

# The surprising success of the Finnish educational system in a global scenario of commodified education

*REMO MOREIRA BRITO BASTOS*

Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, Fortaleza, CE, Brazil

## ABSTRACT

This paper, supported by bibliographic qualitative research, makes use of state of the art sources in studies of the educational system of Finland, as well as official government and multilateral institutions' documents that investigate and seek to influence national decisions in the area of education. Additionally, it discusses the emergence, in 2001, of the international recognition of the the success of the country's educational model. In view of the astonishing results obtained by students in the first Programme for International Student Assessment, which was conducted in 2000, we address the factors that contribute to the consistency and the success of Finland's educational paradigm. Among the achieved results, emerges the conclusive understanding that there are successful alternative educational systems that are deeply opposed to the global corporate standard of education, and which can serve as educational models for other nations.

## KEYWORDS

Finland; education; educational system.

## ***O SURPREENDENTE ÊXITO DO SISTEMA EDUCACIONAL FINLANDÊS EM UM CENÁRIO GLOBAL DE EDUCAÇÃO MERCANTILIZADA***

### **RESUMO**

Este artigo, apoiado em pesquisa qualitativa de cunho bibliográfico, lançando mão de fontes consideradas o estado da arte em estudos sobre o sistema educacional da Finlândia, bem como em documentos oficiais de seu governo e de instituições multilaterais que investigam e procuram influenciar as decisões nacionais sobre a área, aborda a emergência, a partir de 2001, do reconhecimento internacional do êxito do modelo de educação praticado naquele país. Ante os surpreendentes resultados obtidos por seus estudantes no primeiro teste do Programa Internacional de Avaliação de Estudantes, realizado em 2000, são abordados os fatores que contribuem para a consistência daquele paradigma educacional. Entre os resultados alcançados, destaca-se o conclusivo entendimento de que existem sistemas educacionais alternativos exitosos, cujos pressupostos se opõem profundamente ao padrão corporativo global de educação, os quais podem servir como modelo educacional a ser buscado por outras nações.

### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Finlândia; educação; sistema educacional.

## ***EL SORPRENDENTE ÉXITO DEL SISTEMA EDUCATIVO FINLANDÉS EN EL ESCENARIO GLOBAL DE EDUCACIÓN MERCANTILIZADA***

### **RESUMEN**

Este artículo, basado en principios de la investigación cualitativa de enfoque bibliográfico, recurriendo a fuentes consideradas de última generación en estudios sobre el sistema educativo de Finlandia y a documentos oficiales de su gobierno y de instituciones multilaterales que investigan e intentan influir en las decisiones nacionales acerca del área, trata sobre la emergencia, a partir de 2011, del reconocimiento internacional del éxito del modelo educativo utilizado en aquel país. Ante los sorprendentes resultados logrados en la primera evaluación del Programa Internacional de Evaluación de Alumnos, en 2000, se abordan los factores que contribuyen para la solidez de aquel paradigma educativo. De entre los resultados obtenidos, se destaca el firme entendimiento de que hay sistemas educativos alternativos exitosos, cuyas premisas se oponen fuertemente al modelo corporativo global de educación, los cuales pueden servir como un ideal educativo a seguir por las demás naciones.

### **PALABRAS CLAVE**

Finlandia; educación; sistema educativo.

## INTRODUCTION

Despite serious reservations of significant segments of the world academic community — Bonal and Tarabini (2013), Carabaña (2015), Carnoy and Rothstein (2013), Stewart (2013), among others — to which we associate, about its validity and reliability as a sufficient instrument to gauge the learning of students in the age range between 15 and 17 years old, as well as the negative consequences of the massive use of its results as the only criterion for defining the quality of different national education systems, this paper addresses Finland's remarkable performance in the tests carried out by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (henceforth OECD) in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) from 2001 to 2012. It also covers its international repercussions, provoking a wave of analyses and speculations concerning the accomplishments of that country's educational system, precisely when the bases of such success rest on educational conceptions that radically go against those in the hegemonic model advocated by the canons of the neoliberal ideology.

Starting from the analysis of the Finnish students' performance in the first round of the aforesaid test, carried out in 2000, the reactions to these results in Finland are exposed. In the following, the factors that explain this performance are explored, contrasting them with their counterparts found in the global corporate education model, and demonstrating how the superior consistency of those elements present in the Finnish system constitutes the basis of the success of the educational reforms implemented in that country.

## THE IMPACT OF THE RESULTS OF THE PROGRAMME FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ASSESSMENT (PISA), 2000

Prior to the release of the results of the first round of the PISA tests, on December 2001, there was a general agreement that countries regarded as world reference in education, such as the United States, Germany and France, to name a few, enjoyed educational systems which provided their students with superior instruction, which would entail excellence in academic performance and consistent learning, ranking themselves among the best in the world. National indicators of the area — educational attainment, its proportion of investment as a share of the national product, percentage of people with a higher education degree —, besides the success of its students in national and international academic competitions, such as Olympics in Physics, Mathematics, Computing, Chemistry and Biology, for example, reinforced and confirmed the common sense of the quality of those educational systems.

The dissemination of these results has shaken the world's academic and political status quo. Finland, a distant country located at the northern end of the globe, surprisingly, takes the first places in the three cognitive domains evaluated by the test, namely Mathematics, Science and Reading, the latter as a priority focus of

that round of PISA (whereas, in the 2003 round, priority was given to Mathematics and, in 2006, to Science).

The Chart 1 shows the performance of that country in the three areas of knowledge, in relation to the other OECD countries and the other participating nations, not members of this multilateral organization.

By way of comparison with the educational systems hitherto regarded as world-class, the highest rank obtained by Finland in *average performance on the combined reading proficiency scale* (OECD, 2003)<sup>1</sup>, shown in the first line of the Chart 1, contrasts with the disappointing and surprisingly poor performance of some of those educational systems, namely France, 15<sup>th</sup> position, United States, 16<sup>th</sup>, and Germany, 22<sup>nd</sup>, among others (OECD, 2003). In addition, the relative variation of intra and inter-school performance in Finland was exceptionally low, reflecting the equity of the system.

Finnish students' performance in the following examination rounds (2003, 2006, 2009 e 2012<sup>2</sup>) repeats the excellence standard recorded in the first round, that in 2000, which consolidates the perception of the consistency and the soundness of the northern European country's educational system, awakening the curiosity and the worldwide avalanche of analyses and researches on the fundamentals and the reasons of the success of its educational model.

