Finland, PISA, and Scandinavia: A discussion of reasons for Finland’s higher outcome in PISA from the Finnish perspective

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Abstract

Finland’s high results in the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) are often attributed to its contextual factors, such as its culture and society. Egalitarian values and the welfare state provide explanation for some of the reasons behind its PISA success; however, the other Nordic countries of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland do not have the same outcomes in PISA.

Finland scored higher than not only the rest of the Nordic countries, but also most of the world. Its strikingly good results indicate an enviable difference in achievement, which raises the question of why Finland scores higher in PISA than in the other Nordic countries. The Finnish perspective on the matter provides insight on these outcomes; therefore, this article explores the reasons behind these PISA results from the perspective of Finnish educationalists. The empirical results uncover the salient factors such as teachers and teacher education, attitudes towards education and national values, and societal makeup and immigration. This writing explores the uniquely Finnish features that promote high performance in PISA.

Key Words

Finland, PISA, Scandinavia, achievement

Introduction

Finland has received extensive, worldwide attention for its top outcomes in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) since its inception in 2000. Research has shown that many of its educational successes stem from distinctly Finnish societal and cultural features (e.g. Chung, 2009; Simola, 2005), such as Finland’s unique history, the value of education in its society, and the egalitarian nature of Finnish society. However, the likeness of the Nordic countries’ structures would indicate an analogous performance in PISA, as the countries of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and Finland have similar politics, culture, and society, as well as education systems. Egalitarian values and the welfare state also exemplify the character of all Nordic countries. However, PISA revealed a disparity within the countries’ scores, and Finland was the top performer in this Northern European group by far, not to mention one of the top performers in the world. Finland’s “strikingly” good results indicate an enviable difference in achievement in reference to the Scandinavian countries (Kjærnsli & Molander, 2003: 69). This shows “students in Finland are indeed very well prepared for using science, [mathematics, and reading] in their future lives as useful and critical members of a democrati society” (Kjærnsli & Molander, 2003: 69). However, the results spanning from 2000 to today show that the wider contextual features of Finland, often credited with its PISA successes, are contained within the Finnish border, raising the question of why Finland scores higher in PISA than the Scandinavian countries. This article, thus, tackles the issue with empirical research from the Finnish perspective, uncovering the nuances between these countries, and highlighting why Finland outscores its Nordic counterparts.

Background and Theoretical Framework

Finland has a close relationship with its Scandinavian neighbours of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland. These countries have ties due to their similar languages, shared history, and current joint endeavours. The issue of the Finnish and Swedish languages within Finland helps uncover Finland’s ties with the Nordic countries as well as assert its uniqueness. The Nordic Council also exemplifies the cooperation and camaraderie between the Nordic nations. These two features thus provide a good foundation from which to understand the relationship and shared values between the Nordic countries, as well as insight into Finland’s unique role in the group.

Language

The two official languages of Finland, Finnish and Swedish, set Finland apart from the Nordic countries, but also build the common ties between these countries as well. The Finnish language possesses unique linguistic characteristics that separate it from most European languages, including the Scandinavian language group. In fact, the distinctiveness of the language demonstrates the Finns’ uniqueness as a people and remains an extraordinary characteristic (Bacon, 1970). The mysterious nature of Finnish origins as well as the nature of their language, in concert with their history under foreign rule, adds to pride in their exceptional language.

The centuries under Swedish rule, for example, from the thirteenth century to 1809, enhanced pride in the Finnish language, due to the necessity of Swedish, used in all officialdom, including education (Hall, 1967). The influence of language in Finland, which stems from Swedish rule, enforces ties with Sweden and the rest of the Nordic countries. In order to better understand Finland this article further explores its ties with Sweden and the reasons behind its bilingualism.

During their time under the reign of the Kingdom of Sweden-Finland, the Finns were forced to accommodate the Swedish language. The people of Finland expressed their nationalist feelings in Swedish, as the educated people of Finland used the Swedish language, and, as stated previously, Swedish remained the language of instruction in all schools (Bacon, 1970). However, this link to Swedish culture and language allows Finland to cooperate in the Nordic community. To the casual observer, Finland belongs to the group of Scandinavian countries by proximity of geography:

Finland participates as the easternmost of the Nordic countries, or of Fenno-Scandinavia, as the geographer would say. But it would be a mistake to imagine that this cooperation is motivated by purely or even primarily geographic considerations. There is so much else to bring the Nordic countries together. They all have the same cultural background, and a historical fellowship of fate (Fagerholm, 1960: 69).

After Swedish rule, Finland became a Russian Grand Duchy. Upon Finnish independence from Russia in 1917, the Finns chose to begin their time as an independent country upon the previous Scandinavian foundations (Fagerholm, 1960), rather than the more recent Russian influences. Here, the influence of the Swedish language allowed Finland to assume Scandinavian identity. Because of this, Finland secured its position as part of the North of Europe, rather than the East. Despite the differences from its Scandinavian counterparts, modern, independent Finland has formed its unity and identification with them (Hall, 1967).

