

# Factors Contributing to the High Performance of Education Systems: Insights from Finland

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the factors contributing to the high performance of education systems in Finland, providing insights that can inform global education reform efforts. Through an analysis encompassing teacher quality, curriculum design, equitable access, parental involvement, policy and governance, innovation, and cultural and social factors, the essay illustrates Finland's comprehensive approach to education. Key to Finland's success are robust teacher training, student-centered pedagogy, and inclusive practices, underpinned by a commitment to educational quality and equity. Central to Finland's achievement is the collaborative synergy among schools, parents, and communities, facilitated by effective leadership and governance, ensuring coherence between educational objectives and evidence-based policies. Moreover, Finland's culture of innovation, adaptability, and societal values prioritising education significantly shape its educational outcomes. Data analysed predominantly derive from Worldmapper and PISA studies. By examining these factors, policymakers and educators globally can derive valuable insights from Finland's education system to enhance educational quality and accessibility universally. This essay advocates for continued research and international collaboration to advance towards achieving high-performing education systems worldwide.

**Keywords:** Education Systems, High-Performing, Finland, Global Education Reform.

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## 1. Introduction

Finland has been consistently ranked as one of the top-performing education systems in the world, attracting attention and admiration for its innovative and effective approach to teaching and learning. This essay delves into the key factors that contribute to Finland's educational success, shedding light on practices that can inspire and inform global education reform efforts. By examining the role of teacher quality, curriculum design, equitable access, parental involvement, policy and governance, innovation, and cultural and social factors, we can gain valuable insights into the foundations of Finland's high-performing education system.

### 1.1. Brief Overview of the Topic

Finland's education system has gained international acclaim for its emphasis on teacher quality, equity, and innovation. By examining the key components of Finland's educational success, this study can uncover valuable insights for global education reform (Hargreaves, A., & Shirley, D., 2012). This essay will highlight the unique features of Finland's approach to teaching and learning, providing a foundation for discussions on how other countries can learn from and adapt these practices to improve their own education systems.

### 1.2. Importance of Studying High-performing Education Systems

The study of high-performing education systems, such as Finland's, is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, these systems serve as valuable models for policymakers and educators seeking to improve the quality and effectiveness of education in their own countries. By analyzing the practices and policies that contribute to the success of these systems, this essay can identify best practices and innovative strategies that can be adapted and implemented elsewhere. Secondly, studying high-performing education systems can help to challenge conventional wisdom and disrupt the status quo in education.

By showcasing alternative approaches and outcomes, these systems can inspire new thinking and spur innovation in educational practice. Furthermore, understanding the factors that contribute to the success of high-performing education systems can inform discussions on equal education and inclusive education.

By examining how these systems address issues of social and economic inequality, we can learn valuable lessons on how to create a more equitable and accessible education system for all students (OECD, 2019). Finland's education system has consistently ranked among the top in the world, attracting attention and admiration from educators, policymakers, and researchers globally (Sahlberg, P., 2011). With its emphasis on teacher quality, equity, and innovation, Finland has become a beacon of excellence in education. By delving into the unique features and success factors of Finland's education system, we can glean valuable insights and lessons that can inform and inspire education reform efforts worldwide.

This essay will explore Finland as a case study, examining the key components and principles that underpin its educational success. From teacher training and autonomy to comprehensive support systems and a focus on student well-being, Finland's approach to education offers a wealth of lessons and best practices that can help inform and shape the future of education on a global scale. Through a closer look at Finland as a case study, this essay aims to uncover the secrets behind its educational excellence and explore how these insights can be applied in diverse educational contexts around the world.

## 2. Literature Review

The Finnish education system has garnered international acclaim for its consistently high performance in various global assessments. This literature review explores key factors contributing to Finland's educational success and examines the unique characteristics of the Finnish education system.

## 2.1. Finnish Education System

One of the defining features of the Finnish education system is its commitment to equity and inclusivity. Unlike many other countries, Finland boasts a highly egalitarian approach to education, where socio-economic background has minimal impact on student outcomes (Sahlberg, 2011). This emphasis on equity is supported by policies that ensure equal access to quality education for all students, regardless of their circumstances (Simola, 2005). Central to Finland's educational success is its investment in teacher professionalism and autonomy. Finnish teachers are highly trained and trusted professionals who enjoy considerable autonomy in their classrooms (Sahlberg, 2018). This professional autonomy allows teachers to adapt teaching methods to meet the needs of individual students, fostering a supportive and student-centered learning environment (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2011). The Finnish curriculum is renowned for its innovative and flexible approach. The National Core Curriculum provides a framework that encourages creativity, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary learning (Sahlberg, 2018). This flexibility allows schools and teachers to tailor education to local needs and student interests, promoting engagement and motivation among learners (Simola, 2005).

