

**Finnish Schools and the PISA Assessment:  
The Clash of Two Educational Systems**

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## Part 1: Introduction

During the 20th century, there was no generally recognized, global test mechanism that compared different education systems. This is why OECD member states decided to establish the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measures how well young adults at the age of 15 are able to meet the challenges of today's knowledge societies. The PISA assessments measure student skills in reading, mathematics and science, by looking to their ability to "understand key concepts, to master processes and to apply knowledge and skills in different situations."<sup>1</sup> PISA was introduced in 2000, and has since then been repeated every three years. In the first assessment, which was published in 2001, Finland's stood out for its outstanding performance: Finnish students had the best reading literacy, the fourth best mathematical literacy, and the third best scientific literacy.<sup>2</sup> Because Finland again performed as one of the best countries in the PISA assessment of 2003, people started to wonder why Finland was performing so well.<sup>3</sup> Since then, Finland has become one of the most discussed education systems in the world, and has been portrayed as the perfect progressive education system, one that all countries can learn from.

In this essay, I will look into the reasons behind Finland's success in the PISA assessments, examine the assets and disadvantages of the current Finnish education system, and engage in the discussion of what can be learned from Finland's education system. In the end, I will argue that Finnish focus on equality and professional autonomy for high quality teachers should be appreciated and learned from.

My argument adds to a debate which has been framed by two basic and opposing views on education. On the one hand are "constructivists," who defend and praise the Finnish system as it is right now, and argue that the constructivist way of teaching is what makes Finland a success. Constructivist education is defined as "a learning theory found in psychology which explains how people might acquire knowledge and learn... In a constructivist classroom the students are the focus and the teacher a facilitator who asks good questions."<sup>4</sup> Constructivists are perceived to be progressive because their view on education is relatively new—but as we shall see their educational philosophy draws upon the work of John Dewey, who wrote in the early twentieth century. Critics of the Finnish system, on the other hand, question whether it is much better than others. I will

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<sup>1</sup> OECD, *Knowledge and Skills for Life: First result from PISA 2000* (2001), accessed May 13, 2015, <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/programme-for-international-student-assessment-pisa/33691620.pdf>, 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-12.

<sup>3</sup> OECD, *PISA 2003 Technical Report 2003* (2005), accessed May 13, 2015, <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/programme-for-international-student-assessment-pisa/35188570.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> "Constructivism," The University of Sydney, accessed May 12, 2015, [http://sydney.edu.au/education\\_social\\_work/learning\\_teaching/ict/theory/constructivism.shtml](http://sydney.edu.au/education_social_work/learning_teaching/ict/theory/constructivism.shtml).

label them as “traditionalists,” since they think that the traditional way of teaching has made Finland a success. Traditionalist education could be described as “the expectation that students will learn because we tell them to.” This style of education is exclusively focused at the transmission of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Traditionalists are regarded to be conservative, because this view on education has dominated education worldwide throughout the largest part of modern history. It must be noted that these two camps do not disagree about everything. All the same, a clear distinction between proponents and critics of the current Finnish system can be made.

After examining each side, with a particular focus on two Finnish authors, I will argue that there is little evidence to state that the constructivist turn in education in Finland has contributed to the Finnish results that surprised the world in the early 2000s. Nonetheless, I will argue that the constructivist turn has made a positive contribution to Finnish society. By focusing on aspects that were also emphasized in Dewey’s vision democratic education, societal problems such as racism and hatred can be overcome. I thereby agree with constructivists that education is not only about cognitive development, which can be defined as “the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses.”<sup>6</sup> It should also be about the development of what Finnish writer Pasi Sahlberg describes as “moral development,” focused on “social gains and more holistic interpersonal development”.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, I will argue that the focus on equity, together with the high level of teacher education in the Finnish education system, are unique and should be appreciated. Although copying an education system is impossible because it is a result of a certain historical situation, other countries can use it as an example to work towards.

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<sup>5</sup> “A Definition of Traditional Teaching,” NewTechNetwork, accessed May 12, 2015, <http://www.newtechnetwork.org/blog/definition-traditional-teaching>.

<sup>6</sup> “Definition of ‘cognition’,” accessed November 22, 2015. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/cognition>.

