

When Equality Produced Quality Development, Reforms and Change in Finnish Educational system

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Abstract

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Finland was one of the least developed European countries. Hundred years later, Finland stands in top ten in most of the global welfare rankings, with its educational system often elevated as a model for others to follow. This article analyzes the development and some characteristics of Finnish educational system after the Second World War, from the perspective of reconciling political conflicts and competing interests. The article focuses particularly to the postwar de-polarization, search for stability and the challenges of a globalized and digitalized society to educational systems. Why today, in Finnish schools, the gap between high and low performing students is still relatively small, as is the gap between students from high- and low-income families? Is this an achievement of a conscious political planning, or just an historical coincidence? Exceptional qualities of the Finnish system are to be understood as a consequence of a particular historical trajectory, where causalities in outcomes can be detected and the process of change traced. Understanding these patterns of change – the effects of inclusionary parliamentary politics to post civil war political reconciliation; the impacts of expanding social policies to national integration after the Second World War; and the depolarizing effects of consensus-based corporatist arrangements to labor markets during the Cold War - is fundamental for grasping why the system developed in the direction it did.

Keywords: educational policy, welfare, educational history, Finland

Introduction

In his latest book, “Our Kids”, Robert Putnam – the inventor of the theory of a decline in “social capital” (the ties that bind communities together) - analyzes how the difference between “haves” and “have-nots” has been growing in United States (Putnam, 2015). The differences which once were economic, are nowadays alarmingly more social and educational. Combining qualitative interviews with recent data, Putnam shows a new divide in social capital, rather than a simple decline in its levels. The top third of US society – whether defined by education or income – are investing more in education, family life, community networks and civic activities than their parents, while the bottom third are in retreat, as both adults and children disengage from mainstream society. This gap amounts, according to Putnam, to a crisis for the American dream of equal opportunity. Advantages pile up for the kids born to the right parents, all but guaranteeing their own success in life – in stark contrast to the fates of those struggling at the bottom. The breakdown of the working-class family that started to affect African-Americans from the 1960s began to affect also white Americans in the 1980s and 1990s. Widening income gaps have brought profound changes to family life, neighborhoods and schools in ways that give big advantages to children at the top and make it ever harder for those below to work their way up. Since the development of national education systems and universal basic schooling during the early twentieth century, education was supposed to help equal possibilities for all. Now, it has become closer to the great fortifier multiplying the advantages of class, since the wealthy come better prepared and more able to pay.

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During the past decades, the gap between rich and poor youth in finishing college in the US has been continuously widening. Even poor students with high test scores are slightly less likely to get degrees than rich students with low scores. Putnam has called this trend “shocking.” These kinds of new social gaps are reality in many Western countries, not only in US. The gaps of social and educational capital are not only global but also becoming strong tendencies in most capitalist societies that before used to emphasize education as one of the founding pillars of their modern and democratic systems. In this context, the Nordic Welfare State has been elevated often as one of the defenders or survivors of an equal educational system. In this article we will analyze the development and some characteristics of the Finnish educational system. Our emphasis is not in the “miracle” of Finland rising to the highest scores of the PISA evaluations, or in asking why Finnish students perform so well. Rather we focus on the development of the system towards one that still is, at least in comparative terms, efficient in diluting the differences between high and low-income family background. We highlight the socio-historical causalities, and the key political decisions and moments that shaped this trajectory. Why, in Finnish schools, the gap between high and low performing students is still relatively small, as is the gap between students from high- and low-income families? Is there something to be learned? How much is this an achievement of a conscious political planning, and how much just an historical coincidence? How can this positive outcome be preserved, with today’s multiple challenges towards the educational systems brought by globalization, digitalization, and the rapidly changing needs of the labor markets?

