. The teacher's prestige and excellent preparation causes this profession to enjoy huge social trust.

4. COOPERATION BETWEEN FAMILY AND SCHOOL

From the legal point of view, in Finland parents bear responsibility for their children attending school. Parents have the right to set up private schools, provided they fulfil the conditions required. Schools must respect religious beliefs of families. Children have the right to receive education in their native language, whilst schools are obliged to respect religious views of families.

¹⁴ *Educational systems in Europe*, <http://www.eurydice.org/pl/sites/eurydice.org/pl/files/finlandia.pdf> [accessed on 01.10.2014].

¹⁵ Finnish National Board of Education, *Teachers in Finland - trusted professionals*, FNBE/1, www.oph.fi [accessed on 09.10.2014] and *Educational systems in Finland*, <http://www.eurydice.org/pl/sites/eurydice.org/pl/files/finlandia.pdf> [accessed on 01.10.2014].

Cooperation with parents is one of the statutory aims of kindergarten education (*päiväkoti/daghem*). The act stipulates an option of everyday contacts with parents, meetings and conferences (3 hours and 15 minutes weekly out of the total time of 38 hours and 15 minutes).

Since 1992 commune offices have had the possibility of deciding whether at *peruskoulu/grundskola* i *lukio/gymnasium* there needs to be a school council or whether they are to be managed by commune administration. General provisions of the act of 1976 on commune administration (*Kunnallislaki/Kommunallagen*) stipulate that the school is responsible for embarking on cooperation with parents so as to aid them in their work as educators.

From the practical point of view, this cooperation has an informal character. For the purposes of this work, the cooperation between parents and the school in Finland is analysed on the basis of J. Epstein's model and categories: parenthood, communication, voluntary service, home learning, taking decisions, cooperation with the local community¹⁶. The first element, communication, similarly to Poland, is comprised by meetings with parents (generally once in a term) and emails or letters forwarded by pupils. The voluntary service of Finnish parents is generally only participation in school performances as an audience, collection of money for school excursions taking place as late as in the sixth year of primary school. In undertaking decision concerning the school the parents who belong to the school council take part. Interestingly enough, home learning (work with the child on their homework) and cooperation with the local community hardly exist¹⁷. Parents assist children in learning and in their own way participate in children's education at home, but it is not a significant issue. Even more so with pupils of primary schools and largely secondary schools generally not having homework as the main emphasis is put on education at school; in secondary schools homework is also not a chief component of education, as is the case in Poland¹⁸. When asked about this issue, the teachers stated that sometimes they give homework, but pupils frequently

¹⁶ J.L. Epstein, M.G. Sanders, B.S. Simon, K.C. Salinas, N. Rodriguez Jansorn, & F.L. Van Voorhis, *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action*(2nd ed.), CA: Corwin Press 1997.

¹⁷ M. Sormunen, K. Tossavainen, & H. Turunen, *Home-School Collaboration in the View of Fourth Grade Pupils, Parents, Teachers, and Principals in the Finnish Education System*, "The School Community Journal" 2011, Vol. 21, No. 2, ERIC 2011, pp. 185-211, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ957133.pdf> [accessed on 01.10.2014].

¹⁸ D. Dalporto, *Finland's A+ Schools*, We are teachers. Ideas, Information, Inspiration, <http://www.weareteachers.com/hot-topics/special-reports/teaching-around-the-world/finlands-a-plus-schools> [accessed on 09.10.2014].

fail to do it anyway, so it does not make much sense giving it; besides, they learn everything during lessons and need to prepare themselves for any possible tests.

Thus, it can be observed that Finnish Barents are not active members of the school community. The studies show that parents do not want to get involved in school activities because they work in the afternoons, they cannot provide care of their children, or believe that the school has nothing interesting to offer¹⁹.

Although parents' cooperation with the school in Finland is not at the highest level and is not based on strong interpersonal relationships, teachers enjoy a lot of respect and standing among parents, and the school is perceived very positively by the Finnish community. The educational system in Finland is highly trusted by Barents. It was observed in studies of 2010 that mothers of children from Finland had much more trust to the teacher than mothers from Estonia. It was also noted that Finish mothers trust mor the teacher whose way of teaching was focused on the pupil, not on the process of education²⁰. Such a strong trust of the sojety teachers have deserved by their excellent preparation for the profession guaranteed by universities and higher schools. Being a teacher is a great honour and obtaining qualifications is not simple.