<sup>7</sup> Pasi Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* (New York: Teachers College, 2015), 48

## Part 2: Proponents current system

All articles on the advantages of the Finnish education system refer in one way or the other to the work of the Finnish writer Pasi Sahlberg. In his book, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, he aims to answer the question of what the world can learn from educational change in Finland. Sahlberg's central argument is that there is a way to improve education systems that is different from the market-based system in other countries around the globe.<sup>8</sup> For Sahlberg, a market-based system consists of competition between schools over enrollment, a high degree of accountability through standardized tests, and an increased school choice.<sup>9</sup> In his view, Finland can offer an alternative way of thinking about chronic problems such as high school dropout rates and early teacher attrition that countries like the US are currently facing.<sup>10</sup> This section will elaborate on the reasons why Sahlberg thinks that Finland can be an example for the rest of the world. His work will be supplemented by several other scholarly articles, papers published by the Finnish government, and reports of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). First, the history of the Finnish society and the Finnish education will be set out. Next, the different pillars behind the success of Finland, such as the role of the teachers and the role of equity-based education, will be investigated. Lastly, this section will elaborate on Finland's recent decline in the PISA tests and will consider possible solutions proposed by constructivist scholars.

### 2.1 History of Finland's education system

In order to understand why the Finnish education system has become what it is today, Sahlberg begins by investigating its history, emphasizing the close relationship between reforms in economics and society structure, on the one hand, and educational reforms, on the other. Sahlberg puts forward that there have been three different waves of education reform, each related to economic reforms. The first wave entailed the enhancement of equal opportunities (1945-1970), the second wave created a public comprehensive school system (1965-1990), and the third wave has been based on improving the quality of basic education (1985-present).

Finnish history before the end of World War II also contributed to the education system that is present today. As Sahlberg argues, Finland has always been a relatively small nation surrounded by larger powers. As a result, Finnish culture has been characterized by cooperation, problem solving, and a search for consensus. Finland has only been an independent country since 1917, but had problems maintaining its independence especially during the World War II. The peace treaty signed

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<sup>8</sup> Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 102

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 34.

by the Finns with the Soviet Union in 1944 was the result of a concession that resulted in a considerable territory and financial loss, however, it also marked the Finnish success in maintaining independence.<sup>11</sup> The end of World War II resulted in fundamental changes in political, social and economic structures. The economic structure of Finland in 1950 was comparable to Sweden's economy in 1910.<sup>12</sup> In 1950, the educational opportunities for people in Finland were still rather unequal: in general, only people in towns were able to attend grammar and middle school.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the system was very much teacher-centered. In a report about the Finnish education system published in 2012, the OECD stated that: "a fundamental belief underpinning this old structure was that everyone cannot learn everything; in other words, children's ability to be educated is not evenly distributed across society."<sup>14</sup>

As Kupiainen, Hautamäki, and Karjalainen have pointed out, the rapid transition of Finland from the agrarian society to an industrial state in the 50s and 60s called for radical changes in the education system.<sup>15</sup> Important in this process has been the role of political education committees, school practitioners, academics and civil society organizations that together ensured that the proposal of the new education system in Finland passed in 1963. This comprehensive school system was named the *Peruskoulu* system. The new legislation (1966) and national curriculum (1970) adjusted the *Peruskoulu* system so that it became a comprehensive 9-year municipal school, that was based on the idea that everyone could learn everything.<sup>16</sup> This was fundamentally different from the education philosophy that was the driving factor behind Finland's previous educational system. Therefore, it took some time to move towards a system that was completely based on equity. It was only in the 80s that ability grouping was abolished as a policy.<sup>17</sup> *Peruskoulu* brought together a wide variety of students. Furthermore, it made career guidance and counseling compulsory in school curricula, and required teachers to be able to work with all kinds of students. Sahlberg quotes Jouni Välijärvi, who argues that the new system marked a new philosophy of education, based on the ideals of John Dewey.<sup>18</sup> These ideals will be elaborated upon below.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>12</sup> OECD, "Finland: A Non-Competitive Education for a Competitive Economy," *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons from PISA for Japan* (2012): 94.

<sup>13</sup> Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, 46.

<sup>14</sup> OECD, "Finland: A Non-Competitive Education for a Competitive Economy," 94.

<sup>15</sup> Sirkku Kupiainen, Jarkko Hautamaki, and Tommi Karjalainen, *The Finnish Education System and Pisa*, (Helsinki: Helsinki University Print Bookstore, 2009), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, 53.

<sup>17</sup> OECD, "Finland: A Non-Competitive Education for a Competitive Economy," 95.

<sup>18</sup> Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, 55.