We argue that the exceptional qualities of the Finnish system are to be understood as a consequence of a particular historical trajectory, where causalities can be detected and the process of change traced. Understanding these patterns of change –the effects of inclusionary parliamentary politics to post civil war political reconciliation; the impacts of expanding social policies to national integration after the Second World War; and the depolarizing effects of consensus-based corporatist arrangements to labor markets during the Cold War- is fundamental for grasping why the system developed in the direction it did. While reminding that this social and political development had a particular historical context, we also wish to highlight certain key elements in the educational trajectory that can be universal and adaptable to other contexts.

Further, we argue that as in any country recovering from internal conflict and an inter-state war, there was no straight road for inclusive reforms and political pacts that secured peace and democracy in Finland. Trust was not a precondition for the deep institutional reforms enabling the development of the comprehensive school –it was the consequence of a development where stability was searched in ways that recognized the gaps in trust, dissatisfaction and conflict inherent in society. Reforms became possible through accepting and making visible these tensions in the social and political arena –education becoming one building block of the new social contract.

The relationship of trust and social capital to the development of the educational system

According to the Finnish educational sociologist Pasi Sahlberg, the comprehensive and equal school system in Finland is not merely a form of school organization. To him it embodies a philosophy of education as well as a deep set of societal values about what all children need and deserve (Sahlberg, 2011; Laukkanen, 2008). The underlying, transformative belief behind the creation of the comprehensive school was thus, that all children could be expected to achieve at high levels, and that family background or regional circumstance should no longer be allowed to limit the educational opportunities open to children (ibid). In Putnam’s terminology, it was believed that the advantages or disadvantages rising from socioeconomic background could be diminished through a well-functioning educational system. Behind this proposition, in the context of post IIWW Finland, coincided the needs of political stabilization and securing the interests of different economic sectors. Sahlberg further shows, that to create a school system that could educate all students equally well, regardless of family background, a teaching force with a very high level of knowledge and skills was required. This was perhaps the most significant single factor behind the successful educational reform in Finland (Sahlberg, 2011; See also Buchberger and Buchberger, 2004).

A larger set of socially and politically defining factors however, can be grouped around the concepts of reconciliation and national integration, that were the results of wide reforms and enabled increasing social capital individually and at the level of the nation. A growing body of literature demonstrates that social capital makes societies function well and prosper. As a rule, the level of social capital is measured as trust in national institutions and trust in fellow citizens (Putnam, 2000).

Trust in national institutions, understood as a base for social and political stability, was a driving force behind the reforms during the height of the polarized postwar years, and remained an underlying assumption in politics during the Cold War in Finland. This basic trust still comes apparent today in many ways, but particularly materializes with the enrollment of the great majority of Finnish children in neighborhood based public schools. Trust is also reflected on what the comprehensive school is believed to achieve. Without the trust of parents on the public school system producing high achieving students, and the system trusting its teachers in being capable of delivering high quality teaching autonomously, the continuing dominance of the public school system would no longer be possible in the globalized world of competing educational models and providers. It is significant to acknowledge that the definition of “high achievement” is significantly broader in Finland than just performance in two or three subjects on standardized tests (Laukkanen, 2008; Linnakylä, Välijärvi and Arfmann, 2011). A broad, rich curriculum is offered to all students, also to those who choose the vocational pathway in upper secondary school.

It is important to note that rich curriculums and broad choices at all educational levels are generally related to the Nordic welfare state paradigm, where perhaps more than in any other, the relative character of poverty is recognized. Poverty means lacking the resources needed to participate in the normal way of life of the surrounding society. This “lack of resources” closely resembles the concept of “functionings” or “capabilities” as defined by Amartya Sen (Hiilamo, Kangas et. al., 2013.). Capabilities, in their turn, are acquired not only, but mostly through education.