## THE REACTIONS IN FINLAND

As Sahlberg (2011) points out, the initial reactions following Finland's first positive results in PISA within the native educational community were confusing. The world media wanted to know the secret of its excellent education. In the first 18 months after the publication of those results, hundreds of official foreign delegations toured all over the country in order to find out how their schools worked

**Chart 1 – The results of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000.**

Cognitive domains	Score points	OECD countries	All participants
Reading literacy	546	1 <sup>st</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>
Mathematical literacy	536	4 <sup>th</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>
Science literacy	538	3 <sup>rd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>

OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.  
Source: Adapted from Ministry of Education and Culture – Finland [2000].

1 View chart available on page 76 of the referred document.

2 In this year's round, Finnish students' performance in Mathematics has a slight drop compared to the previous PISA rounds, with that nation ranking 12<sup>th</sup>. In the other cognitive domains, Reading and Sciences, the country keeps in the front ranks, 5<sup>th</sup> in both (OECD, 2014b).

and how their teachers taught. Such was the degree of perplexity and admiration of foreign visitors over the “Finnish miracle” of PISA that the Finns themselves often could not manage to answer the questions with the wealth of details the visitors expected.

Yet according to the author, despite all the enthusiasm related to such a “feat”, most educators and school principals in that nation understand that large-scale standardized tests measure only a narrow range of the broader spectrum of school learning, and still warn that PISA advocates the transfer of policies and educational practices to other social formations, which are, in fact, mostly non-transferable, at least mechanically, as well as alert that their uncritical adoption leads to a simplistic view of educational improvement.

## FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE CONSISTENCY OF THE FINNISH EDUCATIONAL MODEL

When we consider, in this section, the factors that led the Finnish educational system from a median performance to the top of the PISA scale<sup>3</sup> in the relatively short period of 30 years, we will contrast those values with those ones that underpin the global corporate model of education, currently hegemonic, focused on constant large-scale standardized tests and strict control of teaching work, and structured according to the paradigm underlying business management techniques.

### LOW WITHIN AND BETWEEN SCHOOLS ACHIEVEMENT GAP

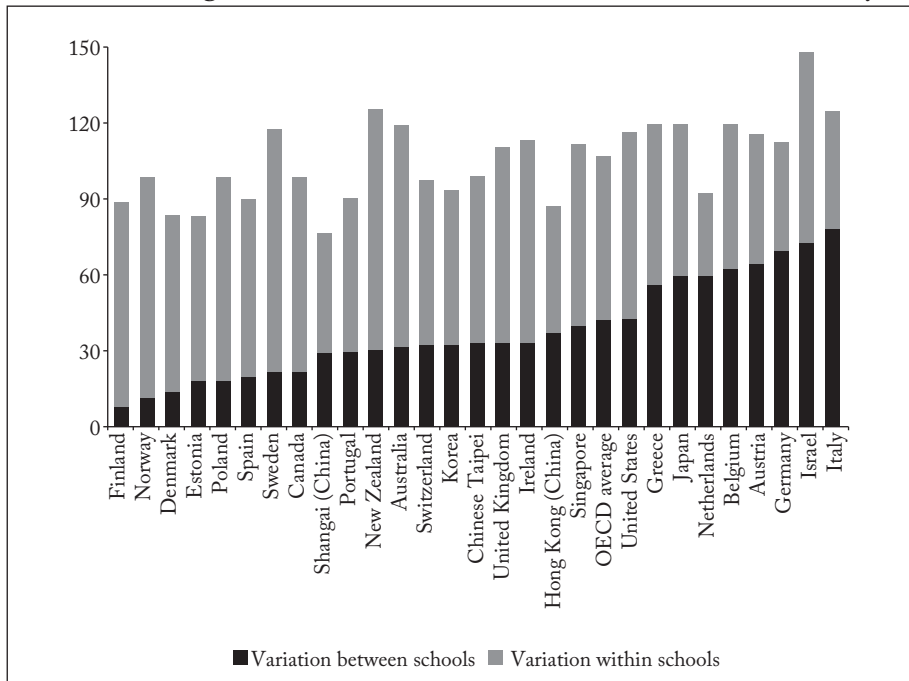
The excellence of the Finnish educational system has been favored by its remarkable homogeneity of performance in and between schools. According to the OECD (2010), no other country has so little variation in results across schools, and the difference within these schools among lower and upper-performing students is extremely low. In this sense, Finnish schools are able to serve all learners well, regardless of their family background or socioeconomic status.

The Chart 2 illustrates well the country’s top performance in low educational gap between schools, as well as its excellent situation among countries with lower educational gap within their schools, within their respective national territories, among OECD countries.

---

3 Sahlberg (2011) provides data on the Finnish students’ performance in several international tests since 1962 (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement — IEA, SIMS and Trends in Mathematics and Science Repeat Study — TIMSS). Although it is difficult to compare the learning of a student body in such disparate historical periods with such disparate socio-economic, cultural and political realities, the author delineates a convincing outlook in which he depicts the evolution of the performance of those apprentices in the period from 1970 to 2012. For further reference, see Martin, Gregory and Stemler (2000) and Robitaille and Garden (1989).

**Chart 2 – Variance within and between schools in student reading performance on the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Study<sup>4</sup>.**



OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.  
Source: Adapted from Sahlberg (2011)

To achieve such a feat, Finland decided to abolish *tracking*<sup>5</sup> in its regular general education in the mid-1980s. As a result, disparities in results between high and low school performance began to decline. From then on, irrelevantly of their abilities or interests, all students would study the same subjects of the common curriculum in the same classes, unlike before, when

4 To obtain the variation, by country, of the performance of the students in PISA 2003 in Mathematics within the schools and between them, one should resort to OECD (2004b, p. 19). While this variation among schools in OECD countries was around 34%, in Finland it was only around 4% (OECD, 2007). The same source points out that the non-selective nature of Comprehensive Schools in that country, which constitute the essence of the Finnish educational model (*peruskoulu*), contributes significantly to this, as all students receive the same basic educational provision on average, until the age of 16. It concludes by indicating that more pronounced variations in performance between schools occur more frequently in national educational systems in which learners enter in different types of schools at the beginning of their school life.

5 For two different approaches on tracking, see Burris and Garrity (2008), as well as Duflo, Dupas and Kremer (2009).

there were three levels of curricula to be assigned to students according to their previous performance in those disciplines, but often also based on the influence of their parents.

#### TEACHERS' SOCIAL PRESTIGE, AUTONOMY AND WORKING CONDITIONS

Many factors have contributed to the success of Finland's educational model, but any research undertaken with minimal bibliographical-empirical depth will reveal that one of these factors outweighs all others in importance to the consistency and sustainability of the system: their teachers.