The Nordic Council

In addition to the historical context of the linguistic issues, the Nordic Council further cements Finland’s association with the countries of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland. The Council, born in 1953, officially outlined the cooperation between the Nordic countries, a practice essentially already in place. This cooperation comes at all levels and disciplines, such as politics, medicine, fashion, and the arts (Hall, 1967). For Finland especially, the Nordic Council has proved beneficial. Its struggles before and after independence with neighbouring Russia followed by the Soviet Union, in addition to its geography, placed Finland in a tenuous position (Chislett, 1996). Finland’s determination during the Second World War seemingly deterred the Soviet Union from adding the country to its republics, and the Nordic Council helped cement Finland’s position as a Northern democracy along with its Scandinavian neighbours.

The Nordic countries all have a relatively similar degree of homogeneity and share a religion, Lutheranism. All, with the exception of Finland, speak a language with analogous roots, but the Finns speak Swedish as a second language, and the Swedish-speaking minority has a Scandinavian language as a mother tongue. Again, Finland’s use of Swedish as an official language allows for better cooperation with its Scandinavian counterparts (Hall, 1967). All of the Nordic countries also share similar social backgrounds and small population size. Most significantly, all Nordic countries pursue the common ideal of the egalitarian society. This egalitarian goal does not push everyone downwards; rather, it levels everyone upwards:

The North wants to be an educated middle-class society; it rejects the cheap and shoddy and does not deride such attributes as honesty, conscientiousness, good behaviour, and good speech. These may not be universally achieved, but they are commonly accepted as constituting a desirable standard, and this makes the day-to-day operation of social democracy far easier and more relaxed (Hall, 1967: 209).

All Nordic countries have adopted similar social policies, aiming for an egalitarian welfare state. Even though the countries have differing levels of welfare and benefits, all countries strive for a high quality of life.

The Nordic Council confirmed Finland’s ascent towards being a wealthy, independent nation. For the first few decades of independence, however, Finland struggled with internal disagreements and war, both within the country and through protecting itself from others. The Nordic Council “brings to a close the isolation of the past and stabilises [Finland’s] position in Europe and the world” (Hall, 1967: 210). It brings great possibilities for social, economic, and cultural development for the country, more so than it could have accomplished without this union. The Finns clearly differ from their Scandinavian counterparts: “The Finns are, as it were, half-brothers who bring a different genetic inheritance into an environment which is comparable, though modified by the duality of the marchland” (Hall, 1967: 210). Finland’s former relationship with Sweden also adds another dimension to her membership in the Nordic Union:

The centuries of subordinate relationship to Sweden have left the Finns with a still unsatisfied anxiety to prove that Finland can do as well as her more advanced and wealthy neighbour. Over the years, many Swedish developments have reached Finland, with a certain time-lag, and made a considerable contribution to the Finnish advance; but Finland sometimes risks overstraining her resources, or choosing less suitable policies, when emulating the Swedes (Hall, 1967: 210).

This statement by Hall reiterates a well-known statement regarding Finnish education, that Finland makes the same mistakes as Sweden, only ten years later (Välijärvi et al., 2002). However, Finland’s performance in PISA, as well as the results of this present study, illustrates a new relationship that has emerged as a result of the success of Finnish education in PISA.

The Finnish identity, while not quite Scandinavian, remains an elusive entity:

The Finns know and understand the Russians, and their imprisonment in history, better than do most Europeans; they have long-standing ties of sympathy with the Poles; they have a kinship, if remote, with the Hungarians; and they are part of the Scandinavian family (Hall, 1967: 137).

Even though Finland does have many similarities with the rest of Scandinavia, it possesses many attributes that render the country different from the Scandinavian countries. Nevertheless, Finland’s place in the Nordic Council confirms its place among these countries in the modern world.

The factors of language and the Nordic Council illustrate Finland’s ties with the other Nordic countries, as well as its differences. The disparity in PISA scores provides a good springboard from which to further examine the differences and similarities between Finland and the Scandinavian countries, as the scores uncover the disparities between these countries, especially in terms of education. Kjærnsli and Molander state:

It is remarkable how much better the students in Finland perform than students in the other Nordic countries. Sweden is also in the group of countries where students score significantly above the OECD average, but the scores are still far lower than in Finland. Students in Norway and Iceland score almost at the OECD average, while Denmark’s result is below the average (Kjærnsli & Molander 2003: 63).

Despite many comparable features, most notably the egalitarian societies and welfare states, the PISA outcomes show that differences do exist in these closely-associated countries. Therefore, this article endeavours to uncover the differences between the Nordic countries, and the reasons for Finland’s higher outcomes in PISA from the Finnish perspective.

Nordic Countries and International Testing

Upon further investigation the PISA scores do reveal the differences between the Nordic countries. For example, Kjærnsli and Lie (2004: 271) conducted a study using the 1995 Third International Mathematics and Science Survey (TIMSS) data, finding “evidence of a characteristic pattern of features constituting a Nordic tradition within science education”. Interestingly, Finland did not participate in the 1995 TIMSS survey. In PISA, however, Finland greatly outscored its Nordic neighbours, especially Denmark, shown by the example of the PISA 2000 scientific literacy data. Kjærnsli and Lie used a number of tests to check for Nordic correlations. They did find a clear connection among the Nordic countries, but found in cluster analysis that Denmark veers towards the German-speaking cluster, while Finland seemed somewhat atypical of a Nordic country. These findings resulting from international testing and quantitative analysis uncover the underlying differences between the Nordic countries, also discussed later in this article when analysing the qualitative perspectives on the matter, especially from the Finnish view. Kjærnsli and Lie’s conclusions are also supported by the aforementioned literature, suggesting that Finland occupies an “outlier” role within the Nordic countries, as exhibited in its education results.

