

Borrowing Finnish PISA success? Critical reflections from the perspective of the lender

Maija Salokangas¹
Jaakko Kauko²

Abstract

Since the introduction of PISA, the OECD has become an increasingly powerful player in education governance and policy within its member countries, as well as elsewhere. It has also become evident that education systems scoring well in the exam have become sources for policy and practice borrowing for other countries. For example, Finnish teenagers' consistent success in the PISA exam has kept the Finnish education system in the limelight of international attention for a number of years. This essay provides critical observations regarding politicisation of PISA results from a Finnish perspective. Using Finnish teacher education, as well as quality assurance and evaluation as examples, we argue that Finnish education system has developed within a particular place and time, through political processes that are not replicable in different political contexts.

Keywords

PISA – Finland – Policy borrowing.

I- Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.
Contact: salokam@tcd.ie

II- University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland.
Contact: jaakko.kauko@helsinki.fi

Tomar de empréstimo o sucesso finlandês no PISA?

Algumas reflexões críticas, da perspectiva de quem faz este empréstimo

Maija Salokangas^I
Jaakko Kauko^{II}

Resumo

Desde a introdução do Programa PISA, a OCDE tem se mostrado um organismo cada vez mais poderoso no que diz respeito à administração e a políticas educacionais, tanto entre seus países-membro quanto nas demais nações. Também é fato que sistemas educacionais com bom desempenho neste exame transformaram-se em modelos de políticas e práticas educacionais para outros países. Por exemplo, o constante êxito dos adolescentes finlandeses no PISA tem mantido o sistema educacional deste país no centro das atenções mundiais há alguns anos. Este artigo apresenta algumas observações críticas relacionadas à politização dos resultados do PISA, sob um ponto de vista finlandês. Ilustrando com exemplos do próprio sistema educacional finlandês, além de avaliações qualitativas, nosso argumento é que o sistema educacional da Finlândia desenvolveu-se em local e época muito particulares, por meio de processos políticos que não podem ser replicados em outros contextos.

Palavras-chave

PISA – Finlândia – Empréstimo de políticas na educação.

I- Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.

Contato: salokam@tcd.ie

II- University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland.

Contato: jaakko.kauko@helsinki.fi

Limitations of PISA

Since the introduction of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has become an increasingly powerful player in education governance and policy within its member countries, as well as elsewhere (GREK 2009; SELLAR; LINGARD, 2013). Accounts have been provided from across the world uncovering numerous ways in which PISA results have influenced national education policy (GÜR et al., 2011; TAKAYAMA, 2010; ERTL, 2006). It has become evident that education systems scoring well in the exam, such as Finland and Shanghai, have become sources for policy and practice borrowing for other countries (DOBBINS; MARTENS, 2011; SELLAR; LINGARD, 2013). This essay provides critical observations regarding the politicisation of PISA results from a Finnish perspective. We argue that the limits of comparative research such as PISA and the complexity of the claimed Finnish education success call into question the attempts of educational borrowing.

Researchers seldom question the excellent quality of quantitative analysis of PISA; however, its comparability, narrow focus and political repercussions have gained critical attention. For instance, the background variables in PISA give little room for comparative interpretation due to methodological problems such as sampling, reliability, missing data, and cultural comparability (RUTKOWSKI; RUTKOWSKI, 2010, 2014). Concerned more with the focus and impact of PISA, on the cusp of publishing the 2014 test results, a group of academics wrote an open letter to PISA director Andreas Schleicher arguing how 'OECD's narrow focus on standardised testing risks turning learning into drudgery and killing the joy of learning' (OECD, 2014). From the comparative education side Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003) point out the risk of research being used merely as a 'mode of governance' rather than analysing the 'historical journey'. This concern reflects views

in comparative education research during an era of international large-scale assessments: the test results and especially their political use neglect the societal context of learning and distort complex comparison into a simplistic number game. PISA in particular has become an 'obligatory point of passage' (CARVALHO, 2013) for national decision-making. However, as Waldow (2010) notes, in the German political debate Finland served only as a 'projection surface' for reforms that might actually be presenting a utopian and flawed image. The comparison and reform based on PISA are very difficult as it tells little about the dynamics of a single system and disregards the socio-historical aspects of education (SIMOLA, 2005; MULFORD, 2002; GOLDSTEIN, 2004). However, we argue that these critical notes have not affected the popularity of PISA and other large-scale assessments in the global education debate.