Sahlberg argues that after the comprehensive state reform in 1970, there have been three different phases of educational change. Firstly, in the 1980's there was the process of rethinking theoretical and methodological foundations of teaching and learning.<sup>19</sup> Drawing upon research from abroad, Sahlberg argues, the Finnish system moved towards a system based on a constructivist way of thinking, which is aimed to educate its citizens to think critically and independently.<sup>20</sup> The second phase in the 1990's was about the improvement through networking and self-regulation, which means that local schools and municipalities received a high degree of autonomy.<sup>21</sup> This can be seen in the fact that the inspection service existed until the early 1990's, which is put forward by Harticainen.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Sahlberg argues: "the school improvement network transformed bold competition into mutual striving for better schools."<sup>23</sup> The main reforms made in the third phase (2000-present) were focused at enhancing efficiency of structures and administration. As Sahlberg stresses, it is difficult to renew a system that is performing well. Since 2000, the focus of Finnish reform has been on multiculturalism and special education. Moreover, the focus has been on enhancing efficiency and productivity, since the budget of schools has been shrinking as a result of economic decay.<sup>24</sup>

## 2.2 Role of Equity

Sahlberg argues that there are different parts of *Peruskoulu* that are unique and drivers behind the success of the Finnish education system. One of the drivers behind this success is the focus on equity. As put forward earlier, one of the main reasons behind the focus on equity was the reform of 1970 and the emergence of *Peruskoulu*. Political education committees, school practitioners, academics and civil society organizations were the drivers behind this reform. The former three relate to the importance teachers play in Finland, which will be discussed in section 2.3. The influence of civil society organizations shows how close the connection is between civil society movements and education systems. This is also mentioned in the OECD report: Finland's economic development followed that of its Nordic neighbors, who all have strong social safety nets.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>22</sup> Mikko Harticainen, "Education in Finland," *Finnish National Board of Education* 2011: 13.

<sup>23</sup> Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, 69.

<sup>24</sup> Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, 71.

<sup>25</sup> OECD, "Finland: A Non-Competitive Education for a Competitive Economy," 95.

Sahlberg quotes Jouni Välijärvi, who argues that the PISA surveys in general have revealed that the principle of equal opportunities in education positively influences the quality of education.<sup>26</sup> This assumption is shared by the OECD, which argues that the highest-performing education systems among OECD countries combine equity with quality.<sup>27</sup> Sahlberg similarly suggests that equity means that people have opportunities in education regardless of their home background.<sup>28</sup> In his view, a society is equal if there is a small performance variation among schools. Interestingly, the PISA tests revealed that the difference in performance between schools is the lowest in the world, which according to the OECD “indicates that schools have similar achievement levels and do not select students by academic ability”.<sup>29</sup> Sahlberg argues that since almost all inequality in Finland occurs within schools, this inequality is mainly a result of variation in the natural talents of students.<sup>30</sup> He furthermore argues that although Finnish education has become more diverse, often seen as a predecessor of inequality in education, Finland has been able to enhance equity.<sup>31</sup> Kupiainen, Hautamäki, and Karjalainen argue that Finland has learned that inequality problems were related to the unequal school system that was in place by then.<sup>32</sup> Finnish focus on equity can be seen by the fact that Finnish education is almost exclusively financed by public sources.<sup>33</sup>

One of the ways in which one can see the focus on equity in Finland’s education system, is the way children in need of special education are helped. As Sahlberg shows, the Finnish system is based on providing special education in addition to regular education as early as possible: the idea behind this policy is that prevention is better than repair. Therefore, the number of students that receive some kind of special education is relatively high in Finland at primary school, although this decreases substantially later on. In contrast, the number of students that receive some form of special education with the repair strategy increased over the years. This can be seen in the figure that Sahlberg provides in his book:

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<sup>26</sup> Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, 71.

<sup>27</sup> OECD, *Equity and quality in education*, (2012), accessed May 11, 2015, <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/50293148.pdf>, 38.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

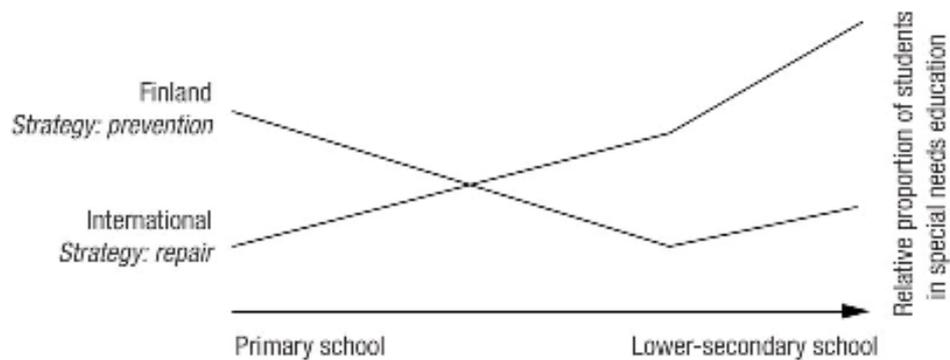
<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>32</sup> Kupiainen, Hautamäki, and Karjalainen, *The Finnish Education System and Pisa*, 40.

<sup>33</sup> Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, 95.

