

## Finnish Education System and its Triumph in Pisa: Lessons to Learn for Pakistan

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Abstract

*Finland has emerged as world leader in terms of educational achievement and become a symbol for school development and reforms since the first exam of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a test structured for the fifteen-year-old students, in science and language literacy, on which it ranked highest among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations. The major aim of the study was 1) to review the factors behind the phenomenal success of Finnish education system, 2) what lessons possibly Pakistan could learn while considering the differences. The findings were that there were no isolated factors that have a contribution in the success of Finnish Education system rather there were numerous interrelated factors that had added strength to Finland's successful educational structure. Moreover, the educational policies in the long run, the culture of trust and the passion of Finnish citizens for reading are the other reasons for this triumph.*

**Key Words:** Finnish Education System, Teacher Education, Pakistan, PISA

### Introduction

Large -scale assessments at international level have attracted an enormous attention during the recent years and not only developed but a huge number of developing countries are also taking part in these assessments. PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) test is unarguably one of the most popular tests among the large – scale assessments. In PISA 2015, over 500,000 students of 15 years of 72 countries around the globe took part in this test and made it the most comprehensive survey in the world (OECD, 2016). Finland has emerged as a world leader in terms of educational achievement and become a symbol for school development and reforms since the first exam of PISA, a test structured for the 15- year- old students, in science, math and language literacy, on which it ranked highest among OECD nations. Many countries have been charmed by the success of Finnish students and diverted their attention towards Finland.

Finnish story is the story of resilience and survival which is articulately depicted in the very first Finnish novel named, “Seven Brothers”, written by Aleksis Kivi published in 1870. This novel was about one of the greatest lessons of life learnt by the brothers who were orphan. They eventually apprehended/ discovered that for a successful and prosperous life, to get enlightened and literate was fundamental. From those times Finns have been fallen in love with reading and it has become an integral part of their culture. Education has played a significant role in construction of a nation and society that is known for its technological achievements and knowledge-based economy. Consequently, “Seven Brothers” is among the list of those texts that are being taught today in many Finnish schools (Sahlberg,2015).

Being a small country located between bigger countries and giants, has finally showed Finns that how to admit existing truths. They have learnt well that how to get benefited while having limited available resources. Today, Co-operation, diplomacy, harmony and problem solving have become an integral part of modern-day Finnish culture. All these qualities contribute significantly in constructing such a structure that is relishing world attraction because of its impartial sharing to knowledge and learning. (Sahalberg, 2015).

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## Rational of the Study

Teacher education and training is a fundamental and integral component of an education system. All factors and elements related to it is very important and interrelated. These elements are not only important but complex as well. So many internal and external factors have their own influences and contributions. New global trends in teacher education and the changes in other segments of the society are very important to watch out for the organization and integration of these segments. Every country and nation have its own set of principles, ethics, aims, rules and culture. They have their very own goals, structure and expectations to meet in terms of teacher education and training (Schwartz, 1996).

All the novel trends and transformations in the field of teacher education and training indicate different other possibilities of global similarity. However, the diversity among them is quite huge its productivity is distinct (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Basically, it differs in terms of elements and circumstances in which any system of teacher education is developed. Historical evolution, ethics, culture and social conditions along with the setting have an enormous influence on developing the individuality. Ideologies of the government policies, socio-economic status and requirements needed for the ever-changing world are among the most significant factors that form a system of teacher education in any country of the globe (Galton & Moon, 1994). As an essential part of an education system, teacher education and training should be associated with the society. It should also be accustomed by the philosophy, cultural values, ethics and most importantly character of the nation.

This study would be a good addition in the existing related literature in the field of teacher education and training especially in Pakistani context, as it will help to replicate those Finnish policies, changes and developments according to our cultural and socioeconomic background.

## Research Objectives

- To review the reasons behind the triumph of Finnish education system?
- To know the lessons Pakistan could learn from Finland.

## Research Questions

- What are the elements responsible for Finland's successful education system?
- What is the lessons Pakistan could learn from Finland in terms of policies and structural changes?

## Methodology

The researcher reviewed different state and policy documents, databases for research articles and books published during 2000 to 2019 regarding Finnish Education system and its world-wide success in PISA.

## Overview of Finland

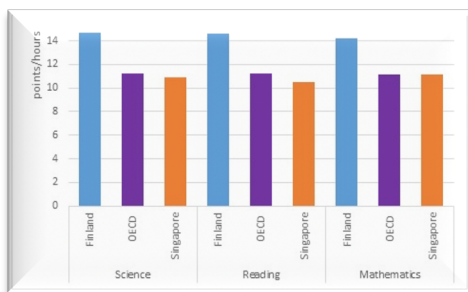
Finland, as a small Nordic state, has been emerged as a world leader in terms of educational achievement and become a symbol for school development and reforms since the time it quickly mounted to the highest rankings in last decade (Sahlberg, 2010). Finnish schools are free from standardized tests, except for PISA. Finns outperformed other OECD countries on these tests for years and still score so high (Nauman, 2018).