Finnish teenagers' consistent success in the PISA (MINISTRY of Education and Culture 2014a, b, c, d, e,) exam has kept the Finnish education system in the limelight of international attention for a number of years. Various reasons have been given to explain the success. For example, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (2014f) suggests that this consistent success may be explained by: highly competent teachers; the Finnish comprehensive education system, which provides uniform basic education for the whole age group; and the considerable levels of autonomy given to schools. Indeed, it is peculiar to the Finnish system that primary and secondary education is free of charge, including instruction, school materials, school meals, health care, special needs education and remedial teaching, and that no fee-paying schools exist (MINISTRY of Education and Culture 2015a). With regards to the Ministry's point addressing teachers' competence, in Finland teacher education is a Master's level qualification, and due to the popularity of the degree programme, gaining a place in teacher education is highly competitive. It is also worth mentioning that no school inspectorate or public school league tables

based on student performance exist, which leaves teachers considerable room for manoeuvre in planning pedagogical activities and assessment of student learning (MINISTRY..., 2013). Instead of national exams, student assessment is based on continuous assessment carried out by teachers. Also, only the core curriculum is designed for nationwide application, and as such provides teachers and municipality level administration considerable decision-making capacity.

Perhaps most importantly, what the exams have revealed is that scores showing variations in student and school performance in Finland have been among the lowest in the PISA countries, which indicates widespread equity and social cohesion across the country. What this means is that the Finnish comprehensive school has managed to combine high quality performance with a high level of equality in educational outcomes. This reveals at least as much of the socio-political context in which the education takes place, as it does of pedagogical practice, both of which lie outside the analytical stretch of PISA data.

As such, here we provide reflections concerning policy-borrowing from the perspective of the lender. This essay is structured as follows: firstly, we present some reasoning to explain Finland's success in PISA. Due to the limited nature of this article, we cannot focus on the multiplicity of reasoning provided to explain Finnish teenagers' success in PISA but in order to provide perspectives to the themes raised throughout this edited collection have decided to focus on Finnish research-based teacher education, and policies on quality assurance and evaluation. These discussions provide contextual observations from the Finnish education system and a base for us to raise some fundamental concerns embedded in international education policy borrowing.

Academisation of Finnish teacher education: a rocky road to recognition

Finnish teacher education has gained significant attention internationally and it has

been often offered as one of the compelling explanations for Finland's success in PISA (SAHLBERG, 2011; TOOM et al., 2010; KUPIANEN et al., 2009; TRYGGVARSSON, 2009). Since the 1970s systematic measures have been made to operationalise research-based teacher education in Finland. The teacher education reforms between 1973 and 1979 introduced significant changes to teacher qualification, as primary teacher education was removed from teacher preparation seminars to universities, which also became responsible for organising secondary-level teacher students' pedagogical studies (RANTALA et al., 2013). As an attempt to raise the professional status of teachers, and the academic status of teacher education, primary teacher education was raised to Master's level in 1979. The notions of 'didactically thinking' and 'reflective teacher' can be traced to this period. Following the evolution of the conceptualisation, in the 1980s the idea of 'research-oriented' teacher education emerged (LAHDES, 1989), and efforts were put in place to ground teacher education firmly within academia. Currently, Finnish teacher education could be encapsulated in the idea of 'research-based teacher education'. Toom et al. (2010) provide a useful four-way approach to this by explaining:

In Finland, research-based teacher education has four characteristics. First, the study programme is structured according to the systematic analysis of education. Secondly, all teaching is based on research. Third, activities are organised in such a way that students can practise argumentation, decision-making and justification while investigating and solving pedagogical problems. Fourth, students learn academic research skills. (TOOM et al, 2010, p. 333).

As such, recently, Finnish teacher education has aimed to equip teacher students with research skills and scientific thinking that they may utilise independently in practice-based problem-solving. Furthermore, as teacher

students graduate, they are not only equipped with practical knowledge that may be utilised in their day-to-day teaching, but they are also in a position from which they may consider pursuing a career in research, like graduates from other Master's programmes.

