



Real Finnish Lessons

The True Story of an Education Miracle

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Finland's success in PISA

- In first PISA surveys, Finland surprisingly achieved top positions.
- Kicked off “education tourism” to understand what the Finns had done to produce such amazing scores.
- The country’s education system was seen as outstanding – receiving praise from journalists and politicians alike.
- “Finnish Frenzy” in the education world
 - ⇒ “I have seen the light” – Sven-Eric Liedman, Swedish philosophy professor, wrote in Dagens Nyheter, Sweden’s largest daily newspaper.



Standard explanations for the success

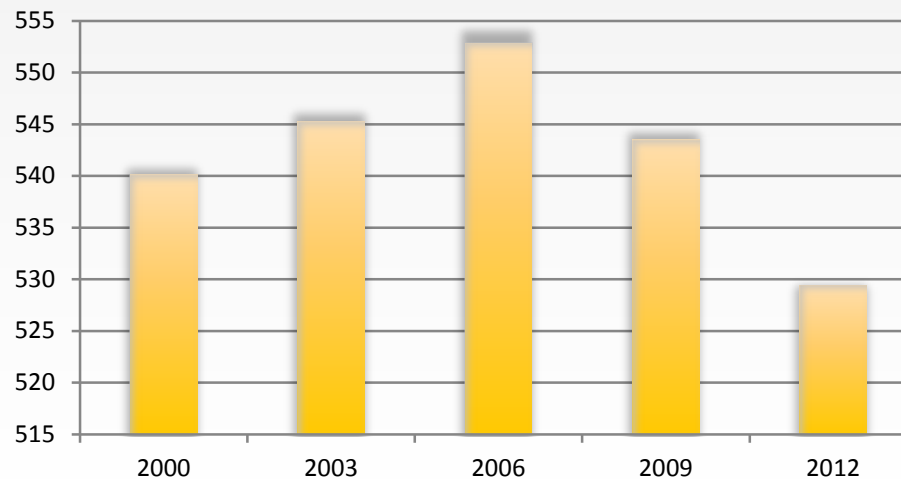
- Comprehensive school reform
- Absence of standardised tests, accountability and market-based reforms (GERM in Sahlbergian terminology).
- Collaboration and autonomy for professionals
- Competitive teacher education – and all teachers have master’s degrees. Supposed to generate great teachers with high status.
- “Less is more” – short school days and little homework



Success turns into decline

- Finland's scores start to slip (in PISA and other tests) – and nobody really knows why. Pretty much the same education system...

Finland's average PISA performance





Solving the puzzle

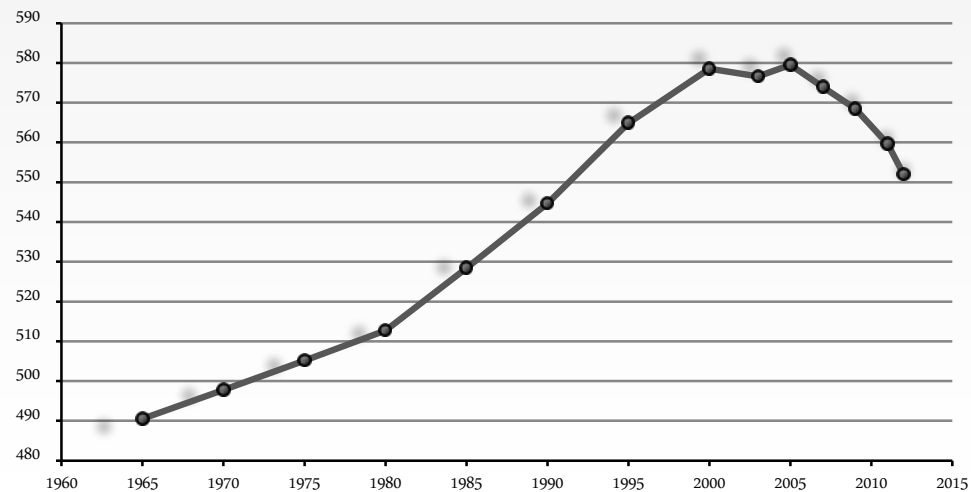
- “Best practice” methodology tells us nothing about successful (or unsuccessful) policy.
 - Rigorous research contradicts anecdotal support for standard explanations
 - Evidence indicates that the comprehensive school reform only had a marginal impact on male test score (see book).
 - Evidence suggests accountability and competition are good for PISA scores (see book).
 - Evidence suggests more instructional time and homework are good for PISA scores (see book).
- ⇒ There was never any real evidence that it was Finland’s current education system that produced the high scores in the early 2000s.



