

Inspiring Practices in Educational Globalization: The Case of Finland

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Abstract: The globalization of education is considered to be the prevailing trend of the 21st-century, compelling an increasing number of countries to recognize the significance of seeking innovation in teaching to align with this transformative process. The era of globalization presents new challenges and opportunities for the education systems worldwide. Among them, Finland's distinctive pedagogical philosophy and its outstanding reputation in the field of international education have attracted significant attention on a national scale. This paper investigates the efficacy of the Finnish education system in promoting quality learning in the context of globalization. In this study, the author adopts a case study approach centered on Finland, employing desktop-based techniques to gather pertinent data and information related to the survey. Overall, Finland's noteworthy academic accomplishments demonstrate the need for greater emphasis on teacher training and the establishment of an integrated pedagogical framework that combines instructional excellence with equitable student treatment.

Keywords: globalization, Finnish education, educational reform, teacher training

1. Introduction

The advent of globalization has placed greater demands on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to establish an educational database capable of assessing countries' economic competitiveness within the current context [1]. Guided by the OECD, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) evaluates students' academic proficiency in mathematics, reading, and science, as well as their aptitude for pragmatic problem-solving and critical thinking. PISA stands as the broadest and fairest measure of international student performance to date, facilitating governance in the field of global education policies [2]. Finland, a model of the "best education system in the world," consistently shows exceptional scholastic achievement in the OECD's periodic tests.

This paper has two objectives. Firstly, it seeks to illuminate an innovative perspective by examining Finland's education system as a case study. This exploration emphasizes the necessary of the realization of teaching quality, equality, and innovation in a unified manner. Secondly, given that many countries are still grappling with the challenge of transcending existing educational paradigms and implementing effective 21st-century curriculum systems, this paper underscores the importance of integrated policy discussions, which often necessitate extensive testing and empirical research.

This paper is partitioned into three parts. It commences with an introduction to an imperative education practice agenda-Sustainable Development Goals 4 (SDG4). Then, it explores successful examples of Finnish education from three primary domains. The considerations for countries undertaking an emulation of educational insights from the Finnish experience are discussed at the end of this paper.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1. What Is Education Globalization?

Scholte characterizes globalization as a multidimensional phenomenon, covering political, economic, cultural, and other levels of dimensions [3]. This intricate concept is reflected in the process of augmenting “extra-regional” spatial communication and promoting economic and cultural interaction on a global scale, which is well used to comprehend and enrich social relations in the 21st-century. Among them, education provides the intellectual underpinning for the process of globalization.

Nonetheless, the reciprocal effect of education and globalization is often understood as a more complex process rather than a unidirectional influence. Emerging information technologies and evolving cultural ideologies introduce both opportunities and challenges to the world education system [4]. Comparative education has been integrated into mainstream assessment models, in which the quality of the education system becomes a national focus, intending to developing the competencies required for the 21st-century. To address these challenges, the United Nations (UN) formally incorporated Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) into the education governance system in 2016, which provides a detailed framework and targets for promoting the actions.

2.2. The Targets of SDG4

The main objective of SDG4 is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” [5]. Serving as an ambitious follow-up to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) set in 2000, SDG 4’s 10 goals to be achieved by 2030 further expand the scope of education and advocate quality basic education services for all throughout life. Brissett points out in his research that some of the sub-goals articulated within the SDG 4 are inextricably linked to the knowledge-based economy model developed in the context of globalization, which signifies that the realization of the agenda will not only enable countries to confront the challenges posed by globalization but also propel the new evolution of sustainable education [6].

3. Success Case of Education Globalization: Finland

Reinikainen emphasizes Finland’s remarkable assessments across every domain in the 2009 PISA tests [7]. Finnish students exhibited math and reading scores surpassing those of every other European country outside of Asia, and achieved some of the highest scores in science. According to the recent PISA 2018 report statistics, Finland still sustains its esteemed standing in international education. Collaboratively with Estonia, it represents the top of European education [8]. The subsequent sections will delve into the reasons behind Finland’s educational success from three aspects.

3.1. Highly Trained Educators

Finland’s leadership in mathematics, literacy, and science is largely due to the professionalism of its teachers [9]. The profession of teaching has enjoyed a longstanding prestige in Finnish society, this respect transcends material gains and stems from a profound recognition and appreciation of its mission and ethical objectives. Because of this, the selection of teachers in Finland undergoes an extremely demanding process. Sahlberg repeatedly highlights the stringent review of teachers’

certifications in his research [9]. Qualified preschool or kindergarten teachers are required to possess a bachelor's degree, while basic education or high school teachers must hold a master's degree, and so forth. Statistical data reveals that merely 10% of applicants in Finland are admitted into teacher programs each year.