However, the success story of the Finnish research-based teacher education has also been subject to critique, as research conducted mainly in the fields of education sociology, policy and history have provided critical dimensions to the image Finnish research-based teacher education has internationally. Here we focus on the struggles teacher education has faced in justifying its place in universities as well as on issues concerning the practical application of theory-based teacher education.

Since the reforms in the 1970s, teacher education has remained in the crossfire between demands from practice and pressures to operate credibly within the academic environment. In fact, Simola and Rinne (2010) point out how the academisation of teacher education was a contingent event. The first suggestions from the teacher training committee proposed a teacher qualification without a Master's degree. The time of this committee work coincided historically with the general reform of university degrees and it was this that led to the ascension of teacher education among the ranks of other academic professions (SIMOLA; RINNE, 2010). During the early years of academic teacher education, in the 1980s and 1990s specifically, some of the vocal critics within the academic community opposing research-based teacher education were education sociologists, who raised concerns regarding the quality of research conducted within teacher education, and especially the poor quality of Master's dissertations the teacher students produced in comparison to dissertations produced in other programmes (KEMPPAINEN; VIRTÄ, 2013). This may not be that surprising, considering the relative newness of the field of study, as the teacher educators at the time were more practice-oriented than academically esteemed.

It was also argued that the way in which teacher education justified its academic existence through the means of rather narrow didactical/pedagogical approaches would result in an ahistorical and narrow view of the profession and the field (SIMOLA et al, 1997).

Teacher educators responded to such criticism with consistent efforts to further raise the academic standards in teacher education by increasing the number of doctoral qualifications amongst the teacher educators, as well as increasing their academic outputs. As Rantala et al. (2013) show, this has been particularly evident since the early 1990s as the number of doctorates amongst the teacher educators as well as research activity in general, has risen considerably across the country. They also raise a rather practical issue concerning the current state of research-based teacher education, as they note a parallel between increased research activity among teacher educators (which has helped to raise its image within the academic community) and reduced contact time with students. Indeed, teacher education has become increasingly student-led, in which independent study time has increased steadily during the past decades. In addition, the nature of teacher education has shifted significantly from classroom didactics to research-based reflection (SALMINEN; SÄNTTI, 2012).

Although teacher education has undoubtedly gained higher academic status over the past decades, and created a teaching workforce equipped with research skills and competences, empirical evidence concerning the implications of research-based teacher education in actual practice still remains somewhat limited. This is interesting, considering that a central question in the debates concerning academisation of teacher education has focussed on whether research-based education is appropriate for teachers, considering the practical nature of their day-to-day work. From the research available it seems that a gap between theory and practice still exists. In their research Krokfors et al.

(2011) found that teacher educators considered research-based teacher education relevant; however, a concern was raised regarding how the research-based education they deliver is actually transferred to teacher students. Research focussing on teacher's experiences (BLOMBERG; KNIGHT, 2015; LAINE, 2004) supports this, suggesting that newly qualified teachers in particular report a gap between research-based teacher education and the practical day-to-day demands of schools. What these results show is that if the academic community has been wary of research-based teacher education, it is not considered entirely unproblematic from the teacher educator's nor teacher's point of view either.

The academisation of Finnish teacher education has been a long and rocky road, and as a process it has been closely connected to other reforms. Kempainen and Virta (2013) suggest that although significant efforts were put in place within teacher education across the country during the past decades, it was not until the PISA results that finally legitimised academic teacher education and provided a public stamp of approval and recognition for teacher education as an academically credible programme of study. This said, despite its international success, due to the reasoning outlined earlier, it should be understood within its historical and political framework rather than as a separate entity. In what follows, we will cast more light on education policymaking that further explains the Finnish context.

