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Why the golden boy of education has lost his lustre

Finland's old-school culture is in decline, catching up with the economic transformation and generating less learning-oriented attitudes

Since the first results from the Pisa international education survey were released in 2001, Finland has been its golden boy, with policymakers and pundits worldwide pilgrimaging in droves to discover the country's secrets. The Finnish fan club continues using the country's experience to support whatever pet educational theories they have, despite the country's recent slippage in international and domestic assessments.

Traditional explanations of Finland's rise highlight education reforms and practices focusing on equality, local autonomy, comparatively little instruction and homework, as well as trust in and appreciation for teachers – and the rejection of market-based ideas and accountability.

Yet there's no evidence supporting the traditional story. Rigorous research does not endorse it, and a more careful examination of Finland's results over time shows that its improvements started long before most highlighted policies were even implemented. In fact, Finnish scores began falling soon after these policies came fully into effect.

The seed of the transformation should instead be sought all the way back in the 1800s. Finland was then a Russian autonomous region with institutions inherited from Swedish rule. But this state-like entity conspicuously lacked an essential ingredient for independence: a nation. And this in turn required a Finnish culture, which then essentially didn't exist beyond peasant status.

The Finnish nationalist movement realised that this situation required teachers to reach beyond formal schooling, giving them a unique role for nation-building. Indeed, teachers became "candles of the nation", acting as educators and role models for the entire population, a mission that continued during the 20th century due to repeated internal and external threats to the country's existence. This elevation to model-citizen status required strict entrance requirements to teacher education and draconian rules of conduct for candidates outstanding enough to be accepted.

The result was remarkably high teacher education levels and status early on in Finland's modern history, still evidenced by comparatively strong appreciation for the profession and stiff competition for teacher-training programmes. No wonder Finnish teacher quality ranks high internationally; this phenomenon has deep historical roots and little to do with specific education reforms.

While socio-historical factors laid the groundwork for Finland's success, they could only do so much in its existing structural context. Indeed, urbanisation and industrialisation arrived comparatively late, leaving Finland considerably poorer than her Scandinavian neighbours in the mid-1900s.

Yet the Finns spent the century's latter half rapidly closing this gap. Seismic population movements from rural to urban areas during the great migration ensured fast, East Asian-style industrialisation and growth, eventually enabling a comparatively late-developed Scandinavian-style welfare state. The booming economy spurred mass education, which generated increasingly educated parents. Such transformations are often initially accompanied by strong work norms and emphasis on education, as existential threats remain embedded in the national psyche, and Finland was no exception.

The result appears to have been a "wealth effect", realising the country's latent educational potential and catapulting its performance upwards from the mid-1960s onwards. In part, Finland's improvements were therefore probably due to economic catch-up.

Finnish culture struggled to keep up with this developmental trajectory and remained comparatively old fashioned – reflected in a hierarchical and traditional schooling environment. Indeed, fierce teacher opposition ensured that school democracy remained conspicuously absent. For a long time, pupil-led learning didn't make it into Finland's classrooms, despite the education establishment's efforts.

Research suggests that teacher-focused instruction and authoritative educational cultures improve learning; Finland's transformation was probably aided by the economic revolution's interaction with this cultural persistence.

So why has the country begun to falter recently? Well, because it's becoming more like other Western countries in general and perhaps Scandinavia in particular. The old-school culture is in decline, catching up with the economic transformation and generating less learning-oriented attitudes, while the pressure to abandon teacher-centred methods is now materialising.

Unfortunately, pundits and politicians have ignored all this, preferring to highlight policy explanations relying more on wishful thinking than rigorous analysis. But slipping Finnish performance is thankfully making these red herrings decreasingly persuasive.

This story is perhaps disappointing for admirers of Finland as an education role model. Indeed, the only relevant policy lesson appears to be the danger of throwing out authority in schools and especially the wholesale implementation of pupil-led instruction, today embraced worldwide.

The intentions behind this development were good, but the road to education hell is paved with good intentions – just as the road to education heaven is often paved with unintended consequences. The story of Finland's educational rise and slippage supplies evidence of both, therefore also providing a general warning to overly optimistic adherents of rational planning. Indeed, the real world's complexities often require a more humble and experimental approach.

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