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Comparative Critical Analysis of Educational Policies of Finland and Estonia

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Abstract

The present paper aimed at conducting a critical and comparative policy analysis of Finland and Estonia. The analysis based on the Education Policy Outlook profiles published by the OECD (2021). The latter is specialized in evaluating nations with the aim of inspiring national policies for better lives. Specifically, the analyzed profiles are of the year 2020 and OECD's six policy levers (equity and quality, preparation to the future, school improvement, governance, funding, and evaluation and assessment) provided a framework for analysis. Finland has been selected for comparison and contrast as it is considered to be a high performing European Union member as well as a developed economy whereas Estonia, has been selected due its uniqueness as a small country (45,227 km^2) with a small number of the population (1.325 million), and multi-languages usage as mediums of instruction (Estonian and Russian). The types of secondary data and evidences in this critical analysis were mainly fetched from OECD reports as well as journal articles. Specific policies which have been very useful for such analysis are education policies of Estonia and those of Finland. Compared to OECD countries, the equity and quality of educational policies in Estonia are stronger at 79% but compared to Finland, the latter is ranked among the highest in the OECD as far as students' learning outcomes in Science (81%), Mathematics (86%), and Reading (91%) are concerned. Conversely, in Finland, however, drop-out rates from secondary education are relatively high among boys (0.7%). Additionally, a highly-selective tertiary admission system has contributed to both delay to universities entry (generally at 24 years compared to the average of OECD which is 22 years) and the delay in labor market entry as the average duration of tertiary education is 6.5 years compared to 5 years among OECD countries. Some of the key strengths in Finland, as far as evaluation and assessment are concerned, include institutional and student's self-evaluation and an improved-focused on evaluation and assessment at a percentage of 76%. However, some challenges also exist: Teachers need more support in designing students' assessment practices and a central guidance is deemed useful for teachers and school-leaders appraisal. As members of European Union and OECD, Estonia and Finland have in common some education features and policies at different levels which seem to be not too different. The investment made in education especially regarding the expenditure per student per annuum are proportionally related to the total number of population (which is generally not too much); the geographical size as well as the national GDP.

Keywords: Education, policies, comparison, analysis

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1. Introduction

The present article aims at conducting a critical and comparative policy analysis of Finland and Estonia. The analysis based on the Education Policy Outlook profiles published by the OECD (2021). The latter is specialized in evaluating nations with the aim of inspiring national policies for better lives. Specifically, the analyzed profiles are of the year 2020 and OECD's six policy levers (equity and quality, preparation to the future, school improvement, governance, funding, and evaluation and assessment) provide a framework for analysis. Finland has been selected for comparison and contrast as it is considered to be a high performing European Union member as well as a developed economy whereas Estonia, has been selected due its uniqueness as a small country (45,227 km^2) with a small number of the population (1.325 million), and multi-languages usage as mediums of instruction (Estonian and Russian). The types of secondary data and evidences in this critical analysis are mainly fetched from OECD reports as well as journal articles. Specific policies which have been very useful for such analysis are education policies of Estonia and those of Finland

2. Comparative Analysis of Educational Policies against OECD's six policy levers

a. Equity and Quality

Equality asserts that every student should have the same access to a high-quality education regardless of where they come from. Equity recognizes that different students need different resources to achieve the same goals as their peers (Cramer, Littele & McHatton, 2018). Generally speaking, compared to OECD countries, the equity and quality of educational policies in Estonia are stronger at 79% but compared to Finland, the latter is ranked

among the highest in the OECD as far as students' learning outcomes in Science (81%), Mathematics (86%), and Reading (91%) are concerned. Specifically, this is more remarkable, in Reading and Mathematics where the performance in Estonia has steadily increased in the period of 2006 to 2018 with an increment of 3.6% annually. In addition, compared to an OECD average of 22.6%; Estonia had the smallest share of low performers in Reading among OECD countries with a rate of 11.1%. Figures show that Estonia outperformed Finland, as the latter has an average of 13.5% in the same area (OECD, 2019). At this level, it may be argued that educational policies which take Science, Mathematics, and Reading as core and foundational subjects, are more visionary and set tangible priorities. Recent research by Sait, Mehmet and Zeliha (2016) has demonstrated how much these subjects contribute to critical thinking, problems solving and reading comprehension.