Constitutive dynamics and the difficulties of policy borrowing

In the political discussions of lessons from the PISA two particular aspects of policy borrowing are neglected. Firstly, evidence from different research disciplines has pointed out how political change along the lines of a set policy is rather difficult (see KAUKO, 2013). Institutions create their restrictions for reforms based on path dependencies (PIERSON, 2000),

norms (MARCH; OLSEN, 1989) or just the complexity of the social relations (KAUKO, 2014). This raises the question of how easy it actually is to import a policy. The problem has been discussed in earlier comparative research: for instance, in terms of indigenisation (PHILLIPS; OCHS, 2004) or embedded policies (OZGA; JONES, 2006). Secondly, as Geoff Whitty (2012) points out, results of 'policy tourism' usually draw on questionable evidence for legitimating reforms. In fact, the 'borrowing and lending' research in comparative education points out how, instead of straightforward policy import, one of the main reasons for borrowing is the opportunity to gain legitimacy for national reforms (see WALDOW 2012, p. 420).

However, the 'Finnish Miracle of PISA' has raised a lot of interest, and delegates from across the world have flocked to visit Finnish schools, teacher training departments and administrative bodies. This global interest in Finnish basic education is harnessed also in the suggestions of using the country brand for policy export or loaning: 'The Finnish model is a proven one and it could also function as a means for many current developing countries to go forward' (Country Brand Report 2010, 195). One aspect striking to many international visitors, not mentioned in the country brand report, is the Finnish practice in education quality assurance and evaluation. We will look at them more closely as they serve as a good example of the difficulties of policy export.

Sahlberg (2011) has offered a much-quoted explanation of the Finnish success. One of his main observations is that Finnish education is a very different one from the so-called Global Education Reform Movement (GERM). The GERM ideas support standardised high-stakes testing, accountability based on tests and techniques such as inspection, and generally a competitive environment. In contrast, the 'Finnish Way' as Sahlberg describes draws on a clear but flexible national framework curriculum without standardised tests, with a high level of trust in the teaching

profession giving them room for action and a lot of responsibility, while basing it, however, on rather traditional pedagogical values (c.f. SIMOLA 2005). Sahlberg (2011), conversely, is somewhat doubtful of direct policy borrowing and instead points out that the main factors for a successful education policy are actually embedded in the larger societal context, and that key lessons relate to questioning the ideas of 'choice, competition and privatisation' and to Master's level teacher training.

Simola's (2014) description of the main features in the Finnish system is close to Sahlberg's (2011), but the reasoning behind the birth of the model is rather different. Simola (2014) argues that Finnish basic schooling is constructed on three constitutive dynamics: 'buffering embedded egalitarianism', 'empowering solicited trust' and 'intensifying paternalistic progressivism'. Each constitutive dynamic is not a conscious product of planning, but a combination of structural and discursive factors, and political action. In relation to quality assurance and evaluation, these constitutive dynamics, embedded in the institutional structure, have resulted in a system without rankings and standardised testing, and where results of sample-based tests are used solely for administrative planning rather than enhancing choice and voice (SIMOLA et al., 2013; KAUKO; VARJO 2008).

These dynamics framing Finnish policies of quality assurance and evaluation are part of contingent historical and societal surroundings that have buttressed long-term planning and buffer change. The long-term planning is supported by the political environment and institutional framework. Traditionally, a rotation of parties in coalition governments ensures that one out of three major parties continue, which brings continuity and a need for consensual decision-making (KAUKO, 2011). In fact, apart from the comprehensive school debate in the 1970s, education has not been a core issue in political debates (JALAVA et al., 2012), and the comprehensive school is a sustained compromise

between the main political forces, thus feeding stability (KAUKO et al., 2015). The Finnish PISA success added further to the stability of the system in muting critical voices against the prevailing system of schooling (SIMOLA, 2014). A buffer for further change was created when the economic depression in the 1990s catalysed a legislative process radically decentralising and delegating education-related decisions to the municipal (local) level, as it was easier for the national-level decision-makers to let the budget cuts be decided at the local level (SIMOLA et al., 2009). As a result, the central governance would not have had the power to radically change local-level practices. Indeed, the practices of the government work supporting longer trends and the school and governance structure buffering change set institutional limitations for changes in education.

Cracks in consensus

Although the success of Finnish teenagers in PISA has been consistently high, the recent scores show a small dip in the results (MINISTRY..., 2014e). Given all the critique above, we cannot say for sure whether this drop has anything to do with the latest changes in Finnish education or whether it is related to longer-term changes, or possibly something else relating to the question of what societal and cultural aspects PISA actually measures.