Furthermore, when analysing Nordic PISA results, Kjærnsli and Lie (2004) also found that the correlations among the Nordic countries, although somewhat weak, illustrated that Iceland, Norway, and Sweden had the strongest connections with each other, while Denmark leaned towards continental European countries, and Finland fit even less well into the Nordic group. “Both the extremely high overall score in scientific literacy and the divergence [...] from the Nordic pattern put Finland at odds with its Nordic peers” (Kjærnsli and Lie, 2004: 284). Kjærnsli and Lie (2004: 284) also remarked that the “similarities and differences that have been revealed in the present analyses are obviously caused by the interplay of curricular, language and more general cultural factors”. Thus, this data shows that, upon close investigation, the Finnish uniqueness penetrates even its education test scores. This is further reflected in the empirical results presented in this article.

Turmo (2004) found that the role of socio-economic status and educational performance did play a role in PISA, even within the egalitarian Nordic context. Norway and Denmark had the greatest influences from socio-economic status while Finland and Iceland had the least. Sweden came in the middle. Owing to the principles of equity and egalitarian values of Nordic countries, one would expect a low influence of socio-economic status on education. Norway, however, comes at the OECD average for the influence of cultural capital on scientific literacy, while Finland and Iceland had some of the weakest correlations within the OECD. The philosophy of the welfare state would lead to the expectation of low influence of socio-economic background on educational attainment. However, the cases of Norway and even Denmark illustrate that Nordic countries too fall prey to these influences. Thus, Turmo’s research uncovers the nuances, and in this case, the influence of socio-economic status, between countries with similar egalitarian principles.

The analysis of international achievement studies, including PISA and TIMSS, illustrates that the Nordic countries, often associated as a collective unit, do exhibit different characteristics and attitudes. Even socio-economic influences on education differ between these countries with a strong welfare state ethos. The empirical, qualitative data contributing to this article helps uncover these nuances.

Methodology

This research was conducted within a comparative framework grounded in the educational policy borrowing theory and methodology outlined by Phillips, Ochs, and Schweisfurth (Ochs & Phillips, 2002; Ochs & Phillips, 2004; Phillips & Ochs, 2004; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2006). It drew largely upon the interpretive-historical paradigm, emphasising in-depth qualitative fieldwork in Finland. The research conducted on this subject incorporates non-participant observation in six sample schools in Finland (Cohen & Manion, 1994), representing both language groups of the country, Finnish and Swedish, and semi-structured interviews (Drever, 1995; Kvale, 1996) with Finnish educationalists. The interviews included seventeen teachers of the subjects covered by PISA: mathematics, science, and mother tongue, and involved the age group implemented by PISA: fifteen-year-olds. The interviews also included six head teachers, two former Ministers of Education, and seven professors of education involved with the implementation of PISA in Finland. All interview subjects were asked why Finland scored higher in PISA than the Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland. Confidentiality was assured (e.g. Kvale, 1996) with the use of pseudonyms in place of the participants’ names.

Findings

Although the differences in PISA outcomes, for example, between Iceland’s and Denmark’s performance in the mathematical literacy in 2003, do not have statistical significance, the difference in performance between Finland and Norway, however, in the same survey does suggest disparity in educational achievement between the two systems. As previously stated, on the surface, all Nordic countries follow similar patterns in their politics, economics, and society, and also in education. However, PISA illustrates that the different Nordic countries have nuances that make them distinct.

As this article has asserted, Finland differs from its Nordic neighbours historically, as part of both Sweden and Russia, linguistically, with its own unique non-Indo-European language, and culturally. Various factors have influenced Finnish culture to develop into its

own unique hybrid of Scandinavian and Eastern. For example, Finnish history has created a culture that “still incorporates a meaningful element of the authoritarian, obedient, and collectivist mentality” (Simola, 2005: 457). Finland’s geography and history also contribute to this. Its time as an autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia and its proximity to the East has added a different dimension to its culture, enhancing and transforming the influences of the Swedish Kingdom. “It is not an overstatement to say that eastern elements are evident in Finland everywhere and in every way, from its administrative traditions to its genetic heredity” (Simola, 2005: 457). This Eastern flavour also filters into politics. Social Democracy in Finland, especially when compared to its Nordic counterparts, “retains some eastern authoritarian, or even totalitarian, flavour [...] At least heuristically, there is nothing strange in finding Finland together with nations such as Korea and Japan in some international comparisons” (Simola, 2005: 457). When comparing Finnish PISA results with those of South Korea and Japan, Finland’s scores correlates more strongly with the high- achieving East Asian countries than with its Nordic counterparts. Here, Simola (2005) highlights further the differences that make Finland an “outlier” from the other Nordic countries, and give some explanation to why the Finnish PISA scores correlate more strongly with East Asian outcomes. The differences have also permeated the education systems of the Nordic countries. Thus, this article now reveals findings from empirical research in Finland, from the head teachers, teachers, professors of education, and Education Ministers. Their reasons for Finland’s higher outcomes in PISA stem from factors discussed in four categories: teachers and teacher education, attitudes towards education and national values, societal makeup and immigration, and other factors.