According to International Early Learning and Child Well-being study (IELS, 2020), children in Estonia demonstrated strong self-regulation and social-emotional skills. In the same vein, participation and access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and reading outcomes are less strongly associated with socio-economic background, a phenomenon which is quite similar to Finland. Associating access to education and children socio-economic background, should not affect children rights, access, and performance in schools. For instance, Gemechu (2018) has conducted a research in Ethiopia on effective of family's economic status and its impact on students' performance and revealed that, there is no significant relationship between family income and students' academic achievement. For this reason, it is highly recommended that educational policy makers avoid such considerations when it comes to student's placement and performance measurement.

The evidences and systems in place display that services in ECEC both in Estonia and Finland have formal curricula which are delivered by qualified teachers. It is clear that recruitment of highly qualified teachers, maximization of enrolment rates and conducive systems are enabling factors that yield successful results in educational systems (Lesiba & Dikeledi, 2015). Concretely, in Estonia, the participation rate to ECEC has increased over time. In 2017, the enrolment of 2-year-olds was 73% while for 3-year-olds was 91%, a performance which is beyond OECD average (62% and 79% respectively). For Finland, on the other hand, ECEC is provided in centers or family day care centers. However, compared to OECD averages, children under 3, and among 5-year-olds, the enrolment rates have remained inferior, even though the trend was growing with an increment of 65 between 2010 and 2017 for children aged between 3 and 5 years.

Moreover, in Estonia, there are remarkable smaller inequalities in access to ECEC. Furthermore, the repetition rate is only 4% for 15-year-olds compared to OECD average rate of 11.3%. Finland, on this aspect, comes ahead of Estonia, as the repetition rate is only 3% of the same age range. However, in Estonia, performance in Science broadly remain stable. Again, there is low performance of students in Russian-medium schools compared to Estonian-medium schools. Statistics show that Russian-medium schools scored 42 points less than in Reading and Science while it was 29 points in Mathematics (remember that the OECD average in Reading is 77%, in Mathematics 76% while in Science, the average is 78%). This goes hand in hand with the poor acquisition of the Estonian language. At this level, different articles (The effectiveness of bi-lingual education by Christine (1996); the effects of bi-lingual education on the English language and literacy outcomes on Chinese-speaking children by Kathleen, Xi, and Katie (2016); impact of bi-lingual education on student achievement) have extensively investigated issues related to bi-linguicism. The same situation is also reflected in Finnish education system, where students of an immigrant background have much lower outcomes than their non-immigrant peers (74 points less). It is arguably noted that factors such as repetition and access have to be highly controlled as they may affect (positively or negatively) the entry to the labor market.

Low performance, in reading of children from immigrant backgrounds, according to PISA (2018) compared to their peers (a gap of 35 points in Estonia and 74 points in Finland) and performance gap between boys and girls, are two other realities that are observed in both education systems. Policies such as Language Immersion Program (2016), Preschool Child Care Institutions Act (2000), and Basic and Upper Secondary Schools Act (2010) have been so much influential in shaping the current Estonian education system, and in Finland, many system-level policies support greater equity. In their empirical study, Raza and Hazir (2019), have extensively examined empirical evidences between boys and girl's education performance and have found out that globally, girls have been dominating boys in terms of educational performance. Having the same realities in both Estonia and Finland would not be something strange. Though, both are OECD countries, however, mean student performance across three main PISA disciplines (Reading, Science, and Mathematics) are on an opposite trend. In Estonia, the trend is steadily increasing while in Finland, the trend declines (especially from recent years).

b. Preparing students for the future

The capacity for a country to produce skilled candidates for labor markets, is reflected in a country's education system and coherent structures accompanied with relevant curricula. For the case of Finland, this country records

almost universal educational attainment at upper secondary level and higher skills levels among adults. According to the OECD (2020), Finland has 5% of points higher than OECD countries in areas of knowledge and skills among adults. A survey conducted by OECD (2012), revealed that Finland was among the highest for both literacy and numeracy among adults. A good level of educational attainment among adults, gives a guarantee of relevant support that parents would provide to their children in terms of coaching, extra work support and home-based education (Sandeep, 2018).

For vocational education and training (VET), Finland's share of students holding a VET qualification (55%) is one of the largest in the OECD, as the latter has an average of only 42%. When it comes to education pathway guidelines in upper secondary education and VET structure, Estonia has the same reality as Finland. Various studies such as of Masaruf (2015); Paryono (2017); and Melaiye, Amuchie and Glory (2019), have demonstrated the usefulness and relevance of technical programs for addressing national real-life and everyday problems and challenges.