Two wars and a divided nation

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Finland was one of the least developed European countries. Hundred years later, Finland stands in top ten in the most of the global welfare rankings, such as Good Country Index, Fragile State Index, World Press Freedom index, Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, World Economic Forum’s annual Global Gender Gap report, EuroStat Quality of Life, etc.³

It has been suggested that the history of Finland can serve as a lesson or a comparative case on how reconciliation in a highly divided country can be achieved through policies that recognize conflict and tensions while aiming for social cohesion (Alapuro, 1979, Kettunen 2012; Kettunen 2014). Education, as one of the main developer is a case in point. As a relatively young country, having only established its independence from Russia in 1917, Finland experienced a severe civil war between the ‘Reds’ and ‘Whites’ (Upton, 1980). The five months’ civil war of 1918 was one of the bloodiest on the European continent during the 20th century. It ended in the victory of the bourgeois white army, and resulted in a divided nation and about 38 000 war victims (Jussila, Hentilä, Nevakivi, 1999; Kirby, 2006; Klinge, 1983; Meinander, 2011).

The occurrence of the civil war in Finland took place in the worldwide context of power struggle and political structural change where war, revolution, and break down of empires set the stage for deep national transformations. The impacts of these processes to Finland had to do as much with ordinary people’s social and economic grievances, as with conflicting visions over the political regime. Since the year 1918, with the scars of the fratricidal war still open, rebuilding trust was understood as indispensable for the new polity. This included the political inclusion of the former political opposition that had taken up arms; implementing an extensive land reform; and modernizing, step by step, health, welfare, and educational systems. As reconciliation advanced in the following decades, the educational system followed in the same path, reflecting major changes in the country between the 1950s and 1970s, resulting partly as an unintended consequence, in something that many describe as one of the best functioning educational models in the world (Simola, 2005; Aho et. al., 2006).

In the context of stabilizing political life after the civil war, it was highly important that the Social Democrats (socialist party) were allowed to participate in the first post-war elections in 1919, right after their defeat. The party won 40% of theseats in the parliament. Furthermore, in 1927, i.e. less than ten years after the civil war, the Social Democrats alone formed the government. Thus, the “losers” of the civil war were quite quickly allowed to participate in the design of the society. Also, the people’s school system had impacts on the mental and cultural maps of pupils.

³ See, for example, Finland Toolbox, <http://toolbox.finland.fi/presentations/finland-in-international-rankings-and-comparisons/>

Children of the ‘Reds’ and ‘Whites’ were obliged to sit side by side in the same class rooms, had the same curriculum and learned to interact with each other. In this sense, both universal social policies and universal education paved the way towards social cohesion and — perhaps totally unintentionally — were used as devices of social investment (Hiilamo, Kangas et. al., 2013).

From this perspective, the development of the Nordic welfare system in Finland differs from its Nordic neighbors: it was more tied to internal conflict and war. Not only growth and wellbeing had to be built from zero, but welfare reforms were more entwined to a political domestic-international necessity to create social cohesion and trust, first after a civil war and then in a nationally polarized and internationally tense environment of the Cold War. While the effort to establish universal access was a prominent feature in the conception of the mass-education systems in all the Nordic Countries, Finland’s universalism was also a depolarizing vehicle. In all the Nordic countries however, grass-roots level educational systems were harnessed to accomplish the task, and as the very name of the educational system, *folkskola* (people’s school), indicates the overarching idea that the whole population should have access to education. It needs to be remembered however, that by the time of the Second World War the system in Finland was still divided into two streams: after just four years of schooling, pupils were divided into two different paths of education. One provided primarily academic, theoretical subjects, while the other, mainly oriented for working class children, was practical and task-oriented.⁴

