

Why Finland's schools seem to be slipping ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

What has happened to Finland's schools?

That's a question educators around the globe are asking in the wake of the latest results of an ongoing study that measures academic achievement in 73 countries.

For much of the 21st century, Finland has been one of the very top performers in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), an ongoing study administered every three years that tests the reading, maths and science literacy of 15-year-olds in developed nations.

PISA doesn't measure memorisable facts, but rather how students apply theory and thinking in answering questions. Finland's students had been so successful on these tests that educators and leaders of other countries began looking to the country as an example of how to run an effective education system.

Headlines show a world smitten with the Finnish approach:

"How Finland broke every rule — and created a top school system"

"What Finland can teach China about education"

"What if Finland's great teachers taught in US Schools"

"Happy teaching, Happy Learning: 13 Secrets to Finland's Success"

But in the 2015 PISA iteration, the results of which were released earlier this month, Finland continued its slide that was first evident in the 2012 results when the country's maths score dropped out of the top 10 for the first time. The drop-off in maths scores from 2009 to 2012 was 2.8 per cent. Science scores dropped 3 per cent, reading 1.7 per cent.

In the 2015 results, Finland's scores dropped in all three categories: 11 points in science, 5 points in reading and 10 points in maths. Among the other top-performing countries, just Vietnam showed a similar drop-off. All the other top-tier countries' scores stayed the same or increased slightly. Finland is now ranked 12th in maths, fifth in science and fourth in reading.

(All of those rankings are still well ahead of the US, which has never been in the top 10 in any of the subject categories. In 2015, US students ranked 40th in maths, 25th in science and 24th in reading.)

There are ongoing debates about what PISA results actually say about education systems in different countries and how seriously they should be regarded. But Finland's high-achieving students were seen, especially by Western countries, as an example to be emulated. Now there are questions about what is causing the drop-off and how it should be addressed.

I put some of those questions to Pasi Sahlberg, a Finnish educator and leading figure in education policy and the author of the best-selling book, "Finnish Lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland". Excerpts:

What do you think best explains Finland's drop in the PISA results? Is it that more countries have simply caught up to what Finland was doing, or is there a fundamental change that has taken place in Finland as to how and what children there are learning?

It has been difficult to explain why some countries, including Finland, have been performing well in international school system comparisons. It is equally difficult to explain precisely why countries are slipping down in these same charts. When we look at OECD's PISA results we must always take a broader look than simply the average test scores.

One important dimension is the equity of education, i.e., how fair is the school system for children coming from different backgrounds? Even in this broader perspective there has been a notable decline in Finland's performance, both in terms of students' learning outcomes and equity of the education system (as we know now these two dimensions often go hand in hand). I have suggested three main reasons for

this decline that started already some eight or so years ago.

First, there has been a visible and alarming downward trend in Finnish schoolboys' educational performance during the past decade. This inconvenient phenomenon is stronger in Finland than in any other OECD country. As a result, Finland is the only country where girls significantly outperform boys not only in reading but also in mathematics and science. One factor that explains this gender gap in school attainment in Finland is related to the diminished role of reading for pleasure among boys. Finland used to have the best primary school readers in the world until the early 2000s, but not anymore. PISA test items rely heavily on test-taker's reading comprehension. Appearance of handheld technologies such as smartphones among school-aged children in this decade has probably accelerated this trend.

Second, rapidly increased "screen time" with media is often eating the time spent with books and reading in general. According to some national statistics, most teenagers in Finland spend more than four hours a day on the internet (not including time with TV) and that the number of heavy internet and other media users (more than eight hours a day) is increasing just as it is doing in the US, Canada and beyond. According to emerging research on how the internet affects the brain – and thereby learning – suggests three principal consequences: shallower information processing, increased distractibility, and altered self-control mechanisms. If this is true, then there is reason to believe that increasing use of digital technologies for communication, interaction and entertainment will make concentration on complex conceptual issues, such as those in mathematics and science, more difficult. Interestingly, most countries are witnessing this same phenomenon of digital distraction among their youth.