**Figure 2.3. Estimated Relative Number of Students in Part-Time or Full-Time Special Education in Finland and Other Countries During Primary and Lower-Secondary Education**



Graph in *Finnish lessons 2.0*, Pasi Sahlberg.<sup>34</sup>

Like Sahlberg, the OECD report also emphasizes the importance of special needs education for Finland’s education system: every comprehensive school has a student welfare team that meets regularly, for instance. This team consists of different important actors for the students such as the teachers, social workers and the school psychologists.<sup>35</sup> As can be seen in the Finnish education report, the students in need of special education are provided with an individual education plan that consists of the support measures that will be provided.<sup>36</sup> Finnish education is based on equity for all students, and in order to get them to a certain level, the special-need system that is provided in the system is rather extensive.

### 2.3 Focus on teachers

The Finnish focus on educating excellent teachers is considered to be another reason behind Finnish success in the PISA tests. Important in this process have been the decision made at the end of the 1970’s to make the teacher education programs become university-based. This means that teachers in basic and general upper secondary education are required to hold a Master’s degree.<sup>37</sup> Although it might seem to be very difficult to get high prospective university-students to apply for teaching programs, becoming a teacher is a very competitive process: out of every 10 applicants, only one

<sup>34</sup> Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, 87.

<sup>35</sup> OECD, “Finland: A Non-Competitive Education for a Competitive Economy,” 107.

<sup>36</sup> Ministry of Education and Culture, *Education in Finland: Finnish Education in a nutshell* (Kopiyva, 2012) 8.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

applicant will be accepted in the teaching education programs.<sup>38</sup> In Finland, teaching is considered to be one of the most admired positions, comparable to lawyers and doctors.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, the reason for this is not a financial one. Although teachers in Finland are well educated and could generally earn more in other sectors, they earn only slightly more than the national average salary.<sup>40</sup> But why is it then that becoming teacher is so popular in Finland, even among the best students?

According to Sahlberg, the reason for this is that teachers in Finland are given the opportunity to fulfill their moral ambitions. In particular, they enjoy a high level of autonomy, which can be seen in a Finnish report about education that stated that “the teachers have pedagogical autonomy.”<sup>41</sup> Teachers are responsible for their subjects on the basis of the objectives written into the curriculum, but have the freedom to design their own materials and tests.<sup>42</sup> Whereas the national curriculum used to consist of 700 pages, there are fewer than 10 pages for all guidelines on mathematics in education.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, not only the Finnish schools, but also Finnish classes are relatively small.<sup>44</sup> This allows the teachers to build very personal relationships with their students. In her article about how Finland is building a strong teaching and learning system, Darling-Hammond quotes Lavonen, who argues that the system is student-centered instead of teacher-centered: this leads to a system in which the teacher learns together with the students, which makes it a much more attractive profession.<sup>45</sup> Also, it is important to note that, as a result of the academic standards for teacher education, the Finnish education system is research-based.<sup>46</sup> This means that education theories, research methodologies and practice are all integrated into Finnish teacher education programs.<sup>47</sup> Thus, as set out in the OECD report of 2012, teacher education has a strong focus on developing pedagogical content knowledge, thereby combining theory with practice.<sup>48</sup>

#### 2.4 Accountability system

As put forward earlier, teachers have the responsibility to design their own tests without being controlled by the government, as is the case in other countries. In a world in which standardized

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<sup>38</sup> Pasi Sahlberg, “The Secret to Finland’s Success: Educating Teachers,” *Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education*, (2010) 2.

<sup>39</sup> Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, 111.

<sup>40</sup> Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, 116.

<sup>41</sup> Ministry of Education and Culture, *Education in Finland*, 12.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>43</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond, “Steady Work: How Finland Is Building a Strong Teaching and Learning System,” *VUE* (2009), 19.

<sup>44</sup> Harticainen, “Education in Finland,” 11.

<sup>45</sup> Darling-Hammond, “Steady Work,” 20.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>47</sup> Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, 122.

<sup>48</sup> OECD, “Finland: A Non-Competitive Education for a Competitive Economy,” 99.

testing and accountability are increasingly being used as tools by policy-makers, as can be seen with the emergence of the Global Economic Reform Movement movement, Finland has chosen a system without standardized assessments at all.<sup>49</sup> In the report of the OECD, there are three reasons given for the lack of standardized tests: Finland gives a high priority to individualized education, policy makers realized early on that teaching is the key element that improves education, and Finland wants to avoid disadvantages that standardized tests brings with it, such as ‘teaching to the test’.<sup>50</sup> The difference between the general Western model and the Finnish model can also be seen in the model Kupiainen, Hautamäki, and Karjalainen provide: in the former there is a system of consequential accountability, through an evaluation by the inspection, whereas the latter has a system of trust through professionalism, in a culture based on teachers and headmasters.<sup>51</sup> In his book, Sahlberg makes a relatively similar comparison between accountability in the GERM model and in the Finnish model.<sup>52</sup> The relation between the accountability system and the role of the teacher works in both ways: the teacher should be good enough to be trust with students, and at the same time the autonomy of teachers is one of the reasons that there are so many highly-rated students that apply for the teacher program.