Both the independence and the path towards reconciliation were at risk during the turmoil of the Second World War. Finland had to fight long and hard to preserve that independence through the war years. For a nation with a population of less than 4 million, the cost of the war was devastating: 90 000 dead; 60 000 permanently injured and 50 000 children orphaned. As part of the 1944 peace treaty with the Soviet Union, Finland was forced to cede 12 percent of its total area (10 percent of its arable land and forest resources), 13 percent of its national wealth, and 20 percent of its railway network. A Soviet military base was established on a peninsula near by the capital, Helsinki, and the communist party was granted legal status. But the most pressing task required the relocation of 450 000 Finnish citizens. The challenge in resettling the evacuees from the areas that were occupied by the Soviet Union was immense even in comparative terms - more than one tenth of the population had to be relocated. Finland’s postwar social policy (the expansion of the social policies) began in 1945 with the extensive measures taken to make living arrangements for returning soldiers, and the roughly 12 percent of the population displaced from the territory lost to the Soviet Union in the Second World War (Meinander, 2011; Jutikkala, 1984; Puntila, 1974; Singleton, 1998, also, Kinnunen & Kivimäki, 2011).

Rebuilding the country after the war and (re)constructing trust

Two goals were central when Finland started the task of reconstruction and continued reconciliation after the Second World War: securing independence and democracy, and building a welfare state that could provide stability against any intent to shake the balance from inside or outside the country’s borders. Although the country was still in fact 60% rural as late as 1960, the urbanization process began already right after the war and accelerated over the next decades. In 1950 most young Finns left school after six years of basic education; only those living in towns or larger municipalities had access to a middle grade education.

The first post-war elections in 1945 resulted in a parliament in which the seats were almost evenly divided between three political parties: the Social Democrats, the Agrarian Centre Party, and the Communists. In the 1950s and 1960s one priority around which a consensus developed between the main parties, joined later by the conservative National Coalition Party as well, was the need to rebuild and modernize the education system. The old education system was still unequal and more reflective of the needs of a predominantly rural, agricultural society than of a modern industrial society. Simultaneously there was an explosive growth in grammar school enrolments, which grew from 34 000 to 270 000.

⁴Until the 1970s, Finland’s only educational accomplishment comparatively, was a very high level of literacy. The Lutheran Reformation of the 16th century introduced the idea of vernacular education and the first Finnish-language ABC book. In the 1680s, the Lutheran Church decreed that the people be taught to read so that they could familiarize themselves with the Bible. By the end of the 19th century, the Finnish people were among the most literate in the world. See Tuovinen, 2008.

Most of this growth took place in the private schools, which in the 1950s began to receive government subsidies and come more under public control (OECD, 2011). The growth reflected the aspirations of ordinary Finns for greater educational opportunity for their children, and the rebuilding pace of the postwar society where opening opportunities and economic growth had to match with a skilled labor force. A consensus developed among the country's political leaders that a radical school reform was necessary.

Already in the postwar decade, the parliament created three successive reform commissions, each of which made recommendations that helped build public support and political will to create an education system that would be more responsive to the growing demand for more equitable educational opportunities for all young people in Finland. The first of these commissions, launched in 1945, focused on the primary school curriculum, and offered a vision of a more humanistic, child-centered school, in contrast to the Germanic, syllabus-driven model of schooling that characterized most Finnish schools at that time. This commission also conducted field studies in 300 schools as part of its work. This offered an example - already in 1945 - of how research might guide the development of policy. The second commission, launched in 1946, focused on the organization of the system, and advocated for the creation of a common school (covering grades 1-8) that would serve all students. This report however, produced such opposition from the universities and the grammar school teachers that its recommendations quickly died (Aho, Pitkänen, & Sahlberg 2006; Simola 2005).

After a lengthy political debate, the Finnish Parliament adopted the law on comprehensive school at the end of the 1960s. Although the parliamentary decision was more or less unanimous, there was a remarkable amount of skepticism in the mass media and among politicians as to where the reform might lead. The opponents of reform argued that the overall skill level would drop because the whole age group would never meet the expected standard. Questions were raised whether the society would really need all young people to be educated to a high level. Did all young people really need to know another language in addition to their native Finnish or Swedish, two official languages, and was it fair to expect this of them? (Sahlberg, 2011). The debate continued over the next several years. But as economic growth was accelerated by Finland becoming more competitive in manufactures and exports, and as political pressure for social and economic equality grew simultaneously, pressure on parliament built up to move forward with the recommendation to create the new comprehensive school.