Third, Finland has been living with a very serious economic downturn since 2008 that has affected education more than other public sectors. Sustained austerity has forced most of Finland's 300+ municipalities to cut spending, merge schools, increase class sizes and limit access to professional development and school improvement. The most harmful consequence of these fiscal constraints is declining number of support staff, classroom assistants, and special education personnel. Finland's strength earlier was its relatively small number of low-performing students. Now, the number of those pupils with inadequate performance in reading, mathematics and science is approaching international averages. In Finland this is probably the most significant driver of increasing inequality within education. A Finnish adage for this could go something like this: equity in education arrives on foot but leaves on horseback.

I think that the fact that most OECD countries have shaped their national education policies, i.e., curriculum, instruction time and testing, to be aligned with PISA hoping that this would increase their PISA scores has affected Finland's position internationally. Education policies in Finland are not targeted to do well in PISA at all.

Have these new PISA results prompted concern among education leaders in Finland?

The PISA study is used more as a measurement that confirms findings from national assessments and research in Finland rather than as a stand-alone metric. This means that most of the findings in PISA 2015, for example, were well known in Finland. PISA 2015 was not big news in Finnish media. Authorities commented these results by saying that Finland is still among the top performers in OECD but at the same time raised concerns about increasing inequality and eroding equity in education that have been hallmarks of Finnish schools. Alarmingly low performance of Finnish boys and growing regional disparity were also among the issues raised by authorities.

There is an increasing number of immigrant students in Finnish schools. None of them speak Finnish when they arrive, and learning the Finnish language requires more effort than many other languages. PISA 2015 revealed a relatively wide gap between these non-Finland born and other students in all three measured domains. Although the number of immigrant-background students in the PISA sample is not big (around 4 per cent) this achievement gap is a growing issue in Finland. But this is not a factor that would explain Finland's overall slippage.

Can you foresee any changes that Finland would consider to address this falloff?

PISA is not seen in Finland as a trigger for education reforms. There will be no new policy changes that would be inspired by PISA in Finland. The Ministry of Education has launched a national programme that aims at improving primary and lower secondary education. This programme includes more student-centred pedagogies, strengthened student engagement in school, more physical activity for all students and more technology in classrooms. The Finnish way of thinking is that the best way to address insufficient educational performance is not to raise standards or increase instruction time (or homework) but make school a more interesting and enjoyable place for all. Raising student motivation to study and well-being in school in general are among the main goals of current education policy in Finland.

Many countries tried to learn from what Finland has accomplished in education. Should these new results give other countries pause? What lessons should other countries learn from this decline and what lesson do you think Finland should take from these results?

In one way, Finland remains one of the highest-performing school systems in the world. I would argue that Finland also continues to be an interesting example for others because in many ways its school system is so different compared to Japan or Canada, both doing very well in PISA. What we need to underline here is that PISA tells us only a small part of what happens in education in any country. Most of what Finland does, for example, is not shown in PISA at all. It would be shortsighted to conclude only looking at PISA scores where good educational ideas and inspiration might be found. The country's early-childhood education, highly regarded teaching profession, strong focus on well-being and whole child development and alternative models of accountability still continue to be useful areas of interest for others.

I would argue that it is now very interesting for others to take a closer look at how Finland will deal with this new situation of slipping international results.

The first lesson certainly is that the best way to react is not to adjust schooling to aim at higher PISA scores. In the coming years, foreign observers will see more integrated interdisciplinary teaching and learning in Finnish schools that actually will decrease instruction time in

mathematics and science. They will also witness more emphasis on arts and physical activity in all schools.

The second lesson is that sustainable improvement of education requires protecting and enhancement of equity and equality in education. International visitors are likely to see intensified conversation in Finland across political parties and opinions on making the education system serve everyone better.

Finally, what Finland should learn from these recent results is that reducing education spending always comes with consequences. It is very shortsighted to think that high educational performance and continuing betterment of schools would be possible when resources are shrinking. Whether Finland's politicians and bureaucrats take these lessons seriously remains to be seen.

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