# International comparison and educational policy learning: Looking North to Finland

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**The example of Finland**

Finland’s high outcomes in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) since its inception, has catapulted the country and its education system into the world’s educational, political, and media spotlights. Even with the slight decline in the most recent administration of PISA in 2012, Finland should remain a model of efficient and equitable education. While many of its educational successes stem from distinctly societal and cultural features (e.g. Chung, 2009; Simola, 2005), the education system also has features that are policy malleable and can aid policy learning, rather than the wholesale borrowing or transfer of education policy. For example, Finland has achieved these high PISA outcomes while ‘going against the grain’ of recent worrying educational trends, such as the Global Education Reform Movement, or GERM. GERM is characterised by competition, high-stakes testing, accountability, and standardisation into the vernacular of education policy-making and reform. While GERM has been spreading virulently around the world, the ‘Finnish Way’ has allowed the country to remain immune to the GERM infection (Sahlberg, 2011). Instead, Finland has achieved its high performances in PISA with consistency of educational provision, high-quality and highly-educated teachers, an education system based on trust and autonomy, egalitarian values of the country, and political consensus in education. The Finns have also exhibited patience when implementing education policy, adhering to the mantra of ‘continuity and change’, for example, waiting a generation to assess the efficacy of major education reform (Chung, 2009). Patience in implementing education policy, unfortunately not an English virtue, would allow some of the policy malleable features of Finnish education, such as high-quality and highly-educated teachers, trust, and political consensus to inform policy within the English context. However, the very real danger lies in politicians using international comparisons to drive forth ‘quick fix’ solutions that lead to uncritical policy transfer and eventual policy failure (Crossley and Watson, 2003; Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Phillips and Ochs, 2004). The slight decline in Finland’s PISA scores in 2012 has led to educational interest from English policymakers to travel to the Far East. Despite this, Finland still provides valuable lessons for policy learning.

**Power, Politics, and Policy Learning**

While I have argued thus far that Finland provides a good example of education policy, especially in terms of teacher education and political consensus, there is the underlying and tempting risk of viewing Finnish education, uncritically, as a ‘silver bullet’ for all educational pitfalls and problems. As stated previously, the Finns judiciously and carefully implement major educational reform, for example, the switch to comprehensive schools in the 1970s (Chung, 2009); policymakers then waited a generation to assess the efficacy of this major educational change. Many attribute the movement to comprehensive schooling with providing the egalitarian values underpinning Finnish success in PISA. In England, however, politicians and policy-makers have shown the increased tendency to use ‘quick fix’ and even ‘phony’ policy solutions for ‘immediate political impact’, especially to fuel political agendas (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Phillips and Ochs, 2004). Chung et al. (2012), for example, argued that these ‘phony’ solutions were used by UK politicians with the creation of the Master’s in Teaching and Learning (MTL), a Labour, government-funded Master’s degree for teachers, right before the May 2010 general election. The newly-elected coalition government then withdrew the funding for the MTL in November 2010. This lack of continuity and political consensus in England embody the fickle and fleeting, rather than critically-informed, nature of education policy-making in England.

Educational interest, or cross-national attraction (Phillips and Ochs, 2004) is unfortunately, often short-lived. For example, in the 1980s, Japan commanded much of the world’s educational interest (e.g. Cummings, 1989), while Japan looked to the west for inspiration (Ichikawa, 1989). In the 2000s, due to PISA, much of the world’s attention settled onto Finland, but the Finns traditionally looked to Germany and Sweden (e.g. Chung, 2009) for educational insight. PISA 2012 renewed English interest in East Asia, inappropriately underpinned by the superficial reading of and perception of the scores. These examples of fleeting educational interest also uncover the essential role of context when observing a foreign system of education. Thus, an education system’s setting, often overlooked by policy-makers, plays an important role in its development. Kemmis and Heikkinen (2012) state that a country’s education system is part of a wider ‘ecosystem’; therefore, it cannot separate easily from its societal, political, cultural, and economic setting. Thus, a ‘highly context-dependent approach’ (King, 2007) is needed in order to tackle the difficult process of judicious, critically-informed policy learning.

PISA has added a new dimension to the power and politics of education policy. For example, the OECD has begun to move some educational power into a transnational space (Moutsios, 2009, 2010) and away from the local and national levels. This suggests that PISA can influence the goals of national education systems; similarly, this new, transnational policy space actually confuses national education objectives. The desire to perform in PISA drives a ‘never-ending hunt’ (Pongratz, 2006) in an ‘international education horserace’ (Takayama, 2008). This leads to further uncritical policy decisions, led by the disregard of context, thus promoting and increasing these fickle and fleeting educational interests and influences. The imbalance of power detracts from achieving the very desirable, yet elusive, political consensus in educational policy-making.

**Warnings and Lessons**

Recent policy actions have indicated that politicians and education policy-makers, especially in the UK context, have been using PISA as a driver for ‘quick fix’ policy solutions. The example of Finland has been used to justify ‘quick fix’ education policy within the UK, namely with 2010’s White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*. This policy paper upholds Finnish teacher education as a model, but then contradicts itself by proposing contrasting teacher education policy for England. In order to avoid further ‘quick fix’ policy solutions such as the MTL and the 2010 White Paper, better communication must occur between policymakers, academics, and practitioners. Furthermore, tackling and preventing these ‘quick fix’ policy decisions requires direct interaction between comparativists and politicians.

Such initiatives have occurred already. I was an awarded a research grant, by the British Academy, in order to investigate Finnish teacher education in response to the 2010 White Paper. Part of this grant involved bringing together Members of Parliament, academics, and teacher educators in a symposium. Ten delegates met with MPs from the Education Select committee at the Houses of Parliament on 30 October 2013 to express views from our varying perspectives, and to warn the MPs of such damaging, ‘quick fix’ reactions with the then-upcoming release of PISA 2012 scores in December 2013. We called ourselves the *Transforming Teacher Education in the UK* Working Group.Furthermore, we, the delegates, submitted a document to the MPs with our recommendations on how to approach the PISA 2012 scores upon their release. The symposium led to further collaboration, as three of these delegates contributed both to the British Association for International and Comparative Education (BAICE) opening plenary in 2014, and to this *Compare* Forum, namely Michael Crossley, Paul Morris, and myself. The *Transforming Teacher Education in the UK* symposium also led to another collaboration, with participation from five of the original delegates presenting as a symposium for the British Educational Research Association (BERA) conference in 2014, which was entitled *PISA and the Politics of Education Policy: (De)constructing Research Impact and Engagement.* All of these initiatives have stemmed from our desire to further bridge the gap between theory, policy, and practice.

Thus, better communication between educational theorists, and in this case, comparativists, policy-makers, and practitioners can help prevent ‘quick fix’ solutions and uncritical policy borrowing. Indeed, when looking North to Finland, England has lessons to learn, namely undertaking policy learning, for example, with political consensus and ‘big picture’, long-term thinking. In spite of the politicians’ renewed interest in East Asia, the example of Finland’s western, European context remains very relevant if policies are viewed through a critical lens and if relevant features for policy learning are judiciously transferred across national borders.

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