History contradicts the traditional explanations

- E.g. until the 1990s, Finland's education system was centralised and controlled by the state. Strong accountability and inspection system. Detailed national curriculum.
- E.g. teacher education only reformed in the 1970s.

Finland's lower-secondary international score trajectory





History contradicts the traditional explanations

- Ex: 1970-1983: Finland's 10-year olds improved 48-59 TIMSS points in science (first place shared with Japan and South Korea) + always had top reading scores
- Army test scores (18-20 year old males)





A “new” story

- Teachers have always had high status – nothing to do with current teacher education
 - Key part of the Fennoman nationalist movement in 19th century: create a non-existing Finnish-speaking culture. Teachers crucial!
 - Teachers were seen as “candles of the nation” – not only in schools but outside as well. Compulsory education implemented in 1921, the same year as Thailand. In 1937, 13% of children still did not attend primary school.
 - Teachers were supposed to be model citizens (Herbart Zillerism) – extreme selection and draconian rules for teacher students. No drinking, no smoking, no dancing. And strict dating rules.
 - Teacher comparatively highly educated already prior to WW II.
- ⇒ Teacher status is primarily due to socio-historical factors, not their current teacher education



The Finland Swedes

- Historical political and cultural elite.
 - As urbanization began around the coasts, Finland Swedes came to occupy higher positions to a higher extent than ethnic Finns. Today: wealthier, healthier, and more educated on average.
 - Svecoman countermovement in 19th century: had an existing culture to lean on.
- ⇒ Teachers important, but not as important as for ethnic Finns.



The Finland Swedes

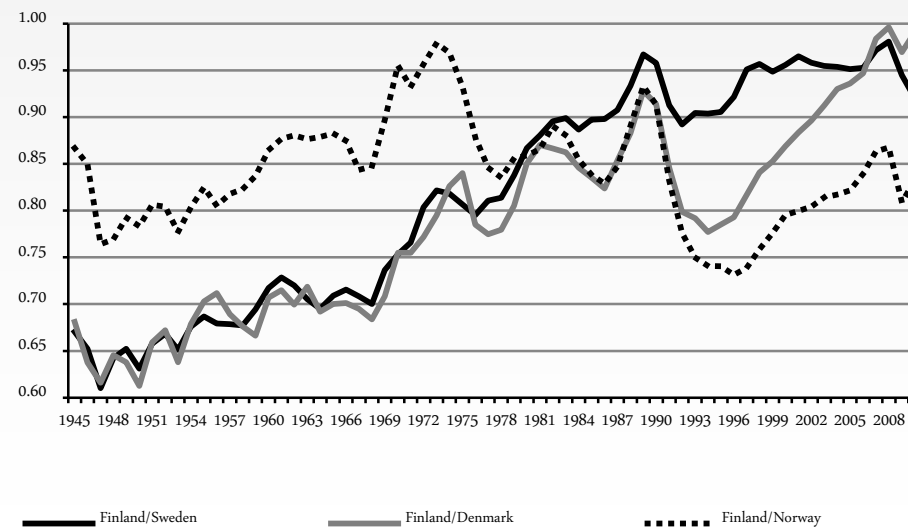
- 2007-08, 14% of Finnish first-choice applicants accepted, compared with 40% of all applicants among Finland Swedes. Kindergarten education in Helsinki: 16% vs. 59%.
- ⇒ Teacher profession not as attractive among Finland Swedes (compared with e.g. medicine).
- ⇒ One reason why Finland Swedes, despite higher socioeconomic background on average, perform worse.
 - E.g. PISA 2009: 14 points lower in maths, 27 points lower in reading literacy, and 28 points lower in science. National evaluations in most subjects also reveal a gap.