### *2.5 Dewey’s Vision for Education*

If the previous points are taken into account, a complete overview of the Finnish education system according to proponents of the system can be set out. Sahlberg argues the ideas that accelerated the Finnish success in education are to a large extent based on the ideas of educational reformer John Dewey.<sup>53</sup> In *Democracy and Education*, which was originally published in 1916, Dewey argued that “Achievements comes to denote the sort of thing that a well-planned machine can do better than a human being can, and the main effect of education, the achieving of a life of rich significance, drops by the wayside.”<sup>54</sup> Only democratic education can, according to Dewey, overcome traditional barriers of race, class, and wealth.<sup>55</sup> Thus, for this approach, education is not only about the transmission of knowledge, but also about the development of human beings and social qualities in a small and confidence environment.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> OECD, “Finland: A Non-Competitive Education for a Competitive Economy,” 99.

<sup>51</sup> Kupiainen, Hautamäki, and Karjalainen, *The Finnish Education System and Pisa*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0* 152.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>54</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, (New York: Dover Publishing, 2004), 227.

<sup>55</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 84.

Sahlberg argues that all primary school teachers read and explore the ideas of democratic education as put forward Dewey, and that the Finnish schools have adopted Dewey's view of education by enhancing the access of Finnish students in decision-making at schools.<sup>56</sup> The lack of standardized tests, the authority of the teachers, the small classes, and the research-centered teaching system all support Sahlberg's argument that Finland comes close to the ideal of democratic education that Dewey has put forward. According to this way of thinking about education, one must look further than only the standardized tests as the PISA assessments, and also consider other un-measurable qualities that Finnish students are developing.

### *2.6 Decline in PISA tests*

Finland was outperforming all other Western countries in the PISA tests in the early 2000s. However, during the PISA tests in 2009 and 2012, Finland's position in the PISA list has been declining.<sup>57</sup> According to Sahlberg, the reason for this is that Finland has done little to improve its schools after Finland performed superior in the first PISA tests.<sup>58</sup> Sahlberg himself, a big proponent of the Finnish system in general, has put forward a couple of troubling trends within the Finnish education system. National education authorities have tightened their control over schools, the government calls for municipalities and schools to cope with fewer resources, and inequality in society and education is increasing.<sup>59</sup> Sahlberg argues that there is a need for a Finnish dream that would "Help all students find their talent and passion in school."<sup>60</sup> In this new vision, he proposes the following changes: less classroom-based teaching, more personalized learning, focus on social skills, empathy and leadership, and focussing on the school as the purpose to find your talent.<sup>61</sup> Thus, Sahlberg argues that although the Finnish system looks like and is partially based on Dewey's ideas of education, the changes that should occur would let Finland move even closer towards the system that Dewey proposed.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>57</sup> Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, 188.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>59</sup> Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, 191.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 197.

### Part 3: Critics of the Finnish Education System

Thus far, we have examined the views of the proponents of the Finnish education system. Now it is time to turn to the critics, who have been under-represented in the debate. Although there have been some blog authors who have criticized the Finnish system, this chapter will mainly be based on *Real Finnish Lessons*, a book written by Gabriel Heller Sahlgren. Sahlgren is a research director at the Centre for Study of Market Reform of Education (CMRE), and is a PhD student at the London School of Economics.<sup>62</sup>

#### 3.1 Critique on the timeline

Like Sahlberg, Sahlgren tries to find the reasons behind the Finnish success and recent decline in the PISA tests. In the third chapter of his book, he questions the fashionable policy explanations behind Finnish success. Summing up drivers behind the success according to the proponents of the system, such as the absence of standardized tests, accountability, and market reforms, but also the importance of teacher education and equity, Sahlgren argues that “if this story were true, Western countries, and many others, would be clearly on the wrong path.”<sup>63</sup> He specifically names Sahlberg as the Finnish educationalist who argues that the GERM movement infected the world, and that the reason behind Finnish success is that it did not follow this trend.<sup>64</sup>