**Table 1.** Performance of Finnish Students in PISA

Literacy Area	2000	2003	2006	2009	2012	2015
Reading	546 (1 <sup>st</sup> )*	543(1 <sup>st</sup> )	547 (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	536(2 <sup>nd</sup> )	524(3 <sup>rd</sup> )	526(2 <sup>nd</sup> )
Science	538 (3 <sup>rd</sup> )	548 (1 <sup>st</sup> )	563(1 <sup>st</sup> )	554(1 <sup>st</sup> )	545(2 <sup>nd</sup> )	531(3 <sup>rd</sup> )
mathematics	536 (4 <sup>th</sup> )	544 (1 <sup>st</sup> )	548(1 <sup>st</sup> )	541(2 <sup>nd</sup> )	519(6 <sup>th</sup> )	511(7 <sup>th</sup> )

\*The ranking of Finland has shown in parenthesis.

Source: Gallup Finland



**Figure 1:** The OECD Score Points (Average) of Learning per an Hour (EDUFI, 2018)

There are many researchers and educationists who have given credit to the Finnish teachers for their students’ success on international achievement tests. Many changes, over the years, in Finnish teacher education help its present strengthened system. There are various important key factors that are remarkable and worth finding when consider the current features and the accomplishments of different approaches related to teacher education in Finland.

### Features of Finnish Education System

#### Basic Education and Comprehensive Schools in the Past

Basic education is also known as compulsory education, previously known as comprehensive schools. It consisted upon nine years, starts from 7 to 16. In Finland, all schools follow the national framework for curriculum development. Most importantly there does not have any streaming in basic education and learning outcomes, aims and goals are same for every student. Special needs of every child are catered as early as possible. Therefore, the gap between low achievers and high achievers has visibly decreased since the time when all ability streaming got abolished in the mid of 1980 (Sahlberg, 2011).

There are two stages of basic education: the first stage is called primary school which is consisted upon first six years from Grade 1 to 6. The second stage is lower secondary school from Grade 7 to 9. These days combined comprehensive schools from Grades 1 to 9 have become more apparent after the emergence of many new schools in Finland. After the completion of their compulsory education students can collect their school leaving certificate (Pollari et al., 2018).

Comprehensive schools (peruskoulu) were started running in late 1960s and in early 70’s Finland had a kind of parallel schools system which were divided further into grammar and civic schools after attending folk schools (Building, 2016). Moreover, in all world rankings and indicators of educational development, Finland was overshadowed by traditional superpowers in the field of education of that time, such as England, Sweden, Germany and USA.



**Figure 2:** Classification of Finnish Education System

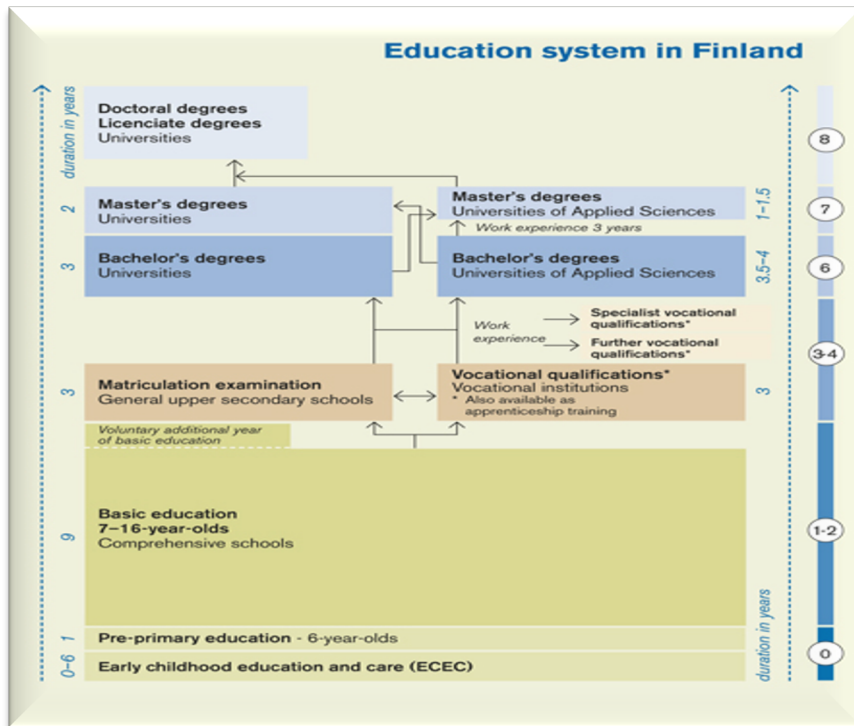


Figure 3: Finnish

### Structure of Education (EDUFI, 2018)

Usually children start going to school at 7 years of age. Since 2015, one-year pre- primary education has been made compulsory from the age of 6-7 for every child before starting actual school. The basic purpose for this pre- primary education is to develop their real-life skills and prepare them for the upcoming years of school life. Pre-primary education is structured with the union of kindergartens and day care centres (FNAE, 2014b).