As a corollary of a solid professional preparation (which a subsequent section of this paper addresses) and of the socio-ethical foundations underlying the exercise of their profession, in line with the prevailing values in that society, teaching enjoys immense prestige and trust in that country, as much as medicine, advocacy and other careers of the same reputation in terms of social value. In this way, the teaching career is lifelong and is one of the most disputed: annually, more than 20 thousand candidates compete for the position of primary school teacher, and only a tenth of these can be selected.

It is no wonder, then, that teachers and teaching are highly regarded in Finland. The Finnish media regularly report results of opinion polls that document favorite professions among general upper-secondary school graduates. Surprisingly, teaching is consistently rated as one of the most admired professions, ahead of medical doctors, architects, and lawyers, typically thought to be dream professions [...]. Teaching is congruent with core social values of Finns, which include social justice, caring for others, and happiness (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 97, emphasis added).

Accordingly, teachers participate intensely in school planning and curriculum development, which in that nation is not a competency of the federation, but rather of the municipalities, even though they follow some general directives outlined by the central government, especially of a programmatic nature, leaving sufficient room for the municipalities to regulate peculiar aspects to the local sociocultural reality.

It makes clear that the macroenvironment and the sociopolitical context in which teaching is exerted in Finland differ significantly from those ones in countries adopting the global corporate education model (United States, Canada, United Kingdom, among others), whose underlying paradigm of accountability relies on endless standardized external tests in which student performance is expected to reflect the quality of teaching work.

Precisely because it is based on a diametrically opposed ethical-educational paradigm, the Finnish model, characterized by the remarkable professional autonomy of its teachers, surpasses its neoliberal counterpart. Sahlberg (2011) summarizes, in a precious way, this key feature of that nation's educational system:

Interestingly, practically nobody cites salary<sup>6</sup> as a reason for leaving teaching. Instead, many point out that if they were to lose their professional autonomy in schools and their classrooms, their career choice would be called into question. For example, if an outside inspector were to judge the quality of their work or a merit-based compensation policy influenced by external measures were imposed, many would change their jobs. Finnish teachers are particularly skeptical of using frequent standardized tests to determine students' progress in school. Many Finnish teachers have told me that if they encountered similar external pressure regarding standardized testing and high-stakes accountability as do their peers in England or the United States, they would seek other jobs. In short, teachers in Finland expect that they will experience professional autonomy, prestige, respect, and trust in their work. First and foremost, the working conditions and moral professional environment are what count as young Finns decide whether they will pursue a teaching career or seek work in another field (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 101, emphasis added).

Teachers' assessment in Finland is conducted by their own peers in an unstructured way. That is, there is no formal process, because, as the teaching work is carried out on a cooperative basis, in teams that are organically intertwined, everyone is responsible for the performance of each one, since the autonomy they enjoy corresponds to the commitment not only with their teaching duties but also with the functioning of their schools as a whole. Faced with the identification of any deficiency in the performance of some educator, this one is aided by the whole team, in a respectful and supportive way, in order to overcome his/her difficulty, almost always through training in order to supply the deficiency. Basically, *the fundamental value that permeates the entire Finnish educational system is trust among its members*, based on the rigid standard of professional selection and on the high quality of the pedagogical and ethical training of its staff.

Educational accountability in the Finnish education context preserves and enhances trust among teachers, students, school leaders, and education authorities, and it involves them in the process, offering them a strong sense of professional responsibility and initiative. Shared responsibility for teaching and learning characterizes how educational accountability is arranged in Finland.

---

6 Salary is not the main reason why young Finns choose the profession of teacher. Nevertheless, the remuneration of effective teachers is at the same level, on average, of their peers in OECD countries (Sahlberg, 2011). It is important to consider, notwithstanding, that the Finnish State provides a wide range of goods and services that meet the basic material needs of its population, which does not occur in most of the countries of that organization. In addition, it should be noted that, in accordance with the values prevailing in that society, prestige, respect and recognition enjoyed by Finnish teachers could not fail to keep close congruence with their professional remuneration.



Parents, students, and teachers prefer smart accountability that enables schools to keep the focus on learning and permit more degrees of freedom in curriculum planning, compared to the external standardized testing culture that prevails in some other nations (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 154).

Still according to Sahlberg (2011), educational authorities and parents understand that education is a highly complex process to be measured and evaluated by purely quantitative parameters, because in the educational system of that nation the existing operative principle is that quality is defined by mutual interaction between schools and students along with parents.

Another feature of the Finnish educational model that contributes decisively to the effectiveness and fluidity of the system is the decentralization of decision-making power to the local authorities, i.e., municipalities and schools, which are now responsible for curriculum planning, implementation and the assessment of educational policy at the local level. This is a remarkable administrative, pedagogical and financial autonomy, since, according to Hautamäki *et al.* (2008), in 68.1% of schools a professor-director, with the local educational authorities, formulates the budget of those institutions, a percentage that is only 35.1% in the OECD countries.

As stated by those authors, with the extinction of the national inspection of didactic material occurred in the early 1990s, all schools and their teachers began to choose the books to be used, which occurs in only 83.5% of the countries of that multilateral organization:

The culture of trust [widespread throughout that society] means that education authorities and national level education policymakers believe that teachers, together with principals, headmasters and parents, know how to provide the best possible education for children and youth at a certain level. Also, the parents trust teachers (Hautamäki *et al.*, 2008, p. 87).

By being educated to be autonomous and reflective professionals, it is not only Finnish teachers' task to implement in their locality measures determined in a central national instance, as in the global corporate model of education, but rather to effectively participate in decision-making processes, that is another aspect in which the greatest maturity and consistency of the educational model practiced in that Nordic country is manifested.

## EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITIES AS THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE OF THE FINNISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Probably the most discrepant feature of the Finnish educational system vis-à-vis its neoliberal hegemonic congener in the remainder of the world is the basic principle of general and compulsory education for all children, irrespective of any of their intrinsic or extrinsic conditions.

Sahlberg (2015, p. 75) points out that in Finland equity means having a socially fair and inclusive education system that provides everyone the opportunity to fulfill their intentions and their dreams through education, which transcends mere universal access to school. In the words of this educator:

People sometimes incorrectly assume that equity in education means all students should be taught the same curriculum, or should achieve the same learning outcomes in school. This was also a common belief in Finland for a long time following the equality-based school reform that was first launched in the early 1970s. Rather, equity in education<sup>7</sup> means that all students must have access to high-quality education, regardless of where they live, who their parents might be, or what school they attend. In this sense, equity ensures that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions — in other words, home background.