## 2.2. High Performance in Education

High performance in education denotes achieving consistently strong educational outcomes, measured by indicators such as academic assessments, graduation rates, and student engagement metrics (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fullan, 2016). Internationally, Finland serves as a prominent example of high performance, consistently ranking at the top in assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), indicating superior student proficiency in subjects such as mathematics, science, and reading (Sahlberg, 2011). Moreover, high performance in education encompasses equity in outcomes across diverse student populations and the capacity of educational systems to equip students with skills for future challenges through innovative curricula and teaching methods (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Finland's educational success is attributed to its commitment to equity, teacher professionalism, and a flexible curriculum fostering critical thinking and creativity (Sahlberg, 2018; Simola, 2005; Pasi, 2020). This literature review explores these dimensions of high performance in education to elucidate the mechanisms underlying Finland's educational achievements and to draw lessons applicable to enhancing educational outcomes in other contexts.

High performance in education refers to achieving consistently strong outcomes in student learning, often measured through academic assessments, graduation rates, and student engagement metrics. In the context of global education systems, Finland stands out as a prime example of high performance. It consistently ranks at the top in international assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), demonstrating superior student proficiency in key subjects such as mathematics, science, and reading (Sahlberg, 2011). Beyond test scores, high performance in education also encompasses equity in outcomes across diverse student populations and the ability of educational systems to prepare students for future challenges through innovative curricula and teaching methodologies (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). The success of Finland's education system is attributed to its emphasis on

equity, teacher professionalism, and a flexible curriculum that fosters critical thinking and creativity (Sahlberg, 2018; Simola, 2005). By examining these factors, this literature review aims to elucidate the mechanisms behind Finland's educational success and draw lessons applicable to other contexts seeking to enhance their own educational performance.

## 3. Methodology

Combining the case study approach and literature review offers a robust methodology for investigating high-performance education. The case study approach will allow for a detailed examination of specific educational institutions or systems known for their exemplary performance in Finland. By conducting in-depth interviews with educators, administrators, and policymakers, this approach will uncover the underlying strategies, policies, and practices contributing to their sustained success over time. These case studies will provide rich qualitative data that illuminate the contextual factors and decision-making processes influencing educational outcomes.

Concurrently, the literature review will provide a comprehensive synthesis of existing research on high-performance education. It will involve systematically analyzing peer-reviewed articles, books, and reports to identify key theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and critical gaps in knowledge. This synthesis will help contextualize the findings from the case studies within broader educational research and theory, providing a solid foundation for understanding the mechanisms behind high performance in education systems globally.

### 3.1. Case Study

Examining Finland as a case study in high-performance education provides a compelling example of effective educational practices. Finland is globally renowned for its consistently high student performance in international assessments like the Programmed for International Student Assessment (PISA). Here's a detailed exploration of why Finland is often cited as a model: holistic approach to education, teacher quality and professionalism, equitable educational policies, curriculum design, and continuous improvement.

Finland emphasizes a holistic approach that prioritizes overall well-being alongside academic achievement. This includes minimal standardized testing, extensive recess periods, and a focus on student welfare. Finnish teachers are highly trained and respected professionals. They typically hold advanced degrees and undergo rigorous preparation, fostering a culture where teaching is a prestigious and sought-after career. Finland implements policies aimed at reducing educational inequalities. This includes providing comprehensive support for students with special needs, ensuring that all children receive an equitable education regardless of background. The Finnish curriculum emphasizes creativity, critical thinking, and practical skills over rote memorization. It is designed to be flexible, allowing teachers the autonomy to tailor instruction to meet the needs of their students. Finland's educational system is characterized by a commitment to continuous improvement based on research and evidence. Policies and practices are regularly evaluated and adjusted to meet evolving educational challenges. Studying Finland's educational system through detailed case studies would involve interviewing educators,

policymakers, and stakeholders to understand how these elements are implemented and sustained over time. By examining Finland's approach within its unique socio-political context, researchers can identify transferable lessons and insights applicable to other educational systems striving for excellence.

