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OECD, Pisa and Finnish and Spanish comprehensive school

María José García Ruiz^a *

^a*Professor of Comparative Education, UNED. Faculty of Education. C/ Senda del Rey n° 7, 28040 Madrid, SPAIN.*

Abstract

In the current era of globalisation the OECD has revealed a great prominent and impact in supranational and national educational policies. The results of PISA are being taken very seriously by the participant countries. The outstanding performance of Finnish students in PISA has transformed Finland into a reference laboratory for politicians that seek to improve their educational systems. The comparison between Finnish and the Spanish comprehensive schools reaches some academic conclusions which highlight the quality and the efficiency of educational tradition and of the pedagogical conservatism displayed by Finnish teachers in their teaching and learning practices.

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1. Introduction

In the first years of the XXIst century, education and educational systems have been deeply influenced by the globalisation process. Different authors that have extensively analysed the globalisation process admit that ‘globalisation constitutes a new and specific relation among Nation States and the world economy’ (Dale, 2007: 48). More concretely, it can be said that the globalisation phenomenon exists as an array of economic forces that are displayed beyond the most powerful Nation States and that, although it is true that such forces diminish the capacities and political discretion of the States, they have not made Nation States irrelevant or obsolete. Although different academics recognize the homogenizer effect of globalisation, in the sense that it creates similar challenges for the States, it is also recognised that the impact of globalisation in fields such as education is indirect and is mediated by the discretion and direction of Nation States. In this sense, it can be stated that globalisation can similarly modify the parameters and direction of State policies, but it does not necessarily do away with existent national peculiarities. There are specific national policies (such as the educational policy) that have structures with which innovations must comply. The current prominence of Nation States in the design and direction of their educational policies, and in the specific configuration of education in their concrete geographical context, reveals the deep educational differences that exist between the schooling cultures of countries such as Finland and Spain. Beyond the influence, that both countries receive as a consequence of their belonging to common unifying supranational instances such as the European Space for Higher Education. National differences in education remain which reach beyond the influence of globalisation and its unifying impact.

* María José García Ruiz. Tel.: +00 34 91 398 6998; fax: + 00 34 91 398 8449.

E-mail address: mjgarcia@edu.uned.es.

2. Globalisation, OECD and education

A more concrete analysis of the globalisation process allows us to state that, according to different academics, this process, as a contemporary phenomenon ‘appears in the middle of the decade of the seventies of the 20th century, in close connection with the political crisis of the Welfare State and with the oil economic crisis, although it is a phenomenon that extends well beyond such crisis’ (Puelles, 2006: 86). In general terms, it can be stated that the process of globalisation holds neoliberal ideological trends, for it temporarily coincides, and incorporates elements, of the political theory and philosophy introduced by Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom which had a great impact on the policies of Anglo-Saxon countries and on those of the whole Western World. Among the two most characteristic features of globalisation underlined by diverse authors, that have made possible the configuration of globalisation in the current world, we can highlight the new information and communication technologies, and the economic policies promoted by markets, governments and international agencies, known as the ‘Washington Consensus’ (Dale, 2007: 51). Some of the features of this consensus are fiscal discipline, priorities of public expenditure, liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation (*idem*). These tendencies that show the concrete impact of globalisation are developed more purely in the case of Anglo-Saxon countries. In the geographical contexts of Finland and Spain some of these tendencies can also be viewed, but in a more reduced form that in the case of countries that belong to the Anglo-Saxon frame.

One of the most notable effects of globalisation in the international context has been the establishment of an array of international organisations. To this end, a ‘government without Government’ (*idem*) has been configured at supranational level. Most outstanding among these international institutions are the IMF, the OECD, the World Bank and the European Union. Among those institutions, the OECD is revealing, in the educational field, an unprecedented leadership and impact. Several academics admit that, in the current era of globalisation ‘the OECD has increasingly become a policy actor in its own right’ (Henry et al., 2001) in national and international educational policy. From the neoliberal logic that steers the educational discourse of the OECD, this institution analyses the educational issues from an ‘economic fundamentalism’ (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009) and from an essentially technique dimension, linked to statistics and internationally comparable indicators, in relation to which the OECD has acquired a great expertise and skill.

It is in this context that the great success of the PISA Programme of the OECD must be analysed. The PISA Programme of the OECD, which has shown an unprecedented impact in international educational policy, is an example of the numerical and economical approach of the current educational proposals of international agencies. The results in PISA are taken very seriously by the participant nations, as a measure of the efficiency of their educational systems, and the quality of their human capital. The outstanding performance of Finnish students in all measures up to date (2003, 2006 and 2009) has made Finland a reference laboratory for politicians that seek to improve their educational systems. It is of extreme importance, therefore, to undertake an analysis of the intrinsic components of the Finnish education, in order to assess the reasons behind the excellence of this educational system. In concrete terms, an analysis of the elements that integrate Finnish comprehensive school as compared to Spanish comprehensive school is a key issue.