Teachers and Teacher Education

Finnish teachers and teacher education have received much attention, as research points to the high quality of teachers and their preparation as a salient factor behind the top outcomes in PISA (e.g. Chung, 2009; Sahlberg, 2011). The Finns would agree. For example, head teacher Pekka believes that Finland has a better education system than the other Nordic countries, especially due to its system of teacher education:

So far our systems are better than in the other Nordic countries [...] We have the benefit as compared to the other Nordic countries, that we have noticeably better teacher training. It is of higher quality than, for example, in Sweden, Norway, Denmark. Especially Norway. There, in Norway, the teacher training system is very bad.

Elin, also a head teacher, states how many people have wondered about the differences between Finland and other Nordic countries and their differing PISA outcomes. She believes that the variations in teacher quality create some of these differences. All of the teachers in her school have Master’s degrees. She also thinks a narrow but deep specialisation in teaching subjects helps the teachers gain proficiency in their subjects. The level of education for Finnish teachers sets the education system apart from the Scandinavian countries. For example, Jouko, a teacher, acknowledges the similarities in the systems; he believes Finnish society has more respect for its teachers. He says, “We are on the outside quite similar [... but] I think Finnish society respects and values teachers more. It is not financial but it is status. Teachers and doctors are respected [in the same way].”

Professor Virtanen also acknowledges the similarities of the Nordic education systems and their philosophies of education, and therefore credits teachers as the crucial factor for Finland’s higher PISA outcomes:

The quality of teaching and teachers is extremely important [...] and it explains also why differences between schools is quite small in Finland [...] They are trained, our teachers, at university level, and they get Master’s degrees. I think that is a very important part of the explanation, the quality of teaching. It’s homogeneous compared to some other countries. That has kept also the status of teachers quite high in Finnish society.

The Finnish attitude maintaining the respect and high regard of teachers makes Finland different. Teacher education and the high status of teachers, in addition to the popularity of the profession, mean that no shortage of teachers exists in Finland. Professor Virtanen cites how Sweden has a shortage of teachers and a different system of teacher training. Although now a part of higher education, it remains separate from other studies. Teaching also does not have the same popularity in Scandinavian countries as it does in Finland. Professor Rautiainen mentions how Finland’s teachers have higher qualifications than their Scandinavian counterparts. For example, Anneli, a science teacher, uses Norway and Sweden as comparisons:

I have now talked to Norwegian teachers because they are a part of our project and we went there in September. We saw them and the education level of teachers is not as high as in Finland, and the teachers, they make groups and teams. For example, a team of teachers is teaching all the seventh graders. They decide themselves all together who teaches what subject. So a teacher is teaching perhaps five subjects and perhaps they haven’t studied [the subject] at all.

Finnish teachers and their preparation may correlate to the higher scores in PISA. Professor Virtanen speaks about the high status of teachers in Finland:

The status of teachers in society is quite high. If you compare the status of teachers, we have a survey, I think every third year, made by some leading newspaper [...] asking people how we value these professions, and teachers are on a very high level compared to lawyers or medical doctors and something like that. That is very exceptional compared to other countries.

Professor Laakonen agrees. “Since they are academics, they are considered academics in society.” Professor Karppinen also mentions the high quality of teachers in Finland. All classroom teachers and even some substitute teachers have Master’s degrees. This provides a good background and foundation for teaching. He also mentions that this high status of teachers in Finland exists despite their low salary. He says, “Teachers think that their salary is not good, but even though they do very good work. Perhaps we have quite high expectations from teachers.” Professor Stefansson agrees with his colleagues. He describes the high status of teachers in Finland, how “it is still glorious to become a teacher in Finland.” In addition to these factors, the former Minister of Education Jussila also thinks the core of Finnish success, even over the country’s Scandinavian counterparts, lies in its teacher education. The teacher, who obviously plays a key role in education, needs to juggle many balls to successfully undertake his or her responsibility as an educator. The strength of Finnish teacher preparation sets a high bar of quality for Finnish teachers.

The opinions of these Finnish educationalists echo much of the research attributing teachers and teacher education to Finland’s top PISA outcomes (e.g. Chang, 2009; Sahlberg, 2011). This salient feature sets apart Finland from the rest of the world, and the Scandinavian countries are no exception. The popularity, status, and education of teachers in Finland remains a unique and enviable feature of Finnish education, not replicated in the other Nordic countries.

Attitude to Education and National Values

As this article discussed earlier, Finland remains an outlier, in both education test scores and mentality, to the rest of the Nordic countries, and this manifests itself in a differing set of national values and a unique attitude towards education. For example, according to the former Minister of Education Jussila, the Nordic countries have cultural similarities, but the difference in educational attitude and PISA results “might have something to do with how strongly the national independence and culture and education in Finland have been bound together.” Despite the cultural, political, and social similarities of the Nordic countries, Finland’s history as part of both Sweden and Russia, the movement for independence, and the rise to economic prosperity may give them an educational edge in terms of PISA.

Another former Minister of Education, Minister Hyvonen acknowledges the complexity and interweaving of factors that contribute to greater Finnish success in PISA compared to Finland’s Scandinavian counterparts. The Minister believes cultural differences between the Finns and the Scandinavians play a part in higher Finnish PISA scores, manifesting itself in such matters such as school discipline, and the attitude towards education. “Finnish people are more serious, perhaps more than those in other Nordic countries. Perhaps Finnish people take education more seriously in general. It is more the way to social mobility than in Sweden and Denmark.” Possible social mobility, as previously suggested by Turmo (2004), therefore plays a part in the differences between Finland and the rest of the Scandinavian countries.