Known as *Peruskoulu* and implemented since the early 1970s, this principle has thenceforth-structured basic education in that country, in which all students learn together in *comprehensive schools*<sup>8</sup>. Sahlberg (2011, p. 51) outlines the overall lines of the idea:

The central idea of *Peruskoulu* [...] was to merge existing grammar schools, civic schools, and primary schools into a comprehensive 9-year municipal school. This meant that the placement of students after 4 years of primary education into grammar and civic streams<sup>9</sup> would come to an end. All students, regardless of their domicile, socioeconomic background, or interests would enroll in the

---

7 Since the 1990s, multilateral agencies involved in education, notably the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), the World Bank and the OECD, prescribe *equity* in educational policies, subtly using this noun with a view to avoid the impossibility of an education structured under the framework of the capital system to provide genuine *equality* among learners. Noting that both terms are taken as synonyms in common sense, Saviani (2015, p.12) postulates the thesis that “it is exactly the use of the concept of *equity* that justifies inequalities by allowing the introduction of utilitarian rules of conduct that correspond to the deregulation of the entitlement, allowing differentiated treatment and extending on an unprecedented scale the discretion of those who hold the power of decision,” noting that, for those international agencies, *equity* is the attempt to reconcile merit and reward. Thus, it is understood the preference for that term, to the detriment of *equality*, because the latter contains in itself, intrinsically, the ethical-moral character that recognizes that all men have the same fundamental rights and provides them minimum dignity, which can not be fulfilled by the capitalist sociometabolic system.

8 Type of school in which admission is universal, not based on ability criteria or academic results. It parallels the “unitary school” advocated by Gramsci (2006).

9 The former ones taught general education, of a more humanistic nature, while the latter focused on the preparation for the labor market.

same 9-year basic schools governed by local education authorities. This implementation was revolutionary.

As expected, critics of the new system argued that it was not possible to have the same educational expectations towards children coming from different social and intellectual backgrounds, and that Finland's future as a developed industrial nation was at stake since performance of national education would have to be adjusted downward in order to accommodate the less talented students. In spite of being minority in that society, which was permeated by a broad cultural and political consensus on the fundamental lines of their educational system (OECD, 2007), these segments only weakened their particularistic and "meritocratic" discourse in 2001, with the publication of the results of the first PISA's international tests, which indicated that strong commitment to the principle of equity, established at the beginning of the reforms, has led to consistent results.

It was clear that success came precisely from the ethical-political choice of not seeking to create small geniuses, but rather to raise the performance of each child, without distinction. That is, to raise national performance in terms of learning by supporting all learners, not just a privileged minority, as it occurs in the global corporate education model, which segregates students into subgroups based on their previous or expected performance<sup>10</sup>.

As a reflection of the adoption of the principle of equity, more than 99% of students in the ideal age group in Finland successfully complete compulsory basic education; about 95% continue to be educated in secondary schools; of those, 93% complete their courses; and more than 60% enroll in higher education. All education in that country, from preschool to post-graduation, is completely tuition-free for all students<sup>11</sup> (Sahlberg, 2011).

Regarding higher education, the Finnish system is one of the most equitable in the world. The Higher Education Strategy Associates, based in Toronto, Canada, compares standards of equity and equality in higher education in different countries. Its Global Higher Education Ranking (Usher; Medow, 2010) compares the accessibility of higher education for residents in 17 countries. The study presents

---

10 In this dualistic educational model, one of the elements of the operational and market strategy of private schools, especially in those attended by the petty bourgeoisie children (since the bourgeoisie opts mostly for education abroad), is to concentrate the best students in "special classes", mainly in preparation for entrance exams for admission to higher education courses of high social prestige.

11 This does not mean that there are no private schools in that country. Known as "independent", most of them are tuition-free and fully financed by the State, and therefore subject to its control concerning the legal application of public resources. A tiny portion of them charges tuitions (therefore do not receive public funds). Only 2.4% of the national spending on educational institutions (at all levels) comes from private sources (Sahlberg, 2015).

data concerning six different indicators of affordability<sup>12</sup> and four of accessibility<sup>13</sup>. The big winner *on both criteria* in 2010 was Finland.

It is difficult not to realize that, in accordance with the prevailing social policy paradigm in that country, it is overwhelmingly understood that the expenses incurred by its educational system constitute an investment of unquestionable relevance for the whole society, and not a weighty cost on the national economy.

#### CONSISTENT TEACHER EDUCATION OF EXCELLENCE NECESSARILY LINKED TO RESEARCH

Congruently with the superior quality standard presented in the other dimensions of its educational system, Finnish teachers' training is one of the pillars of the excellence and success of its education model.

Since the late 1970s, all teacher education programs have been operating only in universities, and the master's degree has become the minimum qualification for teaching in that country's schools<sup>14</sup>. According to Uusiautti e Määttä (2013, p. 6):

The purpose was to provide all teachers with as high a quality of knowledge as possible, based on the latest research. In addition, teachers had to be prepared to follow and exploit the newest research findings in their teaching. This laid the foundation for the idea of seeing teachers as researchers in their own field of work. Teachers were expected to work with an open and critical mind and to contribute to the development of their profession.

Simultaneously, the scientific content and the advances of pedagogical research began to enrich the curriculum of teacher training, which had then assumed an academic nature, in the sense that the teachers adopted, in their work, a critical and analytical perspective, oriented to research, so as to focus their activities not

---

12 Affordability: quality of being financially possible; ability to pay.

13 *Accessibility*: "Generally speaking 'access' is held to have two possible interpretations [...]. One measure ('Type I Access') measures *the total number of places available* while the other ('Type II Access') examines *the social background of the students who fill them*. One type of access is not generally thought to be more important than the other; therefore, we believe that indicators examining the 'Type I' and 'Type II' should have equal weight." (Usher; Medow, 2010, p. 10, emphasis added).

14 By opting for a policy of teacher training that is antipodal to that of the Finnish educational system, the global corporate education paradigm favors rapid and superficial teacher training, and work under conditions of pedagogical subordination and accountability for the quantitative students' outcomes, measured by high-stake standardized tests spread throughout that educational model. In the United States, Teach for America Program recruits newly graduates without any prior teaching experience or training, *"trains" them in pedagogical skills for an average of five weeks*, and then sends them to serve as "instructors" in schools considered more "problematic". In the UK and Norway, Teach First operates in a similar way. For further reference, see Ravitch (2010, 2013), respectively, chapters 9 and 14.

only in the classroom, but also in school planning and evaluation activities and in curriculum development, in which they participate, along with principals and local education authorities, notably as a corollary of the high standard of their professional and intellectual training (Sahlberg, 2011).

Even the World Bank, a staunch advocate, diffuser and implementer of the global corporate education model on the capitalist periphery, recognizes, in a study produced by its education research team (Aho; Pitkänen; Sahlberg, 2006), that, compared to its counterpart in other countries, Finnish teacher training stands out for its depth and breadth<sup>15</sup>. Its balance between theoretical and practical learning helps young teachers to understand the various teaching methods as well as the dynamics of the correlation between teaching and learning.