A third major factor in Finland's rise from poverty after WWII englobes the efforts made by trade unions and employers' organizations to minimize labor unrest and conflict. Already during the war, to avoid any slowdowns in production, Finland's employers' organizations issued a declaration together with the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions to negotiate in the future as equal partners in labor market issues. The declaration in which the legitimacy of the trade unions was acknowledged, came soon after the Soviet Union invaded Finland at the end of 1939 (in what's known as the Winter War), and was essential to Finland's self-defense as, instead of labor market conflict, it centered the focus on the war effort and national unity. Especially in terms of symbolic message externally, it has been argued that it showed to other Nordic countries and further to the West, that Finland, attacked by the Soviet Union, was a democratic Nordic country (Kettunen. 2012). Without the wartime first step towards a modern agreement-oriented society, the situation in the labor market could have been very volatile. Finland like most of its severely war-torn Western European counterparts, needed peace in labor relations to recover and prosper. As an economic and political necessity, those involved in politics focused on increasing the national product *and* on attaining social justice and equality. Conflicts continued to arise, but the underlying commitment to cooperation also continued to grow. Until the very recent years, trade unions and employers' organizations have been unquestioned social partners in Finland's national, social, and economic development.

The history of the Nordic welfare state is often written from the labor perspective, as most of the core activities of the welfare state were claims originally formulated to the political and economic agendas by the labor movements. Recent research and debates have noted however, that there was a cross-class alliance behind many of the core welfare reforms, and decisions were often agreed upon between different political camps. Employer federations and trade unions have played an important role not only in establishing a well-functioning collective bargaining system based on mutual institutional trust on the labor markets, but also in the construction of social policy programs. Needless to say, this kind of policy-making increased the legitimacy of the outcome, as well as the commitment to it among different social sectors (Kangas, Hiiilamo et al., 2013).

Political crises, or social tensions, even recognized politico-ideological differences did not lead to deeper conflicts. The role of education in these developments was fundamental, not only in generating equal opportunities, but also in creating citizenship and belonging.

Educational reform and the increasing role of the Teachers' Union

The expansion of the welfare state in Finland was made possible by the country's economic progress: in the period from the early 1950s to the end of the 1980s, gross domestic product (GDP) grew, on average, by over 3 percent per year. In the 1970s, the old two-stream system was replaced with *peruskoulu* ("basic school") a nine-year compulsory, common school. To help make the transition to the common, comprehensive school, a detailed national curriculum for primary and secondary education was developed—with the help of hundreds of expert teachers—in the late 1960s. Textbooks were approved by the central administration. The teaching process, including its contents and targets, were centrally determined.⁵ The transition was implemented slowly, starting in the early 1970s in the sparsely populated northern part of the country, and taking several years to bring the comprehensive school to the south, to the capital metropolitan area and other big cities (Aho et al., 2006).

While the comprehensive school began with a detailed national curriculum (which was helpful during such a radical transformation of the school system), it soon became clear that teaching heterogeneous groups requires expertise and flexibility. Sahlberg notes how teacher preparation became much more rigorous in the 1980s, and how in the early 1990s, a profound change in curricular philosophy and practice took place. The national curriculum was changed to be more flexible and less detailed, and students in the middle and upper grades were given more optional subjects. Curricula became school-based and teacher-planned (guided by the national curriculum framework) along with student-oriented instruction, counseling, and remedial teaching (Sahlberg, 2011; Linnakylä, Välijärvi and Arfmann, 2011). Simultaneously a major change in teacher education took place when all teachers were required to obtain a masters-level university degree to become competitive for teaching jobs. This has been emphasized by many as a main factor in the Finnish "miracle" of highly qualified and motivated teachers. In this context it has been reminded however, that the comprehensive teachers' education reform was part of a larger reform of the Finnish university system (Simola, 2015), where all university students in most fields were required to study directly until a masters' level degree.