Head teacher Mattias believes that Finland scored better in PISA than the Scandinavian countries because of its unique mentality. He describes how Finns can sit and concentrate, unlike Swedes. In Sweden, they have a stronger group mentality, even in schools:

It is important that they gather in a group, and the teacher should be a part of the students and one of the people in the group. Everyone is discussing and you should have a vote and vote for what we should do in the next lesson. Then everybody votes and then the teacher’s voice is not the best voice.

Mattias implies that too much of a group mentality ultimately takes away any authority for the teacher. He also attributes the strength of leadership in Finland to the role of its political figures. Finland has a president, while Norway, Sweden, and Denmark all have royal families. These Scandinavian kings and queens do not have a strong role; rather, they merely represent the country. He believes this influences the culture of authority, or lack thereof, in Scandinavian countries, which transfers to schools. Thus teachers have stronger and more authoritative roles in Finland than in Scandinavia. In Sweden, according to Mattias, they must vote on everything:

My friend [...] he was working for two weeks in a company in Sweden, and they had to paint a wall in the company, just one wall. There were seventeen workers in that room, and everyone voted on [the] colour for the wall [...] [In] some way, that must go down [to] the education level, and to the school.

In Finland, the larger teacher-student gap results in more effective learning. This authoritative role of teachers, as well as the teacher-student gap, reflects Simola’s (2005) earlier assertions. The teachers in Finland purposely keep a professional distance from their pupils and their families. They feel that this sustains their role of adults and of role models. “Rather than encouraging intimacy, some experienced Finnish teachers emphasised how important it was to keep a certain professional distance from their pupils and their homes and problems” (Simola, 2005: 463). Scandinavian teachers, however, have closer relationships with students and their parents.

Maria, also a head teacher, thinks Finland’s strong results in PISA come from the relatively good behaviour in its schools. In Sweden, however, schools have more difficulties and more disturbing students, which make it harder for the teacher to teach. Sweden, despite this, has its own cultural virtues as well. She says, “On the other hand the Swedes become much more outgoing and speak much better and more easily, learn to perform and are much more advanced on the cultural scene than the Finns.” She said one could view either country as having greater assets than the other, depending on which aspects one values. Head teacher Elin also admires the Swedish system for producing students who can express themselves verbally. She also thinks they have good self-esteem. Therefore, while not measureable in terms of international comparisons, the factors perhaps to the detriment of Scandinavian test scores allow pupils to achieve in other ways. This illustrates the limitations of international testing and emphasis on quantitative outcomes.

Kjell, a science teacher originally from Sweden, has an interesting perspective on the differences between the Nordic countries. He has also observed classrooms and schools in all of the countries concerned. He thinks that students listen to teachers in Finland, and not in the other countries:

When the teachers say something here the students listen. In Sweden, it is not exactly the same. I have been in all the Northern countries with classes, and usually when we are somewhere with other countries’ students, our students are used to doing what the teachers say [...] I think the discipline is harder here. I don’t think it is so hard but it is hard.

He believes that students in Sweden and Norway have the lowest respect for their teachers, while Denmark comes in between. As Kjell comes from Sweden, he has excellent insight into the differences between Finnish and Swedish schools. He thinks that Finnish schools have higher standards of education, and the students have better mechanics of learning. He often compares education in the two countries with his brother, who lives in Sweden. He finds that Finnish students have better study skills and go further and deeper in subjects than in Sweden. Finnish schools also instill a work ethic in their students:

They get homework from school practically every day from first grade. They learn to take their work seriously and do it. [They] make a system when they do their homework. I know that, for instance, my brother, his kids [in Sweden] don’t have homework so often [...] It is a tradition here [...] We learn to do our schoolwork continuously. From an early age, Finnish students receive homework and learn to take work seriously.

Other teachers agree that Finnish schools have more discipline than the other Nordic countries. For example, Petra, a mother tongue teacher, says, “If you look at the Swedish schools, and there is no discipline at all [...] It’s all about social skills [...] I think they need some rules and regulations and some orders from teachers who can organise the work.” Here we see the emphasis on social skills, while beneficial, hindering academic progress. Finnish teachers mark their students’ work and give grades that reflect the level of their academic efforts, which she also thinks influences their work ethic. Danish schools that Petra observed do not use grades in a similar fashion. She describes how “people didn’t know how to read and write in year five, because they didn’t test it. You’re supposed to know in your own way. It’s very nice, actually, but it’s not good for learning.” Tapio, a mathematics teacher, also cites how Swedish schools have less discipline and no homework. He says, “We have some sort of Eastern European hardness. Do that, and calculate, calculate, calculate. Maybe that is good. Pupils learn even if they don’t want to. We make them learn.” He believes that the students need discipline: “I think that people need discipline. They want it from our side. If no one gives orders they won’t know what to do next, especially at this age that these pupils are.”