Following the analysis of the educational policies of Finland, the latter's employment rate is noteworthy especially for tertiary graduates (88.3%) but below for those with upper-secondary attainment (49% compared to 60% across OECD countries). Good enough, with a rate growth of 2% between 2008 and 2018, and the positive short-term trends, unemployment rates and National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) rates have been shrinking in recent years. In the case of Estonia, there is a huge employment gap between women and similarly educated men as the latter occupies jobs at 84% while women are employed at 76%. If countries are striving to promote equity, this should be reflected in all sectors including employment and leave none behind. Stefania and Aysegul (2017) reveals that the gender unemployment gap issue has been in existence since the early 1980s even though serious measures have been put in place to address the gaps. Despite these efforts, (from the analyst's view), industry composition, entry requirements and working conditions remain as main sources limiting especially women to fill this unemployment gap.

Conversely, in Finland, however, drop-out rates from secondary education are relatively high among boys (0.7%). Additionally, a highly-selective tertiary admission system has contributed to both delay to universities entry (generally at 24 years compared to the average of OECD which is 22 years) and the delay in labor market entry as the average duration of tertiary education is 6.5 years compared to 5 years among OECD countries. Even so, the unemployment rates among younger adults and NEET rates continue to exceed statistics prior to 2012 economic crisis despite tremendous recent improvements. Although, Estonia, despite some educational challenges, it has marked an increased participation in adult learning and strong performance in adult's literacy skills across different age groups in recent years with an average of 2.9% of increment across all age groups and annually (OECD, 2019). In line with maintaining internal efficiency of education institutions, minimizing at whatever cost, the dropout rates (generally less than 1%), will contribute to the production of huge numbers of candidates to the labor market.

Compared to Finland, Estonia has recorded a number of challenges and problems in their education systems and some of them are highlighted here: few students pursue vocational schools due to a default choice made by students who study in lower secondary schools with upper secondary education on the general track. In addition, VET schools seem to be not attractive to students as only 27% of basic school graduates opt for this track (a recorded track from 2013 up to 2018). Among given reasons, there is a limited awareness of students for VET programs and the opportunities they offer. Furthermore, drop-out rates i.e. a quarter of students fail to complete studies in VET schools. At this level, there is a need of high public-private partnership especially for industry bodies to set attractive employment packages, a factor which may contribute to the VET sector (OECD, 2020).

Correspondingly, higher education in Estonia, has also been characterized by a number of problems which vary from timely completion; gap between graduates and labor market demands to needs flexibilities for an improved system (OECD, 2020). Among these needs include attractive financial support arrangements for students, tuition fee abolition for full-time students studying in Estonian, and study cost between full-time and part-time students. These mechanisms are deemed to be more promising if make higher education more effective is a dream of the country. Mengual (2013) discusses the need to rethink the role of higher education, calling upon universities to redefine educational programs to meet workers' competences, employers' demands, market needs, and society needs at large. This recommendation would make higher education programs in Estonia with high quality and standards. Simply put, making VET more attractive and improving completion at Higher Education level, and making the education offer and delivery more relevant to the evolving labor markets, continue to be significant challenges.

c. School Improvement

Qualified and engaged teachers, good-quality school leaders as well as conducive learning environment are crucial factors that contribute to the school improvement (Basel, 2014; Monica, 2015). In Estonia, 97% of students and teachers have reported a positive learning environment and tremendous efforts have been initiated to improve teachers' salaries and strengthen the status of the profession through increased salaries (91%), reduced annual working hours (only 585 hours per annum), and lower teacher-to- students ratio (13 to 15 on

average). Promoting, caring and supporting teachers' well-being contribute to their longevity, productivity, and positive relationships with students (Faye & Deborah, 2010; Jantine, Helma & Jochem, 2011; Kamil, 2014). Again, in Estonia, commendable efforts are sustained for the well-being of both teachers and school leaders (OECD, 2020). To this end, it is very interesting to note that 74.1% of teachers in Estonia agree with the importance of ICT in teaching-learning and assessment processes. Additionally, in Estonia, teachers are highly committed as 86% of them spend much time in real teaching and learning.

Compared to Finland, things seem to be much better, as teachers' salaries have been raised at a percentage of 98%; and teachers are highly qualified (at master's level) and receive relatively comprehensive initial teacher preparation at a percentage of 93%. On aspects related to supportive learning environment and teaching hours in primary, Finland is placed much better than Estonai, as they display 589 hours and 619 hours respectively. Finnish teachers report a comparatively high level of satisfaction with their profession at 79% (OECD, 2020). On the other hand, however, there is a need, in Estonia, to provide with school leaders stronger professional learning opportunities including initial preparations at entry level as well as salaries increment of school leaders considering their extensive responsibilities. In addition, building teacher capacity to meet the needs of SEN students and enhance their digital skills (this has been reported by 47% of school leaders); balancing teachers' oversupply and shortage particularly with an ageing profession as this has been highly identified especially in rural areas and for teachers of Mathematics and Science; and further supporting strong school leadership through capacity building (as only 30.1% admit to have been trained). All these, are key factors to concentrate on for optimum school improvement.