### Accountability, Commitment and Knowledge

Finish system of education does not rely on test-based accountability rather it depends upon the professional accountability of teachers, committed and knowledgeable (Kere, 2011). Significant accountability complemented by superficially determined standards of learning like so many other countries, is not a part of Finnish educational policies. Finnish educational policies have been built on the concept of sustainable leadership to raise students' achievement. There is a robust emphasis upon teaching and learning, encouraging schools to expertise optimum learning environment, intelligent accountability, and implement those educational contents that helps students reaching out universal goals of schooling (Sahlberg, 2007). The right to basic education for everyone is written very clearly in Finnish constitution (Makela, 2013).

### Equity not Equality

Equity is one of the most prominent features of Finnish system. Every Finn is facilitated and provided with the equal opportunities and education is one of them. From primary to higher education, at all levels, education is free for everyone (The Finnish National Board of Education, 2012). Schools in Finland are airy, bright, well organized and maintained. Children are not used to walk in lines rather they move around without restrictions, freely. As students are not hasty, the school atmosphere feels so casual and comfortable. Classes are small in sizes, usually consisted upon 20 to 25 students (Nauman, 2018).

### **Free Lunches, Books and Transportation**

A day in Finnish school is built into lots of physical exertion. After a 45-minute lesson, a short break is a must for the refreshment of students. Health and eating well are considered very important at schools as all students receive free lunch everyday regardless of their socio-economic status so that children from low-income backgrounds do not feel branded. Pre-schoolers are free to play. Even though formal instructions (in reading) do not begin before the age of 7, yet amazingly Finland has 100% literacy. Those who do not feel comfortable to go to college, equally have a chance to attend a well-structured and organized system of vocational schools. The percentage of collage going students is around 40% (Nauman, 2018).

Generally, Finnish schools have a smaller number of strengths, less than 300 students and relatively having smaller class sizes (20 to 25 students). These classes are equally very well furnished and equipped. One of the central norms of the schools is to take care of the students not only educationally but also personally. Everyday each student receives free meal (lunch), transportation facility and free health care as well (Eurydice, 2018). They are also entitled to free learning materials, transportation facilities and counselling at school. Beyond all that, their reach to the quality teachers and curriculum has become an integral part of the Finnish educational policies (Darling, 2010).

### **Teacher Evaluation in Finland**

There are no evaluation procedures developed by the Finnish government rather trade unions have a great contribution to draw the appraisal outline for teachers as well as for the municipality. Evaluation process of Finnish teachers is quite different from many other countries. The concept of teacher evaluation differs from the teacher evaluation process based on accountability in that a teacher is judged by the academic achievement of students. In such practices, students' performance is the criteria to decide whether teacher is effective or not. Students' results are often become a reason to take controversial and critical steps regarding teachers' position at school in VAM (Value-added model) based systems. On the other hand, teachers in Finland are usually satisfied with the evaluation process and actively take part in evaluation practices. Accountability based school systems create nervousness, fear and anxiety as they think that their agreements and contracts may be cancelled because of the poor performance of their students (Tarhan, Karaman, Kemppinen & Aerila 2019).

### **Results and Discussion**

Research showed, after exploring different sources of Finland's exceptional rise to top, there is a key factor which distinguishes Finnish success from all others: excellent teachers (Sahlberg, 2010). The phenomenal triumph of Finland's educational system is mainly due to its excellent system of teacher education.

These days Finland is enjoying the privilege of being world leader in education sector. Finnish teachers are highly revered and motivated from pre-school to the university level and that is not due to the attractive salary packages or heavy incentives. When compared with USA teachers, it has been discovered that Finnish teachers are not getting that big fat salaries (Gould & Weller, 2016). Moreover, for Finns, teaching profession is regarded highly noble and prestigious parallel to medicine, economics or law. Finnish people have openly recognized the worth of its teachers. They mutually have faith and trust in their teachers' wisdom, foresight and decisions (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 99).