Henrik, a mathematics teacher, also uses Sweden to contrast with the Finnish system. Although they have a matriculation examination in Sweden, they do not have many other examinations or assessments. Swedish students do not receive grades in school until grade eight, the penultimate year of compulsory schooling. In Finland, according to the national curriculum, students must receive grades by eighth grade, but in practice, many schools start administering them around grades five and six, and some even earlier. The Swedish upper-secondary school, the gymnasium, offers a variety of academic and vocational subjects. All students in Sweden attend gymnasium, unlike the Finnish system where they divide into two sectors. Henrik implies this lessens motivation for study.

Markku, a mathematics teacher, describes the differences in educational laws between Finland and Sweden. In Finland, the law dictates that students must learn. In Sweden, however, the law says that pupils must go to school. In Sweden, “the students are in school but it is too easy there. They can do more or less what they want. They come to school [...] but they don’t have to learn.” In Finland, students must learn, but do not need to go to school to do so in other ways, such as with private tutoring or home schooling. For this reason, Markku believes Finland has a better education system than the Scandinavian countries. His fellow teachers agree that Swedish schools have too much freedom and low expectations of their students.

Some teachers find the differences in PISA outcomes curious, since all the systems in the Nordic countries have similar features, and they admit that Finland always watches Sweden in terms of education. As stated previously, Finns have the saying, “In reforming school, Finland makes exactly the same mistakes as Sweden, except it happens ten years later” (Valijärvi et al., 2002: 3). Jakob, a mother tongue teacher, however, notes the differences between the countries, albeit small:

In Denmark you have the situation, the Danish culture [...] as I understand, you choose your work and studies much earlier. In Sweden, you specialise much faster and in a way evaluation in Sweden has some weaknesses that perhaps should be dealt with. Then we have Norway, a very rich country, and it is perhaps isolating themselves. The value perhaps is that ‘We stand by ourselves and if we get a job as an oil driller or whatever it is enough for us.’ As I understand it, Swedes and especially Finns live to work, and Norwegians want to be more free and they work to get a living. In Iceland, well, there is a very special, unique situation, so it is hard to compare. I have been in Iceland and they have very strong ties with their economy. It is worth our respect. They have of course some problems with their language as they have to learn both Icelandic and Scandinavian languages, and they are not perhaps in need of cooperation with other European countries as we are in Finland. Iceland has more connections with North America. Perhaps that may affect their education system also.

These perceptions of the nuances between the Nordic countries give a better impression of their differences and potential attitudes towards education. Professor Laakonen also feels that Finnish schools have more discipline than their Scandinavian counterparts. She thinks that perhaps Finns have more old-fashioned values, but the schools do not have the same strictness as other countries. She cites how Russian visitors think the Finnish schools have no discipline and the students are ill-behaved, while the Swedish “PISA tourists” believe that Finnish schools have strict discipline and well-behaved students. She says, “We are in between.” Professor Koskinen, much like Simola (2005), believes the authoritarian attitude of the Asian countries also exists in Finnish schools. This attitude sets Finland apart from its Nordic counterparts and makes the educational outcomes higher.

Professor Karppinen admits that the other Nordic countries also wonder why Finland has more success in PISA than they do. He thinks that Finland and Denmark have differences from the others. He says, “I think that we have a little bit different attitude towards education [...] Our mind is a little bit different [from that of] people in Sweden and Norway.” Denmark, for example, feels influences from Continental Europe while Finland holds a position between East and West due to its borders with Sweden, Norway, and Russia. Kjærnsli and Lie’s (2004) research support these claims. In Denmark, according to Professor Karppinen, the Danes stress the importance of enjoyment of life. This filters into the schools, where the importance lies more in the enjoyment of school rather than in school performance. In Finland, however, students try their best in school, even if they do not enjoy it. Professor Koskinen also mentions this. She cites how the Swedish visitors to Finland note how Swedish students have more “non-answers,” meaning “if a task looks too hard, they don’t bother. They just skip to the next one.” In Finland, she describes, students receive half of a credit for an answer even if it is not totally correct. Swedish students do not have this advantage, making them more reluctant to answer questions they cannot completely answer. She describes this as an “in-between. Even if you don’t know, or if you think you know, you try and you might get the right [answer].” Finnish students take the risk of answering the question while their Swedish peers do not.

Professor Rautiainen uses the aforementioned reference to Sweden: “We have followed the Swedish curricula and general schooling system but we are about ten years behind Sweden. When we copied the system we also studied the failure of the system, what could be improved.” By learning from Sweden’s mistakes, Finland implemented successful educational practice. This may also have influenced the relatively higher scores of Finland in PISA over the scores of Sweden. The use of Sweden as a comparison by the Finnish educationalists is a natural one, as the two countries have a shared language and close connections through history and geography. Nevertheless, it also illustrates how educational interest, or “cross-national attraction” (Phillips & Ochs, 2004) can shift and change over time. Sweden, once a model for Finland, is now looking at Finland for educational inspiration. The data collected from these Finnish educationalists show the differences, especially in terms of attitude towards education, between Finland and their Nordic counterparts.