Since the 1980s in Finnish schools educational equipment (textbooks, for example), and welfare services (including health, dental, and counseling services) are free of charge for all children. In addition, pupils get one free warm meal a day. Transportation is usually arranged or paid by the municipality for distances of three kilometers or more. For the most part, all pupils during the first six years receive the same academic content and teaching. In the last three years, between grades 7 and 9, the curriculum includes common subjects and some optional subjects freely chosen by the pupils. Optional studies may include courses in, for instance, foreign languages, sports, and art and music, or integrated, in-depth courses or applied studies in the common subjects. Students also have the option of attending *peruskoulu* for a 10th year. At the level of higher education, there is no tuition for university students, and there exists a universal support system for students, which covers an important part of the living expenses (including rent). The state also guarantees study loans, which allows all students irrespective of family background to finance their studies. Here Finland, resembling its other Nordic neighbors, has implicitly geared its educational system towards promoting equal opportunity. This is understood as allowing the full mobilization of the nations' human resources.

Finland's teachers' union, the Trade Union of Education (merged to a single union from several smaller unions in 1973), is especially strong. Although membership is voluntary, over 95 percent of teachers belong to the teachers' union.⁶

⁵Even then, there was no testing system, but an inspection system existed. In the 1990s the national textbook approval process and the inspection system were both abolished.

⁶In general terms, Finland has one of the highest rates of union membership in the industrialized world, with 70 percent of employees organized in trade unions. Unlike in many other countries, in Finland highly educated professionals are unionized, including architects, doctors, lawyers, professors, scientists, officers, priests, nurses, and teachers. See Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and Jelle Visser, 2013.

All teachers belong to the same organization: teachers responsible for daycare, in comprehensive school, in upper-secondary schools, in vocational schools, and in adult education (The only exception is university professors and lecturers, majority of them being members of their own unions). Those studying to become teachers and retired teachers are also union members. What is exceptional to many outside observers is that principals also belong to the teachers' union. In Finland, principals are all former teachers—and in the smaller schools, many still retain some teaching duties. With such a high membership rate, the teachers' union is not only powerful, but also highly respected in policymaking. For decades, ministers of education have, without exception, understood that carrying out a reform will be easier if the experts from the teachers' union have been involved in the preparatory work for the reform (Sarjala, 2013; Simola, 2005; Laukkanen, 2008; Tuovinen, 2008).

Cooperation between policymakers and the union is facilitated by the fact that while policy happens on the national level, teachers are employed by—and the union negotiates with—the municipalities. Instead of each municipality negotiating a local contract, an organization of the municipalities, the Commission for Local Authority Employers, engages in collective bargaining with the teachers' union, resulting in the "Municipal Collective Agreement." Sarjala emphasizes how this fact has great significance in principle and practice: "Dialogue between the ministry and the teachers' union mainly touches issues that have to do with the provision and content of education. If the teachers' union and the ministry had to negotiate about both pay and education policy, it is unlikely that the two would cooperate as well and as openly as they do now. At the same time, there is a connection between reforms in education policy and teachers' pay". Changes may add to teachers' workloads or alter their professional requirements. So it is only natural that, prior to implementing the reforms, there has to be an agreement as to how the new requirements will be accounted for in their pay. *If there is no such agreement, the reform will not be introduced* (Sarjala, 2013; see also, Pesonen & Riihinen, 2005; Kettunen, 2001).

The challenges of globalization, digitalization and economic crises

The Nordic countries went through a rough period as a consequence of the deep economic recession in the early 1990s. The budgets went from clear surpluses to deficits of 10% of the GDP, and public debts increased rapidly. The dark economic prospects increased the crisis awareness both among all the political parties and among the population, and fortified a political consensus to accept the welfare cuts that were regarded exceptionally harsh and with long-term consequences. After the deep recession in the early 1990s, the Nordic welfare model today is less universal, less generous and more conditional than it was twenty years ago.

