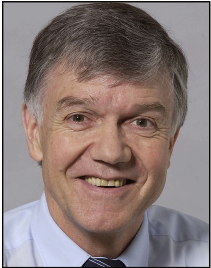


PISA results

Finland's PISA-crash is a wake-up call for Swiss education policy

by Carl Bossard,* Switzerland



Carl Bossard
(Photo pma)

"Can you buy Finnish schools?" an education expert from the Middle East is said to have asked. After the first PISA assessment, he too made a pilgrimage to the promised land of the world's best schools – with the intention of copying and pasting. Such educational trips were made possible by the PISA rankings.

The "Programme for International Student Assessment" (PISA) compares the ability of 15-year-old students in the subjects of reading, mathematics, and science. The results are recorded on a points scale and categorised into competence levels.

Discrepancy between what was predicted and what actually happened

The first global education assessment in 2000 put Finland in a top global position. Like its cross-country skiers, its students also achieved world fame. The Finnish PISA successes quickly aroused international interest. Educational tourism boomed. Finland's myth also attracted me like a magnet. I travelled to the Mecca of educational success. But in the far north I did not experience what I had heard in Switzerland, and I did not see what Swiss education experts preached and postulated: teachers who see themselves as learning coaches and do not instruct, teachers who moderate group work and do not teach, teachers who facilitate *self-organised learning environments* (SOLE) and do not introduce the subject content collectively. No trace of *learning without a teacher* (Lernen ohne Lehrer, LOL), no sign of in-

dividualised teaching, no self-regulated learning with weekly plans.

In all the schools I visited, I experienced the complete opposite, namely guided and collective lessons in whole classes – structured and divided into small sections, varied with questions and discussion sequences, but consistently guided. This was followed by joint exercises – with precise tasks and feedback that promoted learning. Teacher assistants supported the children and practised with them. Relaxed in tone, intensive in action: variety without distraction. Nobody was left to their own devices.

Tangible impact of "direct instruction"

Could this be Finland's secret and explain its top ranking? That's what I asked myself on the way back from the pilgrimage site. As an attentive observer, I discovered much of what the New Zealand education researcher *John Hattie* defines as effective learning in his 2009 study "Visible Learning": guided and structured lessons – student-centred, subject-oriented, but teacher-led. Hattie speaks of "direct instruction".

Many education experts disqualify this form as old-fashioned frontal teaching and reject it. But it is effective for learning. Empirical studies show this. *Franz E. Weinert*, key witness in favour of *Curriculum 21* and Director of the Max Planck Institute for Psychological Research, states succinctly: "To the horror of many reform pedagogues, most serious studies have shown that a form of teaching known as 'direct instruction' is more effective than average. It improves the performance of almost all pupils."

Finland's school performance "very worrying"

However, the Finnish education miracle is not long-lasting. Between 2003 and 2012, the country lost a total of 25 PISA points, which corresponds to the learning success of an entire school year. In international studies, Finland's learning performance continues to decline. Finland's education minister even rates the results for 2022 as "very worrying". The former educational paradise

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is still ahead of Switzerland in science and reading.

Why this success? Why this decline? Some learning researchers explain Finland's education miracle with the old school system: strong teachers who influence and take the lead, guided and clearly structured lessons, a more traditional methodology. In the mid-1990s, the country changed its credo. Central staff replaced experienced school inspectors.

The crash begins at the same time as the reforms take effect

The education system now relies on teachers who take on the role of learning coaches and, as "teaching coordinators", focus on the individual child and their self-organised learning instead of the classroom. At the same time, the curricula

are being changed over: They are no longer formulated in terms of content and objectives but are one-sidedly based on competences. The reforms take effect from 2012. It will take ten to fifteen years, states education research. Correspondingly, Finland performs weaker in the assessments. *The PISA grades are getting worse exactly when the reforms are beginning to take effect.*

Finland's mistakes are resulting in a downward trend. Lessons can be learnt from this. Switzerland has also taken the same path with its reforms. A responsible education policy should counteract this. The losers in education are always the poorer learners among the children.

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