Societal Makeup and Immigration

The differing societal makeup of the Nordic countries also contributes to the disparate PISA outcomes. While some Nordic countries, namely Sweden, have had wide acceptance of larger-scale immigration, others, like Finland, have not. Finland also does not have the immigrant populations of the other Nordic countries, and this influences the results. Mother tongue teacher Linnea, who teaches in a Swedish-speaking school, also has some insight into the difference, as she has in her class a student who had also studied in Sweden:

I have a boy in one of my classes here, and he has spent most of his life in Sweden and went to school there [...] He’s Finnish, and the whole family moved over there for work and he learned Swedish there. His parents also, they really wanted him to stick with his knowledge of Swedish. When they came back he came to this Swedish-speaking school. He said that, and he’s been here for a year, that he has learned more here during this one year than all of his studying in Sweden. He said they don’t give homework there, at least at the school he was in [...] It’s noisier and the environment is not so supportive of studying. It’s a lot of things going on and people fighting [...] He said the problem was [...] there are a lot of foreigners and there is a lot of racism, and a lot of these problems in these schools.

Linnea admits they do not have many cultures within her school, although she thinks her students should have diversity in their lives and learn about other cultures. However, she would also prefer to have a good learning environment. Denmark, Sweden, and Norway have bigger immigrant populations and therefore more diverse cultures to integrate within their systems.

Professor Laakkonen also mentions demographics when describing the differences between Finland and the other Nordic countries. The other countries have much higher immigrant populations than Finland, because of more open immigration policies. She says, “Shame on us,” but admits that immigrants in a society add complexity to an education system. In this case, the education system needs to cater to immigrant students and different language backgrounds, as well as cultural and family factors. She cites the example of Sweden:

It’s not easy in [certain] school[s] [...] if you have twenty students they might have fifteen different nationalities and languages. It is not sometimes the problem with the schools, but with their parents and with work and their background as they come as refugees or an asylum seeker. They are not easy problems to solve, especially in a school, even though they try very hard. But still Sweden is doing, I would say, very well, comparing to their population which has a strong immigrant basis.

Finland’s rather homogeneous population, as suggested by the participants, has made the execution of education more effective, and without the additional challenges of a plural and diverse population. Interestingly, the slight decline in the PISA 2012 scores show the possible effect of increased immigration in Finland over the twelve years since PISA’s launch in 2000 (Bernelius, 2013). While immigrants in Finland traditionally perform well in PISA (Viltanen & Peltonen, 2008) an increasingly diverse population in Finland has brought new challenges for teachers and the education system.

Other Factors

The Finnish educationalists also revealed salient reasons for its higher outcomes in PISA, but not entirely able to fit within a general category. Thus, this section discusses these at length. Professor Koskinen thinks that Finland’s higher scores in PISA than the rest of Scandinavia also has to do with its differing development as a nation. She cites how Finland’s industrial development came later than its European and Scandinavian neighbours. This late industrialisation more closely resembles the patterns in the Far East, bringing Finland closer to countries such as Japan and South Korea in this realm, aligning with Simola’s (2005) argument. Because of this, Professor Koskinen states, “It might just be that PISA came at the point where we were still on the slope up and many [...] European countries were beyond the point where education is on the rise.” She also believes that PISA came at the time where Finland’s educational reforms of the 1970s came to fruition:

In Finland, the PISA generation [...] is the children of those parents who have the greatest advantage [...] of the educational expansion in Finland [...] The kids of PISA, [...] their parents are those who went into this expansion of the academic side of the old system, the parallel system, and the first ones who got university educated.

Professor Huttunen agrees. The reforms of the 1970s first influenced the parents of students taking PISA. The government committees of the 1970s proposed to make schools comprehensive and egalitarian, and to standardise schools even in outlying areas. The government proposed that these reforms take place in a “rolling” manner, between 1970 and 1985 (Whittaker, 1983: 32-33). Geography determined the first areas to see reform, as examples of “inadequate education” made way for the new comprehensive system, beginning in the North in 1972 and ending in the Helsinki area in 1977 (Whittaker, 1983: 34; Antikainen, 1990: 77). The parents of current PISA takers, who were educated after the reforms, benefited from comprehensive education and more access to education in general. Their children, in turn, have parents with higher and more widespread education levels.

Professor Laakkonen cites the Finnish recession of the 1990s as a salient factor in the education system. The recession, she feels, put Finland higher than Scandinavian countries in PISA. Before the recession, Sweden was always better in education. The recession “really changed our attitudes towards education, because in the ‘90s, we didn’t think it had to be so pragmatic.” Previously, Finns viewed education as an autonomous and independent entity, separate from the labour market and the economy. Professor Laakkonen cites the “terrible” unemployment rate in 1993, at twenty percent:

We had to do something. In ’94 we got a new curriculum in both lower and higher grades and also the universit[ies] changed t heir profile. I think that was very good and healthy for Finnish life, so that we started to rethink the role of education and how it has to consider changes in the working life and economy.

Afterwards, Finland aimed to train innovative workers with pragmatic knowledge and problem solving skills. The other Nordic countries did not have such a recession, and did not have to make the subsequent educational changes. The social mobility present in Finnish society, as suggested earlier by Turmo (2004), both after the wars and after the recession, does not have as much influence in the other Nordic countries, such as Sweden. Professor Koskinen cites how Finland still has returns for education, where more education leads to more prosperity, as argued previously by Turmo (2004). In the other Nordic countries, however, she describes how the high standard of living has meant that a high level of education did not necessarily lead to a good quality of life.

Linguistic factors play a role as well. Casper, a science teacher, believes that Finland performed better in PISA than Sweden and other countries because of the logic of their language. Finnish, although a difficult language for others to learn, has a clear and consistent phonetic system, as opposed to, as he cites, English or French. Finnish “is a language where you write it in the same way that you pronounce it. It is very easy for the pupils to learn how to write in the right way, compared to English or French [...] I think this will give a little benefit for the Finnish schools.” In terms of language, Finnish-speakers have this advantage over others, but less so in mathematics or science.