While the rise of the comprehensive school in the 1970-1990 period needs to be seen in the context of the development of the Finnish welfare state and the national push for much greater social and economic equality, the recent economic developments are worrying. The less visible but equally profound changes in Finland's schools, over the past two decades, must be seen in the context of the deep changes that took place in the Finnish economy and global trends, in general. Two major events occurred in the early 1990s that triggered a significant shift in the economic development strategy promulgated by Finland's governmental and private sector leaders. The first was the process that led to Finland's acceptance into the European Union in 1995. With the collapse of the Soviet Union (a major trading partner), Finland had no choice but to diversify its export strategy and begin to move away from its historic reliance on forest products and other traditional industries (Raunio & Tiilikainen 2004; Meinander 2011). The second and more powerful stimulus was a major economic recession in the early 1990s, set off by a collapse of the financial sector reminiscent of the banking crisis the US has recently experienced. Unemployment in Finland approached 20%; gross domestic product (GDP) declined by 13% and public debt exceeded 60% of GDP.

After recovering from the recession of 1991-1994, Finland experienced a strong economic boom with new ICT technologies, led by the success of the Nokia Company. The severe Western economic crisis, since 2008, affected Finland more than many other European Nations. Between 2013 and 2015, the economic indicators of Finland were the weakest in EU, excluding Greece. The genuine Finnish problems, partially separate from the more general global financial crisis - are caused by aging population, ITC sectors' problems after Nokia-boom, and breakdown of the foreign trade with Russia, accelerated by the financial sanctions that EU imposed following the Ukrainian and Crimean crisis of 2014. The worsening economic situation, combined with the austerity measures adopted by the right wing government after 2015 elections, resulted in cuts in public sector.

This affected seriously educational budgets, in all levels, but since the end of 2016, many indicators show that Finland is recovering slowly from the last years' economic depression (Bothwell, Times Higher Education 2017). In short, the Nordic welfare model is still distinct and fares well in comparison with other welfare state models on most dimensions of welfare. Poverty and inequality rates are low, income mobility be it short-term or inter-generational is high; all this is combined with a high level of subjective welfare. Finland is still highly situated in the global welfare rankings, despite the still ongoing economic recession.

Investment in innovation and R&D was the new focus of education in the 1990s, which created long-lived defenders, functional even against recession. These investments not only led to the development of new partnerships between tertiary education and industry in Finland, but also had a profound effect on the primary and secondary education sector. Finnish employers sent very strong signals to the schools about the kinds of knowledge, skills and dispositions young people needed in order to be successful in the new economy. Finnish industry leaders not only promoted the importance of mathematics, science and technology in the formal curriculum, but also advocated for more attention to creativity, problem-solving, teamwork and cross-curricular projects in schools. In spite of some criticism in the 1990s, one example of the kind of message that corporate leaders were delivering to the schools is the statement from a senior Nokia manager, whom Sahlberg interviewed during this period in his role as chair of a task force on the national science curriculum: "If I hire a youngster who doesn't know all the mathematics or physics that is needed to work here, I have colleagues here who can easily teach those things. But if I get somebody who doesn't know how to work with other people, how to think differently or how to create original ideas and somebody who is afraid of making a mistake, there is nothing we can do here. Do what you have to do to keep our education system up-to-date but don't take away [the] creativity and open-mindedness that we now have in our fine *peruskoulu*." (Sahlberg, 2011).