“Japan of the North”

- After WWII, Finland was very poor. Late urbanisation, industrialisation, and development of welfare state – but rapid East Asian style catch-up.

Relative GDP/capita trajectory of Finland





Catch-up = culture of hard work...

- The idea is that social norms of effort and work follow an inverted U-curve as a function of income and welfare.
 - Trajectory shaped Finnish culture: “sisu” (determination and resoluteness). Hard work, hard work, hard work... More East-Asian style development!
 - Share who said “determinism, perseverance” is an important quality to teach children = 51% in 2000 (vs. circa 30% in Scandinavia and up from 39% 1990).
 - More introvert than Scandinavia (agrarian) – also similar to East Asia. An “authoritarian, obedient, and collectivist mentality”.
- ⇒ A “wealth effect” probably catapulted Finland’s scores upward (and probably sustained them longer because of 1990s crisis).



Culture reflected in hierarchal nature of schools...

- Low pupil influence and no school democracy
 - ICCS 2009: only 15% of pupils said they take any part in decision-making regarding how their school is run (lowest). England: 55%.
 - UNICEF (2009): “extremely negative attitudes towards teachers”
 - Low pupil happiness levels
 - ⇒ “Obedience and authority have been key features of Finland’s education system throughout its history”
 - ⇒ Incidentally, Finland Swedish school culture has been more Scandinavian: happier pupils and better relations with teachers.



...and very traditional methods...

- Herbart-Zillerism key from the beginning – and appeared to still cast its shadow as the 20th century was coming to an end (see book for references).
- “Whole classes following line by line what is written in the textbook, at a pace determined by the teacher. Rows and rows of children all doing the same thing in the same way whether it be art, mathematics or geography. We have moved from school to school and seen almost identical lessons, you could have swapped the teachers over and the children would never have noticed the difference. ... [W]e did not see much evidence of, for example, student-centred learning or independent learning.” (East Anglia Research Team 1996)



...which research suggests are positive

- Randomised research support that hierarchical schooling culture can have strong positive effects on achievement, at least among more disadvantaged pupils (see book).
 - Evidence now shows that traditional methods are good for learning – and that pupil-led methods can be disastrous (e.g. Quebec and Sweden).
- ⇒ The *combination* of historical factors and significant societal as well as the retention of an old-fashioned culture and attitudes were likely important for Finland's rise.



What about the fall?

- Finland's culture is catching up with social and economic changes
 - Kids read less and have less learning-orientated attitudes, according to surveys.
 - Changing values among parents. Obedience decreasingly seen as something to instil in children, according to World Values Survey. Parents more likely to pressure teachers today.
 - The on average wealthier Finland Swedes started falling first – incidentally also less affected by the 1990s crisis. Probably reached “peak educational culture” first.
- Changing teacher methods: progressivism finally materialises
 - More progressive methods – direct result of the reforms in the 1990s, long opposed by teachers.
 - Reforms in 1990s the cause of the decline, not the rise!



Finland repeats Sweden's mistakes...again.

- Solution is...more of the same (as always): "The teacher decides the working methods together with the pupils" (National Curriculum 2014).
- Compare: "The teacher decides the working methods" (National Curriculum 2004).
- Argument is that education must follow the trajectory of society. But...

"The problem of education in the modern world lies in the fact that by its very nature it cannot forgo either authority or tradition, and yet must proceed in a world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition."

- *Hannah Arendt, The Crisis of Education, 1964.*



Implications for international comparisons

- Put “best practice” methodology on the dustbin of history – it’s useless
 - Understand that PISA scores do not measure education policy success
 - This applies to other countries as well – now everybody looks to countries such as Poland, Germany and Estonia. The circus continues...
- Experimental or quasi-experimental research necessary to separate causation from correlation.
- My Finnish story is indeed just a story – but I argue that it’s a better story than the traditional story!