Sahlgren disagrees. First of all, he argues that the reforms in the 1970’s made Finnish schools successful.<sup>65</sup> He not only attacks Sahlberg, but also the OECD. In his view, the report of the OECD is “little more than a firework of high-level correlations between countries’ characteristics and their results, which reduces its evidence value considerably.”<sup>66</sup> He argues that because regularly testing improves test scores, England performs better than Wales in league tables on educational performances.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, according to Sahlberg, economics of education research does not support most of the commonly used policy explanations.<sup>68</sup> Also, he puts forward that the impact of policies might take time to have an effect. Since Finland has not always been so decentralized, which is now being picked as one of the reasons behind Finnish success, it might be the case that decentralization has nothing to do with the success of Finland.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Gabriel Heller Sahlgren, “Real Finnish Lessons: The true story of an educational superpower,” *Centre for Policy Studies* (2015): preface.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Sahlgren analyzes Finnish performance in education by looking at the TIMSS tests, a more curriculum-focused international test that was conducted since 1995. Furthermore, he uses the research of Altinok, Diebolt, and Demeulemeester, who researched the education quality between 1965 and 2010 based on the measures of the TIMSS tests.<sup>70</sup> According to Sahlgren, the results of these tests show that the rise of the Finnish education system occurred primarily during the old centralized system. The growth between 1980 and 1990 was considerable, and started to level off in the later part of the 1990's.<sup>71</sup> He quotes Finnish education professor Jarrko Hautamäki, who argues that "there has been a lack of understanding of the timeline here."<sup>72</sup> In this part of his book he does not claim that the old system lies behind the improvement stage'; for him it is enough to refute the idea that the current system does.<sup>73</sup> Sahlgren's view on the reasons behind Finnish success will be discussed in chapter 3.3.

### *3.2 The role of the teachers and democratic education*

One of the problems that Sahlgren has with the argument of Sahlberg, is regarding the role of the teacher in Finland. Although Sahlberg proposes to move even further towards the education system that Dewey proposed, he agrees that the Finnish success at the PISA tests is to a certain extent based on a Deweyian system of democratic education. . Sahlgren, on the other hand, argues that this has not been the case during the time that Finland's education flourished.<sup>74</sup> According to Sahlgren, "all school democracy experiments were halted with the comprehensive school reform. These experiments had 'scarred' the country's teachers, who fiercely resisted any move in that direction."<sup>75</sup> In the International Civic Citizenship Study of 2009, only 15 percent of Finnish 14-year old students reported that they take part in decision-making; this is the lowest figure among all 38 participating countries.<sup>76</sup> The argument that democratic education in the classroom is not as apparent as Sahlberg argued, is shared in a blog of Donald Clark, who quotes the Finnish teacher Maarit Korhonen. "I think the only thing we are best at is that the teacher still can keep the classes calm, the classes are mainly quiet when the teacher's here so the kids are listening and learning,"

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., VI.

<sup>71</sup> Sahlgren, "Real Finnish Lessons: The true story of an educational superpower," 14.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 39.

Korhonen says. “But we don’t teach them to discuss or express their own opinion, we teach them to keep quiet, and we are good at that.”<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, Sahlgren puts forward that Finnish students feel little sympathy for their teachers, that Finnish schools are rather bureaucratic, that Finnish teachers are authoritarian compared to their peers in other countries, that students are required to give short answers to teachers questions, and that more traditional teaching methods have continued to dominate the classrooms in the 20th century.<sup>78</sup> According to him, Finland was the only Nordic country that was pedagogically conservative in the 20th century, which could be “a remnant of an old society that was left behind in the rapid race towards post-industrialization”.<sup>79</sup>

### 3.3 Traditional education as driver behind success

Finnish education has, according to Sahlgren, been rather traditional in history, and he argues that this is the reason behind their success in the PISA assessments. When examining other test scores than PISA such as the PIAAC, Sahlgren shows that the performance peaked with the students born between 1978 and 1987. Interestingly, it was in the early 90s that Finnish education policy took a progressive turn.<sup>80</sup> Since then, the scores of the students dropped, which can be seen in a chart Sahlgren provides:

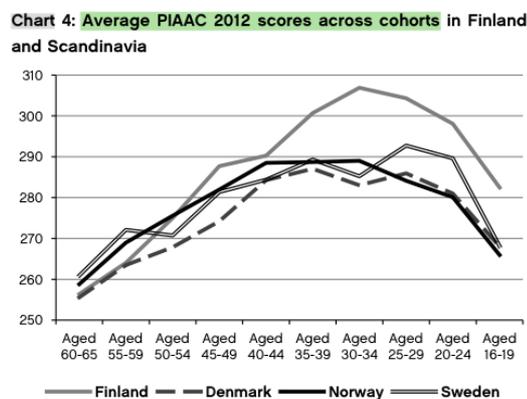


Chart 4 in *Real Finnish Lessons*, Gabriel Heller Sahlgren.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> “Teacher: Finnish schools let down two-thirds of kids,” last modified September 7, 2014, [http://yle.fi/uutiset/teacher\\_finnish\\_schools\\_let\\_down\\_two-thirds\\_of\\_kids/7456598](http://yle.fi/uutiset/teacher_finnish_schools_let_down_two-thirds_of_kids/7456598).

<sup>78</sup> Sahlgren, “Real Finnish Lessons,” 43.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 87.