### 3.2. Literature Review

A literature review in the context of education, particularly when exploring high-performance educational systems like Finland's, would typically encompass a range of scholarly works and research studies.

Firstly, research studies on educational systems. This includes studies that analyze the structure, policies, and outcomes of educational systems, particularly those known for high performance. Research might focus on comparisons between different countries or deep dives into specific aspects of educational practices. Next, educational policy analysis. Literature reviewing educational policies and their impacts, both domestically and internationally, would provide insights into effective policy frameworks that support high-quality education. Studies on teaching methodologies, curriculum design, teacher training, and professional development are essential. These provide understanding on how effective teaching practices are developed and implemented. Literature exploring the influence of societal values, cultural norms, and economic conditions on educational outcomes. This helps contextualize why certain approaches are successful in specific contexts. Research on assessment methods, including critiques of standardized testing versus alternative forms of assessment, would be pertinent. This helps in understanding how educational success is measured and interpreted.

## 4. Findings

In this section, the key insights are synthesized from the literature review regarding various critical aspects of high-performance educational systems, focusing on teachers and teaching practice quality, curriculum and pedagogy setting, equitable access and inclusive education, parental and community involvement, supportive education policy and governance, innovation, adaptability, and investment in educational resources, as well as cultural and social factors.

### 4.1. Teachers and Teaching Practice Quality

One of the cornerstones of Finland's education system is its high regard for teacher quality and professional autonomy. In Finland, teachers are highly respected professionals who undergo rigorous training and continuous professional development (Maatta, K. 2013). They are given the autonomy to design their own curriculum and assessment methods, allowing them to tailor their teaching to the individual needs of their students. Furthermore, the recruitment process for teachers in Finland is highly selective, ensuring that only the best candidates enter the teaching profession. This emphasis on teacher quality has played a significant role in Finland's educational success, as high-quality teachers are able to create engaging and effective learning environments that promote student achievement and well-being. In addition to teacher quality, Finland's teaching practices also prioritize collaboration and support. Teachers work together in professional learning communities to share best practices, reflect on their teaching methods, and continuously improve their practice. This culture of collaboration and support helps to foster a sense of community and mutual learning among

educators, leading to a more cohesive and effective education system. Overall, Finland's focus on teacher quality and teaching practice excellence serves as a powerful example of how investing in and supporting educators can lead to improved student outcomes and overall educational success. By studying and learning from Finland's approach to teachers and teaching practices, other countries can gain valuable insights on how to elevate the teaching profession and enhance the quality of education for all students.

### 4.2. Curriculum and Pedagogy Setting

Curriculum and pedagogy play a crucial role in the education system in Finland. The curriculum is designed to be flexible and adaptable to meet the diverse needs of students, allowing teachers to customize their teaching methods and approaches to best support learning outcomes. Pedagogy in Finland is focused on promoting student-centered learning, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and creativity (Kupari, P., 2016). Finnish schools emphasize a holistic approach to education, integrating cross-curricular themes such as sustainability, digital literacy, and multiculturalism. Teachers are encouraged to use a variety of teaching methods, including project-based learning, collaborative activities, and experiential learning, to engage students and make learning meaningful and relevant.

While there may not be specific references related to curriculum and pedagogy setting in Finland, the overall approach in the Finnish education system emphasizes the importance of providing a well-rounded and flexible curriculum, combined with innovative pedagogical practices to support student learning and development.

### 4.3. Equitable Access and Inclusive Education

Equitable access and inclusive education are foundational principles in Finland's education system, ensuring that all students can receive a high-quality education regardless of their background or circumstances.

In Finland, all children have equal access to education, starting from early childhood education and continuing through comprehensive school and beyond. The Finnish education system is based on the principle of providing every student with an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of factors such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, or ability (Kaarinen, S. & Kerty, P., 2020). This universal access to education is supported by the government's commitment to providing free education, high-quality teaching, and a safe and supportive learning environment for all students.

Finland's education system is designed to mitigate socio-economic disparities and ensure that all students have the support they need to succeed academically. The Finnish education system prioritizes equity in education, aiming to level the playing field for students from different backgrounds. Measures such as providing free school meals, offering support services for students with special needs, and implementing targeted interventions for at-risk students help to address socio-economic disparities and create a more equitable learning environment for all students.