Moreover, the Finnish government funds a series of rigorous and selective training mechanisms and programs for candidate teachers, including their future pedagogical aspirations and curriculum design. Each teacher education department has meticulously formulated and often binding strategies to improve the quality of its teacher classrooms. The Finnish government advances research-based comprehensive teacher education, which is embodied in the construction of specialized teacher training institutions and the provision of an expansive curriculum, aiming to confirm that nascent teachers acquire a full blend of theoretical knowledge and practical skills, along with an independent international curriculum insights and professional strategy development [9]. Furthermore, local governments play a crucial role by capitalizing on educational resources to facilitate collaborations between training colleges and academic schools. Such training institutions carry out the main duties of professional instruction, supervision, and evaluation.

As per the 2011 Finnish Teacher Training Guidelines, practical teaching practice is deemed an important part of cultivating professional skills and expertise. Typically, their internship experience constitutes around 15% to 25% of the total time spent on educational preparation. This also explains the semi-structured interviews conducted by Wikstenon 13 Finnish preparatory science teachers who all hold distinctive perspectives on teaching practice [10].

According to the 2016 guidance report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), SDG 4 necessitates relevant departments to ensure the recruitment of proficient teachers, attach paramount importance to quality teacher training and build a team of teaching faculty with outstanding professional qualifications under the support of efficient operation and effective management system. High-quality educators are instrumental in a globalized society, and their key driving force in shaping students' modes of inquiry and value orientation is considered to be an indispensable part of fostering the sustainable development of education and cultivating comprehensive capabilities to confront global challenges. The Finnish government's substantial commitment to teacher training is one of the critical pieces of evidence supporting the success of its education system.

3.2. Inclusive Special Needs Education

One of the basic principles of SDG4 states that education is a fundamental human right, which was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) since December 10, 1948. This principle has long been at the heart of UNESCO's mission, with SDG4.5 calling for closing the gender gap in education and ensuring equitable access to all levels of education for vulnerable groups such as disabled people, indigenous communities and children in vulnerable situations [11].

Halinen and Jarvinen summarize the multiple evolutionary stages of inclusive education in Finland [12]. Beginning in 1921, the enactment of general compulsory education act marked the expansion of educational opportunities for the general public. Since then, the country has further developed a quality-centric education system. In the 1990s, Finland embarked on a phase of reform. Remarkably, Finland has made efforts to the special needs education from the outset. The transformative step arrived in 1983 when the Finnish Parliament enforced the basic education laws, which declared that education should be compulsory for all children. Over the ensuing years, the National Core Curriculum (NCC) further underscored differentiated instruction to promote the social discourse of normalizing special education. With the revised and clarified provisions act of 2001, leaving no room for ambiguity as it integrated all students, including those with the most severe developmental disabilities, into the unified field of basic education.

Kivirauma and Ruoho indicate that Finland's special education system comprises two primary models: full-time and part-time [13]. The former education form caters to students with complex or severe special needs, involving individualized educational plans and support from dedicated institutions. In contrast, the part-time special education offers more adaptable spectrum of services, including regular special teacher assistance, group tutoring, and supplementary learning aids within mainstream educational settings. Based on official data from the Finnish government, the number of students with impairments who choose to participate in part-time special education significantly exceeds those in full-time special education by up to four times. This dual approach to special education is widely seen as a contributing factor to the nation's exemplary performance in the PISA survey [13].

Today, there exist seven publicly-funded special education schools in Finland dedicated to supporting guidance, training, and rehabilitation services for disabled students. They are also committed to advance the rehabilitation technology by tailoring teaching equipment adapted to the needs of students, providing protection for their learning and life [12].

In fact, inclusive education is a globally disseminated concept and a crucial indicator of diversity in international education systems. It starts with inclusion of people with disabilities, one of the essential conditions for achieving educational sustainable development, and sets unprecedented stringent standards for special education practices [14]. This advocacy partly explains why Finnish education is often emulated, as it significantly informs the implementation of inclusive special education.

3.3. Autonomous and Creative Learning Atmosphere

With the innovative expansion of knowledge systems and digital tools, it is imperative to seek creative thinking to address 21st-century problems [15]. Within this context, there is a growing emphasis on cultivating individual creativity through teacher education. One of the strategies in the Education Development Plan (TEDP) proposed by the Finnish National Teacher Education Forum (NTEF) in 2016 includes the enhancement of teachers' creativity [16].

Henriksen et al. mention that teachers in Finland have autonomy in student evaluation and curriculum implementation, the most representative manifestation of which is that schools have no standardized tests or statistical indicators, save for the national entrance examination for high school students [15]. In fact, the autonomy of Finnish teachers in teaching dates back to as early as the 1950s. Sahlberg specifies that despite the core curriculum of national basic education in Finland has outlined regulations for local curriculum development, the coordination and approval of local education authorities significantly influence the course design process, and it is widely recognized that teachers enjoy autonomy in participating in curriculum development [17]. This latitude permits them to apply their professional knowledge and judgment extensively throughout the learning process, thus improving the efficacy of curriculum reforms.