With such high expertise and professional prestige, nothing could be more expected than the motivation that leads teachers to engage in the processes of educational development in their own schools, as well as in national and international projects. Besides that, educators spontaneously continue to enhance their own professional knowledge and skills, considering the support they receive from the state in this dimension a right, not an obligation, as it occurs in prescriptive educational systems based on teacher accountability as justification for neoliberal reforms.

Another multilateral organization, the OECD, in a sectoral paper entitled “Strong performers and successful reformers in education. Lessons from PISA for Korea” (OECD, 2014c, p.175), emphasizes how Finland has created a virtuous circle around self-respect and autonomy for its teachers:

High status and good working conditions — small classes, adequate support for counsellors and special needs teachers, a voice in school decisions, low levels of discipline problems, high levels of professional autonomy — create large pools of applicants, leading to highly selective and intensive teacher-preparation programmes. This, in turn, leads to success in the early years of teaching, relative stability of the teacher workforce, success in teaching (of which PISA results are only one example), and a continuation of the high status of teaching.

It should be noted that Sahlberg (2011) points out that the high professional status of teachers in Finnish society is a cultural phenomenon, but that their theoretical and pedagogical ability in the classroom and their enthusiastic and contagious involvement in the collaborative activities developed in networks of professional communities have their roots in the very model of teacher training, systematically delineated and implemented since the late 1970s, as well as in the ethical and epistemological foundation and in the values that guide the system. In other words, the political option to invest heavily in the formation of the national faculty was clearly assumed and effectively adopted by that society.

---

15 Among academic studies that confirm the prominence of the Finnish teacher education in the international scope, especially due to the solidity, balance and depth of its curriculum, refer to Saari (2009).

## WHEN LESS MEANS MORE

The discrepancy between the Finnish educational model and its neoliberal counterpart manifests notably in the theoretical and methodological options of the former, which prioritize the consistency and quality of the formative processes, rather than the short term quest for quantitative results through usually discontinuous efforts, clearly uncoordinated among themselves and ineffective from the pedagogical point of view, a *modus operandi* which is characteristic of the global corporate model of education.

In the educational paradigm in use in the Nordic country, an increase in class hours beyond the reasonable time lapse that balances the student's motivation, commitment and discipline, with the aim of compensating for a deficient level of learning, generates an opposite effect. It is being understood that long and intensive class days without appropriate intervals lead to fatigue, not to the maturation of learning, which is only acquired in longer periods and as a corollary of processes that harmonize the physical, psychological and social dimensions of the student's development. The same rationale applies, similarly, to the burden of homework assignments and standardized learning tests to which students are subjected.

Sahlberg (2011) points out that nations with the best performances in the PISA tests in all cognitive domains (Finland, South Korea and Japan, for example) devote fewer hours to formal instruction in the classroom, which means that students in these educational systems attend on average two years of formal pre-tertiary education less than their counterparts in other countries with opposite educational policies. This difference is further reinforced by the fact that compulsory basic education in Finland starts only at the age of 7, not at 5, as in most of the other countries.

Another mode of observing this paradox would be to examine the distribution of teachers' work hours in the various national educational systems, between hours of effective classroom instruction and hours in other teaching activities. According to Sahlberg (2011), between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades of elementary education, Finnish teachers teach approximately 600 hours per year in classrooms, the lowest working hours among OECD countries, while, according to this organization, in the United States the total annual average time of teachers in classroom, in the same series, is 1,080 hours<sup>16</sup>.

The quality *versus* quantity paradox manifests itself in the same way in the issue of assigning homework for students. Once again, Finland leads a ranking of educational systems in OECD countries, this time with the lowest weekly workload among 38 surveyed nations, 2.9 hours, compared to 6.1 hours in the United States, 6 hours in Australia and in Hong Kong, 5.5 hours in Canada

---

16 Although the OECD does not provide accurate data on this dimension of teaching work in Canada, Sahlberg (2011) estimates that educators in that country teach about 900 hours per year within classroom.

and Belgium, among other countries, with the OECD average being 4.9 hours (OECD, 2014a).

It should be noted that Singapore, Hong Kong (China) and Macao (China), countries/instances whose students perform similarly to their Finnish peers in the PISA tests, do so at the expense of strenuous hours after school, in private educational institutions that already constitute an economically significant industry in those nations. Contrary to this view, there is no mentoring or reinforcement in Finland other than those offered at the school itself, which the pupil attends when this becomes necessary (Sahlberg, 2011). The results of PISA 2003 have indicated the success of the Finnish option:

There is considerable cross-country variation in the degree to which students feel anxiety when dealing with mathematics, with students in France, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Spain, and Turkey reporting feeling most concerned and students in Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden least concerned [...]. For example, more than half of the students in France and Japan report that they get very tense when they have to do mathematics homework, but only 7 per cent of students in Finland and the Netherlands report this. It is noteworthy that Finland and the Netherlands are also two of the top performing countries (OCDE, 2005, p. 138).

Another feature of the Finnish educational system discrepant from the global corporate education model is the nearly complete absence of standardized performance tests outside schools. Its students only face tests of this type at the end of elementary school, at the age of 18 or 19, with a view to entering universities.

Indeed, school evaluation in the Finnish model is based on principles diametrically opposed to those prevailing in its neoliberal counterpart. In the latter, competition between schools, students and teachers permeates the whole system, leading them to “teach and study for the tests”, which are punitive for members of the said triad that do not reach the performance set as a minimum acceptable standard. In the opposite direction, Hargreaves, Halász and Pont (2008, p.86) identify in self-assessment the key to the continuous improvement of the educational system of Finland.

Finland does not have a system of standardised testing or test-based accountability. It does not have systems of competitive choice between schools or order its schools in public performance rankings. In the words of school leadership training providers we met, “all schools must be good enough and there is no reason to have elite schools and bad schools.” If schools have difficulty, the government does not intervene punitively but opts for self-correcting systems of support and assistance. There is an emphasis on evaluation for improvement, especially through school self-evaluation which is incorporated into national evaluations. Through this system of self-evaluation, networking, participation and co-operation, the system is able to

“build cooperative structures and hear the weak signals.” The system then responds to these through training, support and assistance from the municipality and other schools in ways that are calmly co-operative rather than dramatic or crisis-driven.