The emphasis on the structural model of comprehensive school constitutes, according to several authors, one of the main institutional effects of globalisation on the educational field. Thus, academics that have analysed the impact of globalisation extensively, demonstrate that one of the main effects of globalisation on education has to do with the structural convergence and, more precisely, with the ‘tendency to consolidate a long phase of basic education that incorporates the elementary structure of secondary education’ (Pedró and Rolo, 1998: 266-271), that is, with the tendency to implant the institutional structural model of the comprehensive school. It is, therefore, most relevant to analyse the intrinsic components of the Finnish comprehensive school in order to assess the reasons why this scholastic model is so excellent and successful in certain geographical contexts, such as Finland, and why in

other countries, such as Spain, this institutional structure results in mediocre educational performance in international comparative analyses such as the one undertaken by the OECD through the PISA Programme.

3. Finnish and Spanish Schooling Culture

Beyond the educational impact of globalisation in the above mentioned trends, Finland and Spain are also influenced by the specific schooling culture present in their own geographical context. Some definitions that have been established of the schooling culture describe this culture as ‘composed of an array of theories, ideas, principles, norms, criteria, rituals, inertias, habits and practices (...) settled through time in the shape of traditions, regularities and rules of the game, that have not been questioned and that are shared by their actors (...)’ (Viñao, 2002: 73). Schooling culture is defined by attributes such as ‘historical product’, ‘tradition’, ‘regularity’, ‘continuity and persistence’ and ‘sediment formed through time’ (Viñao, 2002: 73-74).

It is, therefore, crucial to underline some of the elements that conform the Finnish and Spanish schooling cultures respectively, for it directly impacts on the different composition of the diverse features that the structural model of the comprehensive school presents in these two geographical contexts.

In general terms we can state that the Nordic environment, with its long, cold and dark winters, contributes to the wellknown ‘winter war-spirit’ in Finnish culture and society. This spirit demonstrates this society’s strong belief that objectives, even those which seem impossible to achieve, can be attained by means of endurance and collective determination (Räsänen, 2006: 12). Finland displays a long tradition of local autonomy. Nevertheless, in real terms, it is more an administrative deconcentration than a proper decentralisation. The Finnish administrative system reveals an administrative verticality that has promoted the permanence of tradition and the results linked with equity in the social and educational systems. As far as linguistic and ethnic diversity are concerned, Finland has been considered a very homogeneous country. In fact, this feature of homogeneity has been underlined by several authors as one of the factors that explain the great success attained by Finnish students in school performance (Haahr, 2005: 194-202). Due to its geographical and geopolitical location as a border country between the East and the West, Finnish social-democracy has certain ‘Eastern features of an authoritative and even totalitarian character’ compared to other versions in other Nordic countries (Simola, 2005: 457).

The maturity of the social consensus of the Finnish social democracy must also be highlighted. Similarly, in its educational policy Finland has always opted in favour of a long-term orientation, a shared vision and a sustainable leadership, more than by a vision of immediate results by means of fragmented reforms. Another social and cultural feature of this society is that, in general terms, Finnish society favours an *egalitarian and collectivistic ideology* and does not support the current neoliberal educational reforms which have a competitive approach. A feature of the Finnish educational system that must also be highlighted is the *high social status of teachers*. The Finnish teaching profession has higher social status than their counterparts in most other Western countries (Simola, 2005: 458). A specific feature of the Finnish teaching class is its fundamentally conservative character as a group. They generally display notable *pedagogical conservatism*, in their teaching activity. Similarly, Finnish teachers reveal a persistent *struggle in defence of their professionalisation*.

The Spanish schooling culture is composed of very different features. From an administrative point of view, Spain reveals a far higher educational decentralisation to that which exists in Finland. In general terms, Spain does not have an authoritative or totalitarian character. The vestiges of this kind of approach which existed during General Franco’s dictatorship have been swept away by decades of democratic consolidation and by the introduction of a democratist trend in education, such as the LODE of 1985. With regard to the maturity of social consensus in educational policy, we can state that the Spanish political class has not yet achieved a consensus that guarantees the protection of the educational field from the political and legislative swinging back and forward which inevitably occurs with each change in education, a trend that can be witnessed in the approval of three general educational reforms since 1990: the LOGSE of 1990, the LOCE of 2002, and the LOE of 2006. In these conditions, it is not possible to benefit from the good that, obviously, each of these reforms has, or to correct their more negative

features. With respect to political ideology, there is no evidence of a common ground in principles in Spanish society, or in the political class. On the contrary, there are political sectors which are strongly committed to the neoliberal ideology, and others that display a clear egalitarian ideology.