There is an informal organisation in Finland associating parents, *Suomen Vanhempainliitto /FinlandsFöräldraförbund* (it is made up of about 800 local associations). Its aim and task is closer cooperation with schools. In practice they work on organisation, finding resources on excursions and study trips²¹.

It needs to be considered whether parents' involvement in school work is not a handicap of the Finnish educational system. Studies conducted in this respect in the whole world show that the widely understood cooperation between the family and the school brings huge benefits to the child. These are positive effects observed in learning, behaviour and approach to the school and the teachers²². Lack of homework should not be an obstacle to parents' greater involvement as there are lots of forms of cooperation. It appears, however, that the Finnish are not necessarily keen on building strong school-home relationships.

¹⁹ M. Sormunen, K. Tossavainen, & H. Turunen, op.cit., p. 197.

²⁰ E. Kikas, P.-L. Poikonen, M. Kontoniemi, A. Niilo, A.-L. Lyyra, & M.-K. Lerkkanen, *Mutal trust between kindergarten teacher and mother and its relations with family characteristics in Estonia and Finland*, "Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research" 2011, Vol. 55(1), pp. 23-37.

²¹ *Rola rodziców w systemach edukacyjnych Unii Europejskiej*, EURYDICE, Brussels 1997, pp. 94-97.

²² M. Banasiak, *Współpraca rodziców ze szkołą w kontekście reformy edukacji w Polsce*, UMK, Toruń 2013, p. 17.

5. SCHOOLS' MATERIAL RESOURCES

Schools' material resources are enviable. The Finnish do not begrudge money on schools and equipment. In this part of article I shall describe an example of the material resources of Jyvaskyla College of Education. It is a large vocational school educating for many professions: a car mechanic, a hair-dresser, a cosmetician etc. The entire school consists of a few campuses located in different parts of the town, similarly to some universities. The main part of the school is still being extended. All vocational specialisations have their parts of the school assigned, equipped in accordance with the line of education by the state-of-the-art equipment. The part designated for car mechanics was better equipped than most Polish car workshops. Automatic jacks, oil pumps and plenty of other devices necessary for car repairs (Photos 1,2,). The workshops are connected to classrooms by sliding walls, into where a car can be driven and the teacher can work on the car, display small elements enlarged on a screen (Photos 3,4). Interestingly, in the workshops pupils work on actually broken cars left for repairs by clients. The school encourages the community to make use of their services with competitive prices, although the time of repair can be fairly long, because it happens that, as one of the teachers observed, during the repair a given part gets damaged and another one needs to be ordered. The possibility of training abilities on different car makes and models causes young people finishing their education to have practical and theoretical knowledge on different car makes. The situation looks similar in cosmetics (Photos 7,8) and hair-dressing (Photos 5,6), where clients from outside can also use treatments at prices lower than in a parlour. However, before pupils, or actually mainly girls, do their training on clients from outside, they practice their practical abilities on one another. Only when really have specialist knowledge and skills can they start work in the school's parlour. It also needs to be added that these places are fantastically equipped and there even exists a room for clients with allergies, where special preparations are used and the air is cleaned of the chemical substances used. Students of the gastronomic specialisation run canteens in each campus, and a small restaurant in the building where they study. There, also waiter services are provided by students of this line of studies.

The classical classrooms are also fully equipped with audiovisual equipment and laptops for students (Photo 9). The photographs of the places described were made during the study visit to Jyvaskyla College. The school being presented is a good example of what material resources of schools look like. It is not an exceptional school in this respect, although it is certainly one of the largest vocational schools in Finland and educates students on different lines of studies.



Photo 1. Car workshop.



Photo 2. Car workshop contd.



Photo 3. A classroom where car can be placed; desks visible on the right-hand side on rolls, they can be folded and then the entire room changes into a workshop.



Photo 4. Students work in the room as above on engine construction.



Photo 5. School hair-dresser parlour.



Photo 6. Hair-dresser's and cosmetician's reception where students work.



Photo 7. Cosmetician's parlour – training room.



Photo 8. Cosmetician's parlour for clients.



Photo 9. Classic classroom (in the cabinet on the left-hand side laptops for classroom work are hidden).