Again, the results of PISA seem to indicate the perspicacity of the Nordic nation as far as the evaluation policy of its educational system is concerned. By analyzing the results of the 2000, 2003, 2006, and 2012 rounds of that OECD survey, Sahlberg (2011) identifies a downward trend in average mathematical<sup>17</sup> performance in the series in question, notably among students from the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Japan, and some states in Canada and Australia, precisely those countries that have opted for educational evaluation policies heavily focused on accountability through intensive use of high stake external tests.

Moving in the opposite direction, the successful Finnish school system, during the same period investigated, has emphasized investment in teacher improvement, participative development of curricula, leadership and collaborative networks between schools, processes in which the guiding element of the whole philosophy of the system, which permeates all dimensions involved, is mutual trust among all participants.

Although this correlation pointed out by Sahlberg (2011), per se, does not necessarily prove the failure of educational reform policies focused on high-stake external tests, it clearly shows that the resort to the use of a physical, logistic and personnel structure involved in the design and operationalization of these standardized tests as appropriate instruments to carry out the evaluation of the education system is not a necessary condition for improving the quality of education, as the Finnish model, moving in the opposite direction, has demonstrated this. According to the researcher:

Testing itself is not a bad thing and I am not an antiassessment person. Problems arise when they become higher in stakes and include sanctions to teachers or schools as a consequence of poor performance. There are alarming reports from many parts of the world where high-stakes tests have been employed as part of accountability policies in education [...]. This evidence suggests that teachers tend to redesign their teaching according to these tests, give higher priority to those subjects that are tested, and adjust teaching methods to drilling and memorizing information rather than understanding knowledge. Since there are no standardized high-stakes tests in Finland prior to the matriculation examination at the end of upper-secondary education, the teacher can focus on teaching and learning without the disturbance of frequent tests to be passed (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 92).

---

17 The aforementioned author acknowledges that the observed tendency also affected, without significant changes, the performance of the same students in the areas of Sciences and Reading in those rounds of PISA.



In fact, what emerges from the rationale of the evaluative strategy incorporated into the educational system of that country is that, by prioritizing creativity and respecting and accompanying the learning pace of each learner, enables their cognitive development to have as parameter their own features and abilities, and not uniform patterns externally determined by statistical indicators. As the OECD itself acknowledges (2011, p. 127):

Accountability in the Finnish system is built from the bottom up. Teacher candidates are selected in part based on their ability to convey their belief in the core mission of public education in Finland, which is deeply moral and humanistic as well as civic and economic. The preparation they receive is designed to build a powerful sense of individual responsibility for the learning and well-being of all the students in their care. [...] The level of trust that the larger community extends to its schools seems to engender a strong sense of collective responsibility for the success of every student.

Because it is a teachers and schools' duty, which enjoy, as public institutions, broad respect and trust as a corollary of the high social cohesion and high standard of living existing in the country, the Finnish school and teachers evaluation policy distinguishes itself from the "witch-hunt" style that characterizes its counterpart in the global corporate model of education, notably in Anglo-Saxon countries, featured by the annihilation of trust and cohesion between the groups involved in the educational dynamics, generating suspicion, discredit and low morale among educators.

The following section addresses the current configuration of the Finnish educational system.

## HOW THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF FINLAND IS STRUCTURED<sup>18</sup>

Currently, the educational system in Finland has the following configuration:

- Infant education: offered up to 6 years old, when, then, children are entitled to one year of pre-schooling (optional) in order to smooth the transition to basic education.
- Basic education: to be accomplished at the basic common school (comprehensive schools), from the age of 7, with compulsory attendance for nine years. Although unified, in the first six years, basic education is sometimes referred to as "primary education", and, in the last three years, as the "first cycle of secondary education", according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), which distinguishes between primary education, lower secondary education and upper secondary education.

---

18 This section has as reference source the website of the Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland ([www.minedu.fi](http://www.minedu.fi)).

- Secondary education: corresponds to the second level of secondary education of the aforementioned classification, with non-compulsory attending and split in two paths: the general education, chosen by those who pursue the academic career or areas related to the humanities, or the vocational and training education, indicated for those who intend to work as technicians in companies and private organizations in general. Usually carried out in three years, it precedes higher education, to which access is obtained, for universities, upon passing the entrance examinations and, for universities of applied sciences (UAS), by means of proof of professional experience and satisfactory academic performance.
- Higher education: divided into universities and UAS, includes baccalaureates (three years in universities and three and a half to four years in UAS), master's degrees (two years in universities and one and a half year in UAS) and the doctorates. The master's degree enables for full teaching in non-higher education, but a great number of teachers and researchers advance to doctorate (Figure 1).

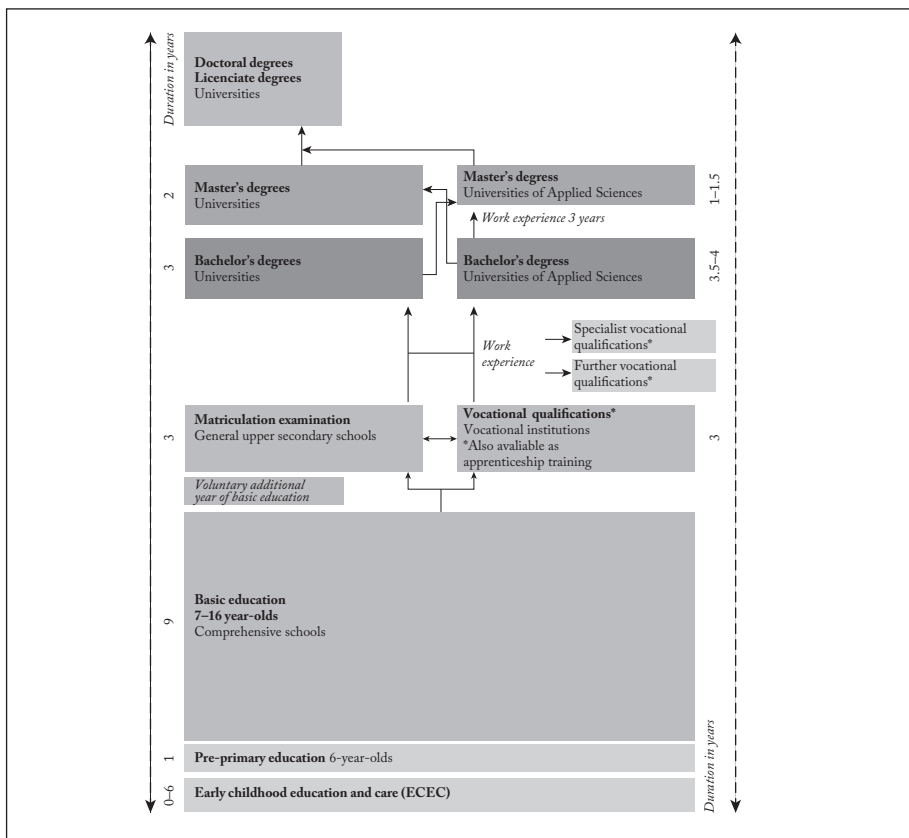


Figure 1 – Current educational system in Finland.