The challenges faced by Estonia are similarly reflected in the reality of Finland where there is a need of achieving a balance of strong instructional and administrative capacity-building in the role of the school leader. Formal professional development for educators need to be more effective as well (OECD, 2020).

d. Evaluation and Assessment

Some of the key strengths in Finland, as far as evaluation and assessment are concerned, include institutional and student's self-evaluation and an improved-focused on evaluation and assessment at a percentage of 76%. However, some challenges also exist: Teachers need more support in designing students' assessment practices and a central guidance is deemed useful for teachers and school-leaders appraisal (OECD, 2020). Briefly, the same strengths and challenges are shared in both countries, but a point unique to Estonia is the existence of an extensive educational database in evaluation. In addition, in all schools of Estonia, feedback forms are availed to teachers for learning improvement purposes. Contrary to this, there is a need of effective quality assurance processes both in higher learning institutions and VET (OECD, 2020).

Several authors such as, Astuti (2012); Ekua (2016) and Lee (2016), have thoroughly explored ways that support the relevance and usefulness of assessment both for students and teachers in teaching-learning and assessment processes and this applies to in-class activities, corrective mechanisms as well as for feedback provision.

e. Governance

According to the statistics of Finland and Estonia (2016), generally speaking, the governance of schools in Estonia and Finland, are municipalities and, highly decentralized; school leaders as well as higher authorities have a high degree of autonomy (new measures have been adopted for the governance of higher education and higher level of decentralization is found in ECEC centers and schools). Challenges are inevitable as the pace of collaboration between school principals is slow and uneven, and building school networks remains an agenda of priority in Estonia while for Finland, national steering higher education committees need to be strengthened for more institutional research and development approaches (OECD, 2020).

Clear statements have to be given its due attention and emphasis at this level as far as school governance and administration are concerned. A school may have all it needs in terms of human, financial as well as material resources, but, if, the school leaders are not competent and professional enough, the everyday running of teaching and learning activities will surely face a lot of problems (refer to the article of Tai and Omar (2019) on school leaders' competencies that make a difference in the era of education).

Similarly, in the area of school governance, several similar studies have been conducted, such as Abdullahi (2018) who investigated about corruption in primary schools of Nigeria; Joshua and Samuel (2013) who explored the influence of school governance on students' performance from public secondary schools of Tanzania, and Israr and Mohammed (2014) who extensively showed the role of school governance on higher education management and improvement. All these studies underline the effectiveness of school governance and the implications it may have on teaching, learning, school environment and staff relations.

f. Funding

According to the reports of OECD (2020), Finland is characterized by a growing financial expense especially in higher education sector. A student per annuum expenditure has been raised at USD 17,541 while in primary the expenditure is at USD 4214. This shows a high educational funding especially in earliest education levels. In Finland, again, the impact of shortage of resources in schools is highly minimized with a public funding of 92% while it is only 2.8 % privately sourced. Gaps which are available are found in tertiary education where funds are

supposed to base on high quality and performance-based.
In the case of Estonia, this country comparatively achieves good education outcomes with lower educational expenditures and lots of investment in ECEC centers and schools. However, as Estonia relies on European Union funding, there is a need to ensure continuation and sustainability of activities after funds stop as well as private funding in higher education.

3. Conclusion

The present article thoroughly and critically analyzed the educational policies of Finland and Estonia. The framework of analysis typically based on the OECD's six policy levers such as the equity and quality of educational programs as well as infrastructures; the delivered content and learning materials that prepare students for the future, strategies and perspectives for the schools' improvement, quality and effectiveness of educational programs evaluation and assessment, schools governance and leadership, and finally the viability and funding of schools.
In a nutshell, as members of European Union and OECD, Estonia and Finland have in common some education features and policies at different levels which seem to be not too different. The investment made in education especially regarding the expenditure per student per annuum are proportionally related to the total number of population (which is generally not too much); the geographical size as well as the national GDP. Though some areas for improvement are in existence, the profiles of education systems in these both countries are at a very interesting and satisfactory levels.

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