6. CONCLUSIONS

After an analysis of the available material, it can be observed that many different aspects contributed to the success of Finnish education. First, equation of educational prospects of all people, no division into better or weaker pupils; professional teachers involved in their work, who enjoy a great trust by the society both with regard to education as well as upbringing. The teachers are aware of their tasks and set high demands for their pupils, providing them at the same time with the sense of safety and support, and inciting their interests.

Lack of standardised tests is also an important element of the success of Finnish education, as it does not cause additional stress, enables development of each pupil at his or her own pace without unnecessary stigmatisation. Although stress-free upbringing went out of fashion long ago, stress-free education brings in Finland unexpectedly good results.

Each level of education allows for further education and does not shut the path to continual education and qualification improvement.

Excellent material resources of schools enables education at the highest level, particularly when it comes to vocational education. It is beyond any doubt that the school surroundings, desks, decorations, free-of-charge materials, and also the meals offered have a strong impact on the students' attitude to the school, their motivation, frame of mind, and thus on educational effects.

Many of the named practical and formal elements of the educational system in Finland are enviable. However, we do not need to be overwhelmed by this educational paradise. Finland does achieve high scores in PISA tests every year, but do these – formal and written – tests truly reflect educational effectiveness? In the last years Polish pupils also did better than earlier. It is, for sure, not a result of changes in education, but those in the world surrounding us.. I shall risk a thesis here that the access to computers and multimedia equipment imposes on young people improvement of the reading skill. Let us not be under a delusion that the interest in reading has grown; it is tablets, mobile phones, laptops and notebooks that render the reading skill a necessity and in this way our youth have done better than before.

Looking at the Finnish school, we cannot fail to notice lack of sufficient cooperation between the family and the school. Is the lack of cooperation with parents, lack of homework, lack of books in secondary schools compensated by food, classrooms and workshops equipment, financing of transport? On the one hand, pupils undoubtedly feel comfortable at school and their sense of safety is secured; but, on the other hand, it seems that the Finnish (both teachers and parents) avoid contacts. Teachers work comfortably not having to mark a few dozen tests or loads of homework. They have been spared a lot of extra work that Polish teachers must do. All aspects pertaining to the material status of schools are greatly organised and administered – lunches, books, commuting etc. During lessons pupils practically are not tested or examined, there is no homework or active participation of parents in the school's work. Parents are present at school but in a subdued manner, they help when asked to do so, but they are not actively involved. Looking at all elements of the system, it seems that lots of deficiencies are compensated by a large financial contribution. And although the success in PISA tests is undeniable, it is all the time only testing of knowledge and not a display of cultural level or verification of personality development implying a success in upbringing and social competence, so significant these days. Also a question of scientific achievements, inventions and implementations. It is hard to evaluate Finland in this respect as it has been a separate state for a short time and cannot boast about many achievements. The successes in PISA do not translate into

technological successes, inventions, implementations, or Noble prizes received in the 20th and 21st centuries after the regaining of independence: only 4 prizes, whilst Poland has received 16²³ of them during this time, with our country doing much worse in PISA tests.

In my opinion, we cannot unequivocally speak of Finland's educational success. Of course, we cannot negate the effective and interesting solutions proposed by them in many dimensions of education, but they are only effective in Finnish social, cultural and political conditions. Particularly, a very individual approach to the pupil and supporting them at each level.

With regard to cooperation between the family and the school, Poland does much better, both in formal as well as practical terms. More and more willingly schools ask parents for assistance in different matters and teachers do much better in their treatment of parents as partners.²⁴ Lack of financial resources are compensated in kindergartens and schools by parents' help and support, their involvement in different types of activities ranging from preparation of wall papers through help in organisation of festivities to assistance in classroom renovations. Such actions bring parents and children and allow for new contacts and friendships being made²⁵. Furthermore, it needs to be considered whether we care more about high scores or the overall development of the student?

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²³ Nobel Prize - official site, <http://www.nobelprize.org/> [accessed on 7.01.2014].

²⁴ M. Banasiak, *Współpraca rodziców ze szkołą w kontekście reformy edukacji w Polsce*, UMK, Toruń 2013, p. 228.

²⁵ M. Mitok-Mrozowska, *Współpraca szkoły z rodzicami ucznia [w:] Psychologia Ucznia i Nauczyciela*, S. Kowalik (red.), PWN, Warszawa 2011, p. 226.

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