Source: Adapted from Ministry Of Education And Culture - Finland (2017).

The completion rates achieved by the educational system of the Nordic nation are really striking: basic education, 99%; general secondary education, 94%; and professional secondary education, 90%. With regard to attendance and accessibility, 98% of their children attend pre-school education, and 60% of young people study in higher education institutions, a rate overwhelmingly higher than the OECD average, around 25%.

## GENERAL EVALUATION AND REPRODUCTIVITY OF THE MODEL IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Finland's educational system has managed to remain relatively immune to the global subsumption of this sphere to some capitalist market mechanisms, which engender educational models based on competition between students, schools, and nations, with their endless high-stake tests fad, and the obsessive blaming of teachers for their student's precarious performance, a mispractice prevalent in most national states where governments are guided by the neo-liberal economic recipe. The Finnish educational policy, whose majority of assumptions and paradigms are opposite to those found in the correspondent systems of those countries, is closely intertwined with the other social policies carried out by that State<sup>19</sup>.

---

19 Paradoxically, it was only in the 1970s that Finland started to implement what was called the *welfare state*, a period in which, unlike that nation, most of the central countries, pressed by the aggravation of the structural crisis of capital, began the process of dismantling that sociopolitical and economic arrangement. In the present study, we adopt a critical perspective on the idea of a deliberate institutionalization, in those countries, of an "agreement" that, reconciling the antagonistic interests of capital and labor, would allow for a truce leading to an increase in remuneration based on the growth of its productivity. We understand that what was known as the welfare state was one of the historical configurations assumed by monopoly capital with a view to displacing (in both temporal and geographic dimensions) the contradictions intrinsic to its accumulation and reproduction, counting on the "strange help" from the State (Mészáros, 2011). Indeed, all the public policies adopted by these countries in the context in question had as their fundamental purpose the recovery of the average rate of profit and of the dynamism of the process of capital accumulation, dangerously impinged by the cyclical economic depressions that afflict this contradictory mode of production. In fact, the imperatives of legitimacy, aiming at an implementation of the national economic policies in the least contentious manner, brought substantial improvements in living conditions to the aristocracy of the working class in those countries, yet it can not be ignored that precisely these "benefits" were used as instruments for subsidizing the reproduction of the labor force, decreasing its value and, consequently, the cost of capital, thus raising (at least provisionally) its average rate of profit. Given the limitations due to the scope of the present study, it is not possible to address other aspects that would corroborate our perspective, such as the fact that overexploitation of the labor force in the peripheral capitalist countries provided the necessary profitability base so that capital could concede those "benefits" that allowed him to pass through that peculiar configuration, which is the reason why we recommend Gough and Cabrero (1982) and O'Connor (1979) for deepening on such issues.

These achievements provide the basis for a desirable and beneficial assimilation of the positive aspects of the Finnish experience by other nations with a view to improving their educational systems. It is important, notwithstanding, to harmonize satisfactorily two issues that are often dealt with in a dichotomous way, concealing the complexity of the reproducibility of the educational practices adopted by the Nordic country in other national formations.

It is necessary to comprehend that the Finland's model success has not "fallen from the blue sky like a lightning on a sunny day", but it was embedded in a broad and participatory nation project, as mentioned before. Shortcuts and short-term "solutions" that characterize the *modus operandi* of the current capitalist phase, in their congenial and obsessive eagerness to competition, do not produce the necessary consistency in order to solidify the proper foundations for the development of a fair and effective system.

Thus, the success of Finland's educational system results from a set of social, cultural, political, economic, and ethical-moral factors that have shaped that society in the last 70 years and from a conscious and deliberate project, by that social body, in the same period, in order to create the basis for building a modern, prosperous, equitable and just nation. The strength of the national consensus around this mission is reflected, among other manifestations, in the solid permanence and consolidation of its free public education system since the early 1970s, regardless of the ideological profile of the political parties that were in charge throughout this period, as well as in the strong resistance to the pressures of the global capitalist macrostructure, with a view to subsuming the education system of that country to the mechanisms of reproduction and accumulation of capital concentrated in the immense transnational monopolistic financial conglomerates<sup>20</sup>.

Just as the efforts to mechanically transport to other countries and try to reproduce only certain aspects that have proved effective in the Finnish model are obviously innocuous, the accurate analysis of this model shows that the construction of the educational system itself takes place in the broad scope of the formulation and development of the welfare state set up in the nation since the dawn of the 1970s.

From this perspective, education is integrated into the entire framework of public policies in that State, which supports and makes it an indispensable basis for social cohesion and the socioeconomic development of that nation. Attempting to reproduce an educational system with the

---

20 It is necessary to record an alternative analytical perspective outlined in Simola and Rinne (2013), in which the authors emphasize the historical contingencies and convergences as factors with greater potential to explain the success of the Finnish educational system, utterly discarding the rational and deliberately built conscious political-educational decisions as the source of the success of such educational model, and stating that the latter occurred in spite of the former.

values, foundations, principles and objectives found in the Finnish model in a foreign society characterized by high levels of social inequality and misery, absence of a minimally democratic political system and high levels of income concentration and economic power will prove to be a fruitless and frustrating experience.

On the other hand, the relative peculiarity of some features of the Finnish society, State and educational system should not serve as a pretext for disregarding its model as an educational paradigm to be sought by other nations, naturally through a process of mutual learning, collaboration and interaction among participants in the systems in comparison, aiming at the necessary adaptations to their respective social, cultural, political and economic contexts.

One of the claims of those who share such a misunderstanding has been that the small territorial extension and the small population of Finland are absent in many other countries, which would make its system unviable as a pattern to be considered in the educational policy formulations of other nations. The argument falls apart when one learns the fact that, for example, 30 of the 50 states of the United States have a population similar in size to that of this Nordic country, it being known that these political and administrative instances have, in the United States, for example, considerable administrative, pedagogical and financial autonomy to formulate their educational policies. Therefore, no structural factor would, per se, prevent them from considering the alternatives adopted by the successful model of that northern European country.

Another similarly mistaken idea points to the supposed ethnic and cultural homogeneity that allegedly exists in Finland, which does not occur in large countries trying to reformulate their educational systems. This trait has gradually lost relevance and intensity in that society in recent decades, with the upsurge of migratory processes coming mainly from other European countries. However, what is striking is that, as Sahlberg (2011) reminds us, this same relative homogeneity can be found in Japan, South Korea, and Shanghai, whose educational systems are often taken as benchmarks by market-driven educational reformers, which demonstrates its fragility as an argument justifying the alleged inapplicability of the Finnish experience in other countries.