Many Finnish researchers and some international observers have argued that the Finnish success story can be explained primarily by its specific national history and culture. The fact that Finland is culturally homogenous is often stated as one key factor of the achievements of the educational system.⁷ Historically - in the European context - Finland is a quite homogenous and small country. This argument of the national homogeneity has been valid until recent days. However, in 2016, there are schools in Helsinki where nearly half the students are immigrants. The new curriculum plan, implemented since Fall 2016 intends, again, to radically transform the education received by Finnish children, and to reorient the role of teachers. The new curriculum aims to answer the new challenges for the educational system, such as the rapidly changing needs in citizenship and working skills, the digital revolution and the changes brought by immigration.⁸

Finland's still overall economic health, proved in international welfare ranking, with country's (once) flourishing IT sector, have been also stated as important success factors. The national bureaucracy - or public sector in general - is efficient and enjoys the trust of most citizens and taxpayers. This is apparent also in the school administration, which is quite light, with most resources oriented in classroom. It has not been noted that Finland's average per pupil expenditure is well below that of the highest spending countries. It is also remarkable that primary school teaching is now the most popular profession among Finnish young people, attracting the top quartile of high school graduates into highly competitive teacher training programs. This article has showed that this has not always been so, and that the country took special steps to upgrade the status of teachers and teaching.

Conclusions

Today, in the Nordic welfare state paradigm, perhaps more than in any other, the relative character of poverty is recognized: poverty is the inability to participate in the way of life that is prevalent in the society that the individual lives in. The ability to participate is acquired, first and foremost, through education. This is why to many observers, one of the most alarming findings of the 2016 PISA (which focused on science, but also assessed mathematics and literacy, among 15-year-olds in 70 countries and regions) is that regional differences within the country, as well as differences springing from family background are rising in Finland.

⁷ A critical review of this argument, see Simola, 2015.

⁸ See, for example: <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/education-40043254/why-finland-is-changing-its-top-ranking-education-system>

While there are countries especially from Asia that have passed the results of Finnish students, the average achievement level is still quite high in Finland. The gap between high and low performers continues relatively small, as well as the achievement gap between students from high- and low-income families, but the gap is augmenting. PISA still proves that it is of little consequence where students live and which school they attend, and that the opportunities to learn are virtually the same all over the country. But the difference in results between girls and boys (in advantage of the girls) the biggest in OECD countries, as well as between the capital region and the rest of the country are signs that need to be taken seriously. Another alarming issue that needs policy action is that students from immigrant origins are obtaining lower results, more remarkably than in many other European countries.

As pointed in the introduction, authors such as Robert Putnam are, basically, worried about the lack of “Finnishness” in their societies: in Finnish schools, the gap between high and low performers continues relatively small, as well as the gap between students from high- and low-income families. The social and cultural structures of the US society are quite different from the Nordic one - but the possibilities of equality and threats of inequality are recognized in both sides of the Atlantic.

Another interesting finding has to do with the importance of trust. Trust, of course, cannot be legislated. But if the relationship between teachers and wider society is examined, one can argue that trust is more a consequence of skillfully negotiated conflicts and recognition of different interests as well as important policy decisions, as it is a pre-existing condition. In this context, it becomes clear that the “Finnish educational miracle” needs to be analyzed in its sociopolitical and historical context. The space for the reform was created through political negotiation, which in turn made possible the changes in teacher training and autonomy. Given the respect that teachers have historically enjoyed in Finland, there has been a solid base on which to build. The combination of a rigorous preparation, together with the devolution of much greater decision-making authority over things like curriculum and assessment – has enabled teachers to exercise the kind of professional autonomy other professionals enjoy. This granting of trust from the government, coupled with their status as university graduates from highly selective programs, has empowered teachers to practice their profession in ways that have deepened the trust afforded them by parents and others in the community.

The fact that there seems to be very little interest in Finland in instituting the assessment and external accountability regimes that have characterized the reform strategies of many OECD countries, most prominently the US and the UK, is perhaps the best evidence of the fundamental trust that seems to exist between the educational system, the educators and the society at large. Given the narrow achievement gap between all students - in different areas of the country and different socio economic strata – and the overall extraordinary performance of the Finnish system over the past decade, there is a lesson between high equality and high quality that others might want to study.

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