Finnish teachers' selection criteria and qualifications is pre-defined in legislation. Pre-service is the real time when the professional training of the prospective teacher starts and continues for the first five years of newly inducted teacher and then expands throughout its career (Niemi, 2016). The Ministry of Education and Culture was previously known as Ministry of Education. One of the prominent features of Finnish teachers is their professionalism. They are highly autonomous and trust worthy, therefore have liberty regarding pedagogy and the content along with many other responsibilities. Finnish Teachers are free to choose whatever teaching methodology, content and textbook they feel appropriate to teach in the classroom (MoEC, 2016b).

Responsibility for different assessment and disciplinary policies is also on teachers' shoulders alone (Valijarvi, 2015). Finnish parents are considered as most happy and satisfied among other Nordic parents, with the teachers and their children's schools. They don't like the thought of competition behind the idea of market-oriented schools (Simola, 2005, p.459). The major reason for the development of such an attitude is trust in

both, teachers and the school system. Therefore, they do not get fussy and insecure about choosing a good school for their children as they feel the same for every school (Valijarvi, 2013).

From centuries, teaching profession has been regarded as the most sought-after profession in Finland. From many decades class- teacher education has remained popular and the first choice of Finns and the criteria to get in has become tough day by day. Since the year 2011, out of 100% applicants only 10% have got the chance to enter (Kumpulainen, 2017). Almost three decades ago, Finland had nothing noticeable to attract the international educationists and the world to its education sector and many concepts were adopted from its neighbour Sweden. However, even during those times, 10 - year- old Finnish children were recognized as exceptional in reading internationally. They were ranked the best among the readers of their age in the world (Sahlberg, 2009).

Finnish teacher education has its roots and foundation in religion, a tradition dating back to 1860. As religious leaders served themselves as educators and a certain education was needed for sacraments. After finding their dominion and asset from Russia and Sweden, Finnish people found their own identity. Because of the push towards national sovereignty and strength as an independent nation, Finnish people started taking pride in their language both written and spoken (Uusiutu & Määttä, 2013). During the later years of twentieth century, the citizens became more and more educated. However, teachers were still honored and became a symbol of respect in the society.

Before 1970, teacher education, especially primary level teacher education was taken place in different teacher colleges. These teacher education programs were short and had fewer requirements. In 1970, the Comprehensive School Reforms and the Teacher Education Act in 1971 both led to the alliance of education for all teachers (primary and secondary teachers) in Finland. This unification was at university level (Silander & Valigarvi, 2013).

At that time, university based prospective teachers training program became the single certified mode for the teachers in Finland (Sahlberg, 2015). Programs like Teach for Brazil and Teach for America in different countries did not exist at that time in Finland. Many researchers are agreed and have found that research- based education is the central pillars to teacher training programs in Finnish system of education. A specific principle of research- based teacher education in Finland is its systematic combination of scientific educational knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and prepare teachers so that they can augment their pedagogical thinking, their decision making based on evidence, and their employment in the professional communal of educators (Sahlberg, 2015). Master's thesis is compulsory and the apex of the philosophy of research-based teacher education. Theory and practice run parallel and has practical implementation in the classroom that would lead prospective teachers to think about the abstract ideas and different theories.

## **Conclusion**

The study has reviewed various articles, books along with many other official documents including National Core Curriculum and Finnish Basic Education Act. Different Policy documents that are specified by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the ultimate authority in the field of education in Finland, and National Agency for Education were also analysed. On the bases of intensive review of these documents, it is concluded as follows:

1. There are no isolated and sole factors that have contributed to the success of Finnish Teacher Education system rather there are numerous interrelated and interdependent factors that have added strength to Finland's successful educational structure. Instead of enlisting the reasons for the success of a system it would be more suitable to analyze the whole Finnish educational system and evaluate network of those various factors with the context.
2. Among many the most distinguished factor of Finnish education system seems to be its autonomous teachers and the teacher education and training system. Teacher Education is research based. They are free for the pedagogical practices in classroom as well. Pakistan is far behind when talk about teacher autonomy and freedom and research-based teacher education and training.

3. Planning in the long run and continuation of the educational policies have played a decisive role in the Finnish success. Otherwise that miracle would have not been possible. As any reform needs a long- term policy to get its objectives which lacks completely in the case of Pakistan.
4. The basic values and ethics are essential part of the success of Finnish education and teacher training system. Equity and cooperation of higher level leads the system to run smoothly and work in harmony. In Pakistan one could not find equity and cooperation among different departments at different level due to many other reasons including political influences, poor structure, lack of finances and corruption at bigger levels.
5. It will be very helpful to compare high achieving countries like Finland with other cultures and low achieving countries like Pakistan. It might be helpful to know the factors that affect their success in different international achievement tests i.e. PISA and which factor works best in which cultural context.

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