



**Aila-Leena Matthies and Ehrenhard Skiera  
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From the beginning of the 2000s, as a result of the results achieved on the PISA student achievement measurement tests, major and distinctive interest was focused towards the Finnish public educational system and the daily practice of Finnish education. In particular, those countries and educational experts showed heightened interest in the matter where the official educational policy framework included the PISA-scores as an index of performance of the educational system and of the place occupied within the ranks of the countries. From German-speaking countries – Germany and Austria – interest was also intensive; in these countries, as opposed to Hungary, sceptical and openly critical voices, most distinctively from the academical sphere, were apparent regarding the PISA student achievement measurement tests and the performance of national educational systems.

In Hungary, there are relatively few comparatistic research groups within the field of educational research which could undertake the complex task of preparing a monographic work on the educational system of a country or region. The reason for this is twofold. On one hand, it is very time-consuming and also, requires huge amounts of money and considerable social capital to collect the necessary literature, the processing thereof, to acquire personal experiences of the given educational system, and furthermore, the thorough overview of the whole situation from the viewpoint of more than one scientific fields. On the other hand, in the last two decades the major role within the international information flow is acquired by the transmission of expert knowledge – the more it is so in the case of lesser known countries or regions. Today, gaining knowledge based on verified facts and data is a readily accessible way thanks to the international institutions' activity of data analysis and data communication regarding electronic texts. This on the other hand is associated with a certain focus shift: political intentions determine language and world view instead of academical scientific views and problem identification. The situation is similar in the case of Finland, too. One can read various coverages of the “Finnish wonder”, the “Finnish success”, the “Finnish model”, about “the outstanding performance of Finnish students and the Finnish educational system”; but much less can be read about the actual history of the Finnish education, the hundred-year-old tendencies that still have effect, or, still determine today's educational

field, about the international effects, about the cutthroat contest that was going on for decades in the field of educational politics; moreover, it is not even always clear, who those “Finnish” people are whom are referred to so often. The aim of the Gondolat Kiadó (Gondolat Publishing Company) when issuing the book *Educational and cultural system of Finland (Finnország művelődési és oktatási rendszere)* is to shed light on this circle of problematic questions: to provide thorough and comprehensive picture of the world that was previously known only superficially, from slogans and catchwords, that is, the world of what we call the educational system of Finland.

The book comprises 25 studies written by German and Finnish authors. If we add the numerous Hungarian authors contributing to the book, we may talk about a publication created with real international cooperation. We regard the fact to be helpful that the Hungarian publication of the book was essentially helped by András Németh, one of the most influential Hungarian scholars on the history of education, and the students of ELTE Doctoral School of Education. The interest in Finland in terms of history of education marks the appearance of a certain approach and scientific position that was hardly present in the previous few decades in the Hungarian scholarly literature.

After we have been introduced to the overall geographical and cultural aspects of Finland, we are presented with the school system of the country and the turning points of the history of Finnish education. As a closing section of the part on Finland the challenges regarding the future are outlined by the author of the chapter.

The publication introduces the characteristic Finnish national educational questions and problems that arise out of the country’s special geographical location, linguistic isolation, social circumstances, and also presents the answers to these questions coming from within Finland. Among these we may find the fact that exigencies have always been forming the Finnish educational politics and educational system through the historical periods the country was going. For example, in the 1950s important changes in the economical system were going on in Finland; from the end of the 1950s the agrarian society was slowly turning to be rather industrial. One of the key motivations for these changes was that the country had to pay large sums of indemnity to the Soviet Union after the Second World War. According to one of the authors of the book: „The necessity, that is, to pay the indemnities with industrial goods, for example metalworking goods, meant indeed the economical prosperity, because the Soviet Union was in dire need of these goods even after the full payment of the indemnities therefore these goods became important export products.” (32. p.).

We also gain insight into the system of important (Swedish, Russian, German) effects that formed the Finnish education system up until the independence. When mentioning the international effects the power of the extra-national institutions on the shaping of education politics in the past decades is also mentioned regarding the Finnish education system and the practice of education itself.

The authors of this present book, despite the many approaches of the publication, held the practical aim in sight that real and usable messages should be sent through to the actors in education politics. This is achieved by constantly reflecting on Finnish experiences: they compare German and Finnish experiences on the basis of German education. In this regard, one must highlight the last (10.) chapter, because one may read here those conclusions that are deduced from the system of Finnish education and the knowledge of German relations. The author of the closing chapter summarizes the international recognition of the Finnish education system in several factors. He deems it to be important that in the nine-class primary schools real democracy is achieved, that is, everybody has the same right to gain knowledge. The nationwide recognition of the teacher profession is also supporting this, besides the protection of professional independence of schools. However, in the background the core importance goes to the fact that the Finnish education control is highly centralized and nationwide consensus supports all the intentions of Finnish education. The catchphrase of this nationwide consensus on the level of decision-making is "With and not against each other!" He does not think the copying of the Finnish education system is possible. When mentioning the reasons for this he states that a centralized education control that is now working in Finland is impossible to be implemented in Germany. It is also highlighted that in political decision mechanisms there is no traceable general social consensus: "In Germany, education is the shadow area of politics." (291. p.). The mental background of the regions and of the actors of education politics is described as such: "Against and not with each other!" The author suggests orientation towards long-terms developmental projects and for this, the consideration of alignment of decision regarding education politics and the increase of problem-solving capacities.

The closing study of the publication, written by Aila-Leena Matthies especially draws our attention to the fact that the Finnish education cannot be seen as independent from the surrounding system of conditions, that is, the frameworks offered by a Northern prosperity state. According to the author the prosperity system was still stable in the 1980s and that was changed with the economic setback at beginning of the 1990s; since then, significant economical and organizational challenges are to be solved. The traces of these challenges can be seen in the school system as well. The pursuits of the present economical politics are also leading into one direction, namely, that the neoliberal political tendencies endanger and threaten the prosperity services that had been built up and used through decades. As a paradox situation those countries who look to Finland as an educational example to follow, try to develop that educational politics that is based on equality and democracy, the very same that Finland is dismantling these days.

At the same time, the authors of the original publication did not make a clear decision regarding the choice of problem identification, recognition or description based voice in order to document events in a voice not tainted by political overtones. The other choice could be to describe Finland from the viewpoint of certain educational politics and the system of factors determining thereof. Thus the reader might receive normative

statements even in the most informative chapters, such as: “Constant renewal is still needed, as is the ongoing training of the teachers. Otherwise Finland will not remain the model state of basic education in international context”. (89. p.)

Besides all of the obvious positive aspects of the publication a number of formal inaccuracies might be discovered. These do not decrease the value of the book; however, one may take certain consideration when utilizing the chapters as scientific literature basis or the starting point for research.