Despite the institutional continuities described above, the Finnish model is not immune to changes. At the moment we are seeing many weak signals and incremental changes that are changing the Finnish education system. After the introduction of school choice based on 'teaching with special emphasis', there is a growing diversification in practices of choice in major cities in terms of the socio-economic background of families (BERNELIUS, 2013, KOSUNEN, 2012; POIKOLAINEN, 2012; SEPPÄNEN et al., 2012). In urban areas specifically, parents are actively exercising school choice (VARJO et al., 2014; KOSUNEN, 2014). What is peculiar to the Finnish urban

school markets though, is that, because neither public league tables revealing school performance nor inspectorate reports exist, parents' conceptualisations regarding a 'good' or 'bad' school are based on their perceptions and superficial observations regarding school reputation. For example, Kosunen (2014) found that socially and ethnically mixed student populations and low expectations of pupils' contentment are seen as contributing factors "for parents to choose another school".

The political system might be changing also. Outside of the three major parties, a fourth, populist party rose to the big leagues in 2011 and "took a place in the Government after the 2015 Parliamentary elections". It is too early to draw longer-term conclusions, but the new bigger party might disrupt the continuity between consecutive governments and thus polarise the political sphere. However, the cracks in consensus are unlikely to stem from the Ministry of Education. In its recent 'look to the future' the Ministry sets out to tackle the dip in the rankings by trying to stop diversification:

According to national and international research, the learning results among youth have decreased. [...] The Finnish position as a place with a high-skills-based economy is challenged, as the rise in the level of education that lasted for decades has stopped. [...] The future increase in learning outcomes requires developing the school environment in terms of comprehensive welfare. ... The diversification trend will be stopped. (MINISTRY..., 2014, p. 10-11 [translation by the authors]).

To conclude, we have argued here that education policy borrowing based on success in international exams is rather problematic, using Finnish research-based teacher education, as well as quality assurance and evaluation, as examples. We have argued that despite being an international success story, Finnish research-based teacher education is not entirely

unproblematic, as some issues regarding practical applications of theoretical content remain unsolved. Even more importantly we have argued that academisation of teacher education has been a lengthy process, that has been closely connected to other reforms, and as such should be examined within its historical and political framework rather than as a separate transportable entity. This also applies to Finnish quality assurance and evaluation practices, as they have also developed within a particular place and time, through political processes that are not replicable in different political contexts. They are also deeply embedded in cultural and societal practices carved throughout the *longue durée* of history.

Drawing on our examples, we can argue from various points of view for the difficulty of transferring these policies. This would be nearly impossible if we were to understand the Finnish education system as a whole and as part of the larger socio-historical framework. From a historical perspective, the main institutional solutions in Finland have been contingent and not results of only deliberate political action. For instance, in exporting the Finnish evaluation practices to another extreme, Chile, it is hard to imagine how the competition and market mechanisms could be pushed back (KAUKO et al., 2015). From a political point of view, the comprehensive school is a result of a compromise between the main parties and was only possible during a specific time in history. If a similar political attempt to gain consensus were to occur in another context or in contemporary Finland, the policy process would inevitably feed in different cultural and political interpretations of how the comprehensive school works and should work. From a cultural perspective, for instance, if a context of high-stakes testing were to be reformed into a Finnish model, reinstating trust in the profession that a country has replaced with managerial practices would require a large societal re-understanding of what teaching is about. Finally, knowing that

the Finnish PISA success is a result of equal learning outcomes linked to a rather equal society in terms of socio-economic factors, it is relevant to as which one should be developed to ensure good scores in international large-scale assessments.

Due to reasons outlined in this article, we join the ranks of many academics voicing our concern at the use of international league tables as a means to legitimate, or in the worst case, guide decision-making. What the league tables ignore is the fact that the processes of

schooling and education are always a part of the surrounding society.

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Maija Salokangas is Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Management in Trinity College Dublin.

Jaakko Kauko is a university researcher and adjunct professor working at the Research Unit focusing on the Sociology and Politics of Education (KUPOLI) at the University of Helsinki.