In Finland, inclusive education is a fundamental principle that guides the provision of support services for students with diverse learning needs. The Finnish education system recognizes the importance of catering to the individual needs of each student, whether they have disabilities, learning difficulties, or other challenges. Support services such as special education, counseling, and language support are

available to ensure that all students can fully participate in and benefit from their education. By providing tailored support services, Finland promotes inclusivity and ensures that every student has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

In conclusion, Finland's emphasis on equitable access and inclusive education reflects a commitment to providing all students with the opportunity to learn and succeed, regardless of their background or circumstances. By prioritizing universal access to high-quality education, mitigating socioeconomic disparities, and offering support services for diverse learner needs, Finland's education system strives to create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students.

#### **4.4. Parental and Community Involvement**

Parental and community involvement are essential components of a successful education system, contributing to student achievement, school improvement, and community cohesion (Lappalainen, M., & Vehviläinen, S., 2018). In Finland, parental and community involvement are prioritized to ensure strong partnerships between schools and families, supportive community networks and resources, and engaging parents in educational decision-making.

In Finland, schools actively engage parents in their children's education through regular communication, parent-teacher meetings, and involvement in school activities. Schools in Finland understand the importance of building strong partnerships with families to support students' academic success and well-being. Parents are seen as valuable partners in the education process, with teachers and schools working collaboratively with families to create a positive learning environment for students. Finland values community involvement in education, recognizing the role of supportive community networks and resources in enhancing students' educational experiences. Community organizations, local businesses, and non-profit groups often collaborate with schools to provide additional resources, support programs, and enrichment activities for students. By building strong connections with the community, schools in Finland can offer students a more holistic and enriching education that extends beyond the classroom. In Finland, parents are actively engaged in educational decision-making processes at the school and district levels. Parental involvement in decision-making is promoted through parent councils, school boards, and other avenues for parent participation. Parents have the opportunity to contribute their perspectives, ideas, and feedback to help shape school policies, programs, and initiatives. By involving parents in educational decision-making, Finland ensures that the voices and perspectives of families are considered in shaping the direction of education in the country.

Lastly, parental and community involvement play a critical role in fostering a supportive and collaborative educational environment in Finland. By emphasizing strong partnerships between schools and families, supportive community networks and resources, and engaging parents in educational decision-making, Finland promotes a culture of shared responsibility for student success and well-being.

#### **4.5. Supportive Education Policy and Governance**

Supportive education policy and governance are crucial for promoting high-performing education systems. Halinen, I. and Karjalainen, S. (2018) discovered from PISA that in

Finland, the education system is known for its strong focus on supportive policies and governance that prioritize student well-being, academic achievement, and teacher professionalism. The following points highlight the key aspects of supportive education policy and governance in Finland.

The first one is comprehensive education policy framework. Finland has a comprehensive education policy framework that guides the development and implementation of education policies at the national, regional, and local levels. The Finnish National Board of Education plays a prominent role in setting educational objectives, standards, and guidelines, while also monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of education policies. The policy framework in Finland is designed to support continuous improvement and innovation in education, with a strong emphasis on evidence-based practices and research-informed decision-making.

The second aspect is decentralized governance structure. Finland's education system features a decentralized governance structure that empowers local authorities, schools, and educators to make decisions that best meet the needs of their students and communities. This decentralized approach to governance allows for flexibility, autonomy, and responsiveness in addressing diverse educational challenges and opportunities. Schools in Finland have a high degree of autonomy in curriculum development, pedagogical practices, and resource allocation, enabling them to adapt and innovate to better serve their students. Investment in teacher professionalism should not be forgotten. Finland places a strong emphasis on teacher professionalism as a key pillar of its education system. Through rigorous teacher education and ongoing professional development opportunities, Finnish teachers are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and support they need to provide high-quality instruction and personalized learning experiences for their students. The education policies in Finland prioritize the recruitment, training, and retention of top-quality teachers, recognizing their critical role in shaping student outcomes and school success.

In conclusion, supportive education policy and governance are foundational elements of Finland's successful education system, contributing to its reputation for excellence, equity, and innovation. By prioritizing comprehensive policy frameworks, decentralized governance structures, investment in teacher professionalism, and a focus on equity and inclusivity, Finland has created a supportive environment that enables all students to thrive and succeed in their education.