Indeed, in addition to the difficult reproduction in other national formations of some of the aforementioned factors of the success of Finland's educational system, notably those of a sociocultural nature, it is hard to believe that societies affected by social inequality, as well as those characterized by an individualistic and competitive ethos — like the Anglo-Saxon nations —, are able to assimilate the fundamental values that have guided and marked the success of the “Finnish way.”

Nonetheless, it has been realized that there are reasonably successful alternative education systems, whose assumptions are profoundly opposed to the

overall corporate pattern of education, which can enable the nations victims of this ruse the possibility of cooperative development, with the participation of the broader segments of society, of an autonomous model compatible with the values of equality, dignity, fraternity and solidarity that guide the social groups that have already understood and matured the basic link between equity and social cohesion.

## REFERENCES

- AHO, E.; PITKÄNEN, K.; SAHLBERG, P. *Policy development and reform principles of basic and secondary education in Finland since 1968*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Education Unit, 2006. (Education Working Paper, Series 2).
- BONAL, X.; TARABINI, A. The role of Pisa in shaping hegemonic educational discourses, policies and practices: the case of Spain. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, v. 8, n.3, p. 335-341, 2013.
- CARABAÑA, J. *La inutilidad de Pisa para las escuelas*. Madri: Las Cataratas, 2015.
- CARNOY, M.; ROTHSTEIN, R. What do international tests really show about U.S. student performance? *Economic Policy Institute Report*, 28 jan. 2013. Disponível em: <<http://www.epi.org/publication/us-student-performance-testing/>>. Acesso em: 5 ago. 2015.
- GAMORAN, A. Is ability grouping equitable? *Educational Leadership*, n. 50, p. 11-17, 1992.
- GOUGH, I.; CABRERO, G. R. *Economía política del estado de bienestar*. Madri: H. Blume, 1982.
- GRAMSCI, A. *Cadernos do cárcere*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2006.
- HARGREAVES, A.; HALÁSZ, G.; PONT, B. The Finnish approach to system leadership. In: OECD. *Improving School Leadership: case studies on system leadership*. Paris: OECD, 2008. 2 v.
- HAUTAMÄKI, J. Harjunen *et al. PISA 06 Finland*. Analyses, reflections and explanations. Helsinki: Finnish Ministry of Education, 2008.
- MARTIN, M. O.; GREGORY, K. D.; STEMLER, S. E. *TIMSS 1999 technical report: IEA's Repeat of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study at the Eight Grade*. Chestnut Hill: Boston College, 2000.
- MÉSZÁROS, I. *Para além do capital: rumo a uma teoria da transição*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2011.
- MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND CULTURE - FINLAND. *Education in Finland*. Finland Education in a nutshell. 2017. Disponível em: <[http://oph.fi/download/146428\\_Finnish\\_Education\\_in\\_a\\_Nutshell.pdf](http://oph.fi/download/146428_Finnish_Education_in_a_Nutshell.pdf)>. Acesso em: 22 jun. 2017.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The results of PISA 2000*. [200-]. Disponível em: <<http://www.minedu.fi/pisa/2000.html?lang=en>>. Acesso em: 2 mar. 2015.
- O'CONNOR, J. *The fiscal crisis of the state*. New York: Transaction Publishers, 1979.

ORGANIZAÇÃO PARA A COOPERAÇÃO E O DESENVOLVIMENTO ECONÔMICO(OCDE). Aprendendo para o mundo de amanhã. *Primeiros resultados do Pisa 2003*. São Paulo: Moderna, 2005.

\_\_\_\_\_. Does homework perpetuate inequities in education? *PISA in Focus*, Paris, n. 46, p. 1-4, Dec. 2014a.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Education at a glance*. 2010 OECD indicators. Paris: OECD, 2010.

\_\_\_\_\_. *First results from PISA 2003*. Executive Summary. Paris: OECD, 2004.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Literacy skills for the world of tomorrow: further results from PISA 2000*. Paris: OECD, 2003.

\_\_\_\_\_. *PISA 2012 results in focus: what 15-year-olds know and what they can do with what they know*. Paris: OECD, 2014b.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Strong performers and successful reformers in education*. Lessons from PISA for Korea. Paris: OECD, 2014c.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Strong performers and successful reformers in education*. Lessons from PISA for the United States. Paris: OECD, 2011. Disponível em: <<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/46623978.pdf>>. Acesso em: 17 fev. 2015.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Finnish success in PISA: and some reasons behind it 2*. PISA 2003. Paris: OECD, 2007.

RAVITCH, D. *Reign of error: the hoax of the privatization movement and the danger to America's public schools*. New York: Basic Books, 2013.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The death and life of the great American school system: how testing and choice are undermining education*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.

ROBITAILLE, D. F.; GARDEN, R. A. *The IEA study of mathematics II: contexts and outcomes of school mathematics*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1989.

SAARI, S. *Leadership and management of education*. Evaluation of education at the University of Helsinki 2007-2008. Administrative Publications 58. Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2009.

SAHLBERG, P. *Finnish lessons: what can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* New York: Teachers College, 2011.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Finnish lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* New York: Teachers College, 2015.

SAVIANI, D. Equidade e qualidade em educação: equidade ou igualdade? In: \_\_\_\_\_. *História do tempo e tempo da história: estudos de historiografia e história da educação*. São Paulo: Autores Associados, 2015. Cap. 2.

SIMOLA, H.; RINNE, R. Política educativa y contingencia: creencias, estatus y confianza detrás del milagro finlandés de Pisa. *Profesorado: Revista de Currículum y Formación de Profesorado*, Granada, v. 17, n. 2, p. 171-192, 2013.

STEWART, W. Is Pisa fundamentally flawed? *TES magazine*, 26 jul.2013. Disponível em: <<https://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6344672>>. Acesso em: 5 ago. 2015.

USHER, A.; MEDOW, J. *Global higher education rankings 2010: affordability and accessibility in comparative perspective*. Toronto: Higher Education Strategy Associates, 2010.

UUSIAUTTI, S.; MÄÄTTÄ, K. Significant trends in the development of Finnish teacher education programs (1860-2010). *EducationPolicyAnalysisArchives*, Arizona, v. 21, n. 59, p. 1-18, jul. 2013.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

REMO MOREIRA BRITO BASTOS is a doctoral candidate in education from the Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC). He is a Federal public servant of the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE).

*E-mail:* remomoreira@gmail.com

*Received in November 03, 2015*

*Approved in February 22, 2016*