Between 2011 and 2014, Heo, Leppisaari, and Lee conducted an international exchange involving global education leaders from Korea and Europe, including nine Finnish students and eight Korean students, who visited each other's countries for teaching practices [18]. Throughout the program, the participants committed an average of one to three hours per week to it. According to the report, several Korean students who participated in exchange programs in Finland in 2013 found that Finnish teachers were adept at guiding students to choose their own learning content. These teachers were also responsible for creating conducive learning environments and readily modifying the curriculum based on the situational dynamics. Additionally, one Korean student in 2013 shared an experience where a Finnish elementary school teacher encouraged students to use iPads to create a video about "personal companies." Despite the difficulties encountered, the students exhibited fast mastery of the relevant ICT skills, even innovating to download additional images and make video clips. Another

Korean student at a Finnish middle school, also from 2013, observed that Finnish teachers excelled at interdisciplinary teaching, and were good at integrating multi-disciplinary knowledge into a single subject, thereby providing a broader space for students to nurture creative thinking.

Therefore, empowering teachers with critical decision-making authority has a positive impact on students' creativity [19]. UNESCO (2016) interprets in SDG 4.4 that for the purpose of achieving sustainable development of education in a globalized society, emphasis should be placed on the development of high-level cognitive skills and non-cognitive or transferable proficiencies that can be adapted in a variety of career domains, as well as 21st-century competencies, which accentuate the importance of innovative thinking and the ICT utilization [11]. Hence, it is plausible to say that the success of Finnish students owes much to the cultivation of their creative aptitudes.

4. Discussion

China, as a country with the largest education system in the world, uses Finnish education as a focal point to illustrate the significance of Finland's education for its existence, which will have wide applicability. In contrast to Finland's autonomous and non-evaluative classrooms, China relies heavily on standardized tests as a primary means to assess both students' aptitude and teachers' professional literacy. Kearns conducted interviews with 16 adolescents and found that all of them experienced anxiety and shame about the results shown in standardized tests [20]. These tests were even led to a detrimental ideology about their future learning. The influence of standardized testing extends to teachers as well, who often harbor negative feelings regarding the outcomes of these tests, related to the deeply held belief that student performance serves as a direct reflection of teaching quality. This belief results in a reluctance to deviate from conventional test-oriented instruction, and always choose set teaching techniques and materials compatible with standardized test formats [21]. These narrow curriculum focus and lack of progressive pedagogical strategies hinder comprehensive personality development among students.

Finland's educational success holds a crucial lesson for China to re-examine the role of standardized testing. Drawing from Finland's example, China should contemplate the adoption of a more diversified approach to assessing students' abilities while trying to reduce the frequency of standardized tests. Nation could consider implementing a variety of assessment activities like project-based evaluations, group cooperation assessments, organizational performance reviews, and self-assessments. These methods can foster students' innovation, critical thinking, and collaborative skills to a certain extent, unlocking their potential across various domains, thereby enabling teachers to better evaluate their capabilities and future potential. Moreover, recognizing the emphasis on ICT skills necessary for the 21st-century, China could take inspiration from Finland by integrating the multimedia teaching tools and electronic textbooks into classrooms. This effort should extend to supporting students' independent access to technical resources, and encouraging them to proficiently use online libraries or academic websites for information retrieval ability and innovative thinking.

Diverse assessment methods put forward higher requirements for teachers. In order to bolster teacher professionalism and interdisciplinary teaching, Finland's model offers key insights. Firstly, China should improve teacher salaries and welfare while elevating the social status of the profession. Finland's respect for teachers has significantly increased the expectations of the profession, thus attracting highly qualified individuals. Secondly, establishing a comprehensive professional development framework for teachers, including career advancement paths, training seminars, and evaluation mechanisms, thereby optimizing the effectiveness of diversified assessments. Thirdly, fostering partnerships with international organizations and research institutions allows for the exchange of cutting-edge educational research findings from the perspective of international experience and effective teaching collaborations. Lastly, training teachers in ICT skills to become proficient in the use of modern technologies such as online courses and mobile devices, can also be

learned from the Finnish case study. These advances provide more flexible and innovative learning environments, equipping students with indispensable 21st-century technology competencies.

5. Conclusion

This paper commences by providing a review of the concept of education globalization and the goal agenda delineated in SDG 4. Finnish students consistently outperform their global peers in international tests, which is attributed to several reasons, including commendable achievements in teacher selection and training, equity-driven inclusive special education, and the nurturing of creativity. The Finnish education system serves as a valuable reference point, and this paper specifically starts with the analysis of China's standardized testing reform policy, which helps to perceive how Finland can provide instructive insights for the formulation of international education policies.

Having said that, direct imitation of its policy model in practice raises substantial concerns yet to be addressed. Given the real-world constraints of social and cultural systems and economic statuses among countries, the Finnish educational paradigm is not universally transferable, and direct application could provoke potential conflicts. Therefore, the emulation of global education reform should fully acknowledge the heterogeneity of nations. It is the responsibility of policymakers to insist on rigorous decision-making to formulate policies in alignment with their own culture, social environment, and economic contexts. Meanwhile, robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are critical to ensuring the effectiveness and adaptability of policy implementation while achieving timely improvements with the aim of responding more precisely to the challenges posed by educational globalization.

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