#### **4.6. Cultural and Social Factors**

In Finland, education is highly valued within the culture, with a strong emphasis placed on the importance of learning and academic achievement. Finnish society places a premium on education as a means of personal and societal development, leading to high levels of educational attainment and a culture of lifelong learning. This cultural value of education influences education policies and practices, ensuring that resources are allocated towards providing high-quality education for all students. Finland is known for its strong sense of social cohesion and equality, which extends to the education system. Finnish schools promote inclusivity and equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their background or socioeconomic status. The emphasis on creating a supportive and respectful learning environment helps to foster a sense of community within schools, where students feel valued and respected for their unique

contributions.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics shaping educational effectiveness and equity. By synthesizing key themes and interpretations from the literature, this discussion aims to illuminate critical aspects that influence educational outcomes and inform actionable strategies for improvement.

The synthesis of findings underscores the multifaceted nature of effective educational systems. It highlights the importance of integrating various factors such as teacher development, curriculum flexibility, equity, community engagement, policy coherence, innovation, and cultural sensitivity. These elements collectively contribute to fostering a supportive environment for student learning and development.

### 5.1. Key Interpretations

The interpretations drawn from the literature suggest several implications for educational practitioners, policymakers, and stakeholders. These insights call for strategic actions aimed at enhancing teaching quality, fostering inclusive learning environments, strengthening community partnerships, improving governance structures, embracing innovation, and promoting cultural awareness. Addressing these implications through evidence-based practices promises to build resilient educational systems capable of meeting diverse student needs and preparing learners for future challenges.

This discussion explores each of these implications in depth, offering pathways for translating research into practical measures that can drive meaningful improvements in educational outcomes and equity.

### 5.2. Implications for Educational Practice and Policy Development

These insights offer several actionable implications for educational practitioners, policymakers, and stakeholders. Invest in comprehensive professional development programs and supportive working conditions to empower educators and improve teaching quality. Foster curriculum flexibility and innovative pedagogies that cater to diverse learning needs and prepare students for lifelong learning and professional success. Implement targeted policies and interventions to ensure equitable access and inclusivity, addressing socio-economic disparities and fostering a supportive learning environment for all students. Develop strategies to foster meaningful partnerships with parents, families, and communities, leveraging their support and involvement in education. Advocate for coherent educational policies, transparent governance structures, and strategic resource allocation to sustain improvements in educational outcomes and equity. Emphasize the integration of technology and innovative practices to enhance teaching effectiveness, student engagement, and educational outcomes. Promote cultural sensitivity in educational practices and policies to create inclusive learning environments that respect and celebrate diversity.

In conclusion, addressing these implications through collaborative efforts and evidence-based strategies can contribute to building resilient, inclusive educational systems that prepare all learners for success in a globalized society.

Continued research and evaluation will further refine these approaches and ensure their relevance in the face of future educational challenges.

## 6. Conclusion

Throughout this essay, we have explored the supportive education policy and governance structures in Finland. We have examined how Finland's comprehensive policy framework, decentralized governance system, emphasis on teacher professionalism, and commitment to equity and inclusivity have contributed to its success as a high-performing education system.

Understanding the factors that underpin high-performing education systems like Finland is crucial for informing education policy and practice globally. By analyzing the components that drive success in education systems, we can identify effective strategies and best practices that can be adapted and implemented in diverse contexts to enhance educational outcomes and promote equity.

The Finnish example provides valuable lessons for policymakers and educators worldwide. By embracing key elements of Finland's education system, such as holistic policy frameworks, decentralized governance models, investment in teacher professionalism, and a focus on equity and inclusivity, countries can work towards creating quality, inclusive, and equitable education systems that benefit all learners.

In conclusion, the supportive education policy and governance structures in Finland offer a compelling model for fostering excellence and equity in education. By learning from Finland's successes, countries can strive to create nurturing educational environments that empower learners and educators to reach their full potential and contribute to a more equitable and prosperous future for global education.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the organizers of the inaugural "International Elite Research and Innovation Training Program" at Sichuan Normal University, in collaboration with Oxford University and Cambridge University. This program provided invaluable training and mentorship, enhancing our research capabilities and academic growth.

Special thanks are extended to Professor Steven Puttick from Oxford University and Dr. Ksenia Ova from Cambridge University for their expert guidance and unwavering support throughout the completion of our research papers. Their mentorship not only enriched our academic experience but also inspired us to strive for excellence in our scholarly pursuits.

The knowledge and skills acquired during this program have profoundly influenced my academic journey and will undoubtedly shape my future endeavors. I am truly grateful for the opportunity to have been part of such a stimulating and enriching educational experience.

Feel free to adjust the content to better fit your personal experience and the specific details of the program.

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