This is not the only evidence that Sahlgren uses to make his argument that the traditional methods in education positively influence the results of tests like PISA. He quotes Hattie, who argues that “analysis of hundreds of meta-studies of effective practices, active, guided instruction is shown to be more than three times as effective as facilitating, unguided teaching that is associated with constructivist practices”.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, Sahlgren argues that relatively strong research has backed the claim that structured teaching is preferable for raising test scores. He thereby refers to several researchers that could be labeled as economic researchers on education.<sup>83</sup> Lastly, Sahlgren puts forward the universal reform in Quebec to a constructivist, pupil-driven teaching system.<sup>84</sup> The results, especially in mathematics, were disastrous. For Sahlgren, this shows once again that it is traditional teaching methods that foster test results.<sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, Sahlgren argues that Sahlberg misunderstands the chronology of Finland’s education development. According to him, two processes meant that Finland was the only country among the Nordic countries that was pedagogically conservative until the end of the 20th century: the fact that it has been the least developed country among the Nordic countries during most of the 20th century, and historical country specific processes in Finland.<sup>86</sup> Sahlgren argues that it is likely that this has been the reason behind the Finnish success, rather than the reforms towards the more progressive and constructivist way of teaching in the 90s and in the first decades of the 21st century.

Another critique of the work of Sahlberg comes from Michelle Fung. In her blog, she argues that teaching is not about getting master degrees, but more about a special kind of communication. Achieving a doctor degree, according to her, does not say anything about how a well teacher can teach: “passion and communication obviously outrank fancy degrees.”<sup>87</sup> However, she ignores the fact that teachers in Finland are being carefully selected, in which passion and communication skills play a considerable role.

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<sup>82</sup> Sahlgren, “Real Finnish Lessons,” 35.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Sahlgren, “Real Finnish Lessons,” 48.

<sup>87</sup> “Why We Can’t, and Shouldn’t, Copy Finland,” <https://thegrumpygiraffe.wordpress.com/2013/03/14/why-we-cant-and-shouldnt-copy-finland/>.

### 3.4 *Wealth Effect*

Sahlgren argues that the success of the Finnish education system is the result of the traditional way of teaching in Finland, but furthermore could also partially be described by the wealth effect. Sirku Kupiainen, researcher at the University of Helsinki, explains the wealth effect: “when nations rise economically, appreciation for education tends to rise as well, but later it decreases”.<sup>88</sup> Finland’s economic rise has been impressive, and so have its PISA scores. According to Sahlgren, support for the wealth effect hypothesis can be found in the chart 4 that could be seen on the page, since all Nordic countries have witnessed this downward opening parabola. Furthermore, the elitist Swedish minority in Finland started to fall behind in reading comprehension before their Finnish peers, which also confirms the hypothesis of the wealth effect.<sup>89</sup>

### 3.5 *Constructivist turn and the future for Sahlgren*

The progressive turn in Finland started in the early 90s. The idea started to emerge that one must enjoy school, and one the reasons for this was that the parents of the children became to be higher educated. Furthermore, in a new age, the general consensus is that the classroom nowadays cannot be controlled through old methods.<sup>90</sup> Quoting Professor Schneinin: “If you listen to the Finnish education debate currently, many are saying that traditional methods are wrong . . . this thinking goes all the way up to the ministry.”<sup>91</sup> The students appear to have more influence in the classroom and have a more direct relationship with the teacher, which result in more satisfaction at school and a warmer relation between the students and the teachers.<sup>92</sup> To quote Kupainen: “constructivist methods have probably emerged to match what goes on in schools with the outside society.”<sup>93</sup>

The question remains whether it is a improvement to match developments in society with constructivist education reforms. While Sahlberg argues that it is, Sahlgren thinks that it is not. Although Sahlgren admits that the relation between the teacher and the student improved in recent years, and that children have become more independent and improved their reasoning skills, he argues that the constructivist move in education has harmed, and will continue to harm, cognitive achievement.<sup>94</sup> According to him, there is this potential trade off between different teaching methods: on the one hand, a progressive and constructivist teaching method could benefit social

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 66.

capital, improve the school climate, and improve reasoning schools, whereas on the other hand, a more conservative and traditional teaching method will benefit cognitive development. Since he thinks that developing cognitive development is very important in education, he argues that Finland should be cautious in replacing old with the new, because the new is not always better.<sup>95</sup>

It is important to note that Sahlgren's main point counters many common explanations and lessons taken from the Finnish success as put forward by Sahlberg. Although Sahlgren does set out to form explanations about the Finnish success, such as the historical situation of Finland, the wealth effect, and the traditional way of teaching, he does argue that it is very difficult to identify the causal factors behind the Finnish educational performance in the 20th and 21st century. The explanation he provides should be "the new starting point from where we should continue to look."<sup>96</sup>