Even in egalitarian societies, the literature (e.g. Turmo, 2004) and the empirical evidence presented in this article uncover the nuances between and influence of social mobility within the Nordic welfare states. This section uncovered some of the nuanced differences between Finland and the other Nordic countries, decipherable upon close investigation. These distinctions have benefitted Finland in terms of education, apparent in the disparity in PISA scores.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Finns will most likely cling to their uniqueness that differentiates them from their Scandinavian counterparts. Their history will make sure of this for some time:

As the North influences and is influenced by the rest of Europe, the Finns may acquire some of the superficial features of both Northern and Western standardisation. Beneath the surface, out of an instinctive tenacious reaction, they are likely to cling all the more closely to the traditions, the background, the language and the land which have contributed so much to their individuality. The Finns have above all one of the most individual characteristics – they are among the few peoples of Western Europe who are still in love with the world. If they should lose this zest and optimism they would lose themselves and they would no longer be Finns (Hall, 1967, p. 211).

The Nordic countries have similar values, as illustrated by their comparable societies, culture, politics, and philosophies, exemplified by similar egalitarianism and welfare states. For these reasons, the different outcomes by the Nordic countries in PISA were counterintuitive results. However, upon further analysis, the disparate outcomes do not come as a surprise. For example, the aforementioned research by Kjærnsli and Lie (2004) shows that Finland does not fit exactly into the Nordic cluster. Meanwhile, Turmo’s (2004) research into the socio-economic influences in Nordic countries’ educational achievement shows a disparity in these influences even within Welfare States. Simola (2005) refers to the unique qualities of Finland, which include its language, history, and its distinct hybrid identity as both Scandinavian and Eastern. The “authoritarian” nature of this mentality manifests itself into a larger teacher-student gap in schools, and more authority by the teachers and principals, and higher discipline in the classrooms.

The Finnish participants contributing to this article added dimensions to the curious differences of Nordic outcomes in PISA. Many of the participants highlighted the importance of teachers and teacher education, as in Finland it comes at a higher level than in the Scandinavian countries. Many of the participants felt, much like Simola (2005), that this “authoritarian” Finnish mentality affected the higher outcome of the country in PISA. This mentality leads to a higher level of discipline in schools, a larger teacher-student gap, better student behaviour, and more authority in schools. All of these factors contribute to the differences between Finland’s schools and the schools of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland.

Immigration also plays a factor. “Shame on us,” says Professor Laakkonen, but the Finnish policy towards refugees and immigrants has allowed the country to maintain a more culturally homogeneous country than countries such as Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. A culturally homogenous country makes it easier to execute an education system with consistency with quality and equality. However, the slight decline in the Finnish PISA 2012 scores may indicate that immigration is beginning to play a part in Finnish education (Bernelius, 2013). Future changes to the population demographic and future PISA scores can shed more light on this interesting change.

Finland’s path as a country also gives it a unique flavor, setting it apart from the rest of the Nordic countries. Finland’s history as part of Sweden and Russia, the independence movement, and late industrialisation intertwined the importance of education into Finnish culture. Furthermore, Finland’s recession of the 1990s made the country reflect upon the purpose of education, and subsequently held reforms in order to have closer ties between the labour market, the economy, and the education system.

This brings up the issue if Finland can maintain the high level of performance in PISA. As previously addressed, the Finnish PISA scores of 2012 declined slightly. Furthermore, as more time passes, will the respect for teaching, education, and learning be maintained as the memories of Swedish and Russian rule, the comprehensive school reforms of the 1970s, and the recession of the 1990s fade from the Finnish psyche? Will Finland be able to maintain high educational attainment, and will the nuances that set it apart from the Scandinavian countries be relevant in the future?

Although the similarities between the Nordic countries would indicate comparable outcomes in international achievement studies, the PISA results have shown that Finland’s performance outperforms those of their Nordic counterparts. This article has illustrated the importance of educational context, not only on the macro level, but also on the micro level. The Nordic countries, all adhering to egalitarian values and the welfare state, do have disparities in social mobility, history, attitudes towards immigration, teacher preparation, and value of education. All of these factors, among others, help set Finland apart from the other Nordic countries, with top achievement in PISA.

Interestingly, according to Elin, the head teacher, visiting Danes have accused Finland of using too many assessments in their schools:

The Danes say [...] the good PISA results are due to our terrible drilling of our students with our exams. I had Danish principals visiting and they were almost a bit annoyed with us [...] It goes well when you drill and have so many exams and things like that, but as I said, in this PISA assessment it was not at all about this type of drilled, learned knowledge but it was about the ability to read, understand, and draw conclusions, problem solving, and so on. There must be something in this school system that develops also this thought process.

It seems that there may have been some envy provoked by the disparity in PISA scores in the Nordic countries. However, as Elin stated, Finland’s high PISA scores illustrate the critical thinking and problem solving skills that PISA assesses. As this article has uncovered, while the Nordic countries enjoy shared policies on many matters, much of Finland’s successes in PISA stem from its distinctly Finnish characteristics, to the envy and wonderment of the rest of the world.

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