## **Part 4: Conclusion**

### *4.1 Finnish performance in PISA*

After reading the work of Pasi Sahlberg and following the Western media, most people would be convinced that the progressive constructivist way of teaching has been the driver behind Finnish success. Sahlberg does a good job in setting out not only Finland's history of education, but also history in a broader turn, because these two are very much related. However, the critique of Sahlgren – that it is not about the progressive and constructivist reforms that Finland performed well in the PISA assessments – is persuasive. Research, such as the research that looked into the relation between students and their teachers, shows that the constructivist turn has only been in place in recent decades. There is no evidence to state that Finland's constructivist teaching methods has lead to the good results in the PISA: it rather seems to be the case that the traditionalist way of teaching by then was linked to the good development of cognitive skills under the younger generation. Nonetheless, it remains to be very difficult to point to what has accounted for the good PISA results, but the claim that it is about the progressive and constructivist teaching methods can be refuted.

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<sup>95</sup> Sahlgren, "Real Finnish Lessons," 66.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

#### 4.2 Constructivist turn in perspective

However, it remains to be the question whether this underperformance at the PISA assessments in recent years with the constructivist teaching methods is a problem that needs to be solved by changing the system to a more traditionalist one or not. Although it must be noted that these distinctions are not completely black or white, the following overview could be made:

<b>Constructivism</b>	<b>Traditionalism</b>
Student-centered teaching	Teacher-centered teaching
Regarded as progressive	Regarded as conservative
Sahlberg dominant author	Sahlgren dominant author
Focus on development human beings in a safe and warm environment	Focus on performance students in an efficient manner
Takes numbers with a pinch of salt	All about numbers

Whether one thinks that the constructivist turn in Finnish education is a positive development, depends on whether one is a constructivism or traditionalist. Traditionalist would argue education is about gaining knowledge and improving important skills as math and reading. Therefore, the education system must be developed in such a way that the country would perform best at the PISA assessments. A teacher-centered method, in which the teacher is the main driver, would, according to this approach, be most conducive for the development of cognitive skills. From a traditionalist perspective, it could be said that the PISA results have been declining after the progressive turn started to have effect, and the future focus of the Finnish education system should therefore again be traditional teaching methods.

Constructivists, on the other hand, would celebrate the constructivist turn. For them, education is not only about improving cognitive skills through reproduction, but about the development of human beings in a broader sense: skills as critical thinking are also important in that sense. Therefore, a student-centered method, in which the teacher is a guide rather than an instructor, would be, according to them, the right form of education. Constructivist would care less about the decline in PISA tests in recent years, because they question whether development in education can be measured at all, and furthermore value the importance of cognitive development not as important as traditionalists, since the development of other skills is also being regarded as very important.

Thus, the difference between these two is the way they see education in the broadest sense. For the one, education is merely about improving cognitive skills as much as possible, whereas for the other, it is also about developing several other skills. In the world we live in today, I would argue that it would be very limited to only focus on cognitive development. Reproducing was part of work-life for the largest part of history, but in the dynamic world where we live in, flexibility and other skills are required. Therefore, I would argue, the strong relation between cognitive development and economic effectiveness is not as strong anymore as it used to be. Even more importantly, I would agree with Dewey that only by having some form of democratic education, societal problems as racism and hatred can be overcome. Is that not more important than economic development?

#### *4.3 Lessons that can be learned from Finland*

While there remains controversy about whether the constructivist turn has been good for Finland, both Sahlgren and Sahlberg agree that the focus on equity have indeed played a considerable role. With the introduction of *Peruskoulu*, Finland has enhanced equity, and has provided all students with the opportunity to develop. Surprisingly, Sahlgren agrees with Sahlberg since “the rise in test Finland’s rise in international tests was probably also to a certain extent due to catch-up from low parental education levels.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, enhancing equity could be seen as one of the drivers behind Finnish success in the PISA scores.

Furthermore, it could not be denied that the Finnish system for teachers has been a huge asset for the country. Finnish teachers have been regarded as important actors within society for a long time, and that appreciation has resulted in a system in which prospective students are carefully selected for the teaching academy. Raising the standard for teachers to be academically educated is difficult to achieve in practice, however, by giving teachers autonomy and responsibility, Finland has found a good mechanism to raise the quality of their teachers.

Nonetheless, the success of a focus on equity and teaching education in Finland does not mean that the Finnish education system should be copied all around the world. The Finnish were able to create this system because of their historic appreciation for teachers, and because they followed the social structure based on equity of their neighbors. All countries have their own complicated history.

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<sup>97</sup> Sahlgren, “Real Finnish Lessons,” 35.

However, we can appreciate the Finnish system, and look in what manners and to what extent equity could be enhanced and the level of teacher education could be improved.

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