Spanish society presents a much more heterogeneous character than Finnish society, and shows a much higher percentage of immigrant population. This results in a much higher heterogeneity in the classroom, and the education of immigrant students is one of the biggest problems for present Spanish educational policy. Finally, it must be recognised that Spanish society does not grant the teaching profession the high social status that this group enjoyed in Spain in the decades of the sixties and the seventies. There is no longer such unity of educational aims between the State, teachers, society and parents that formerly had such a positive impact on the climate of discipline and order in the educational field, the schools and the teaching and learning process of students.

4. Contrast between the Finnish and Spanish Comprehensive School

The comprehensive school, as a concept and as a practice, constitutes a reality which may accommodate a wide range of different structures, methodologies and didactics. More specifically, it can be stated that the exact configuration of the comprehensive school in a country at a particular historical moment is determined by five essential elements: the specific content assigned to this scholar modality by the autochthonous theorists of the comprehensive school movement; the schooling culture present in the country in question; the choice of one or other structural aspect of the comprehensive school; the option for the inclusion or not of the curricular aspects of the comprehensive school (and the determination of which bias –academic, professional or both– stamp to those concrete curricular aspects, and the pedagogical paradigms that govern the specific schooling culture (formal or progressist pedagogical paradigms).

In the case of Finland, the evolution process, from the planning of the reform of comprehensive school to its implementation in practice has been considered by certain academics as ‘the most laborious project of the history of Finnish education’ (Aho, Pitkänen, Sahlberg, 2006: 45). The political motivation behind the design of the comprehensive school was twofold: on the one hand, politicians sought the increase of social equality in Finnish society. On the other hand, politicians also sought the positive influence of a quality educational reform on the development of the national economy. Sweden as a neighbouring country, with its high quality of life and its most outstanding public services, constituted an excellent model for the new Finnish school.

In the case of Spain, the comprehensive school was established for the first time by the General Law of Education (LGE) of 1970. This education act appealed to the principle of equality in its introductory foreword, and stipulated the age for basic education from six to fourteen years of age, establishing the compulsory and free nature of this education, and abolishing the former institutional structure. The political line of the 1970 education act has been described as composed of features of ‘pragmatism, europeanization, modernity and pedagogic renovation’ (Puelles, 2004: 116-117). Due to the peculiarities and specific elements intrinsic to the Spanish schooling culture, conservative sectors have criticised the Spanish comprehensive school finally instituted by the LOGSE Act of 1990 owing to assumptions such as its diminution of the quality of Spanish education, its lack of attention to individual differences and to the diversity of pupils, and its democratism.

In brief, we can state the following as the main elements of contrast between the Finnish and the Spanish comprehensive school:

The Finnish comprehensive school has been instituted in Finland by politically and pedagogically conservative teachers, who have always developed highly traditional methods and didactics. That is, the teaching elements which are used in the Finnish comprehensive school are those components typical of the formal paradigm of pedagogy (ie. Logocentrism, teachercentrism, hierarchical order, role of memory) (Del Pozo, 2002: 180-192) and not those specific to progressive pedagogy in which ordinary proponents of the comprehensive school think about (paidocentrism, democratic teaching, role of experiences, activity and judgement) (*idem*). The success of the

academic performance of the Finnish comprehensive school must be attributed, therefore, to a great extent, to the use of traditional methods and didactics in the classroom, and also to the existence of a conservative teaching profession that has developed a traditional role in its relation with students. The Spanish comprehensive school does not have such a marked conservative pedagogical character, nor does its teaching force share this conservative character.

Finnish comprehensive school starts one year later than in Spain (ie. at seven years of age) and lasts one year less than Spanish comprehensive school (ie. nine years instead of ten years).

The curriculum of the Finnish comprehensive school is marked by a predominance of academic components.

Finnish comprehensive school is more homogeneous than the Spanish comprehensive school: this is not only due to the smaller number of immigrant students in this Finland, or to the existence of a more uniform schooling culture (owing to the lack of a double network of schools such as that which exists in Spain), but it is also due to the fact that Finnish schools, until the year 2000, had a policy of not integrating special needs children into mainstream education. It can be stated unequivocally that, in general terms, Finnish teachers face far fewer challenges and difficulties in the classrooms than do their Spanish counterparts.

The climate of unity and consensus in education that exists in the Finnish political class and society, due to the historical legacy and the political contingencies in this country, is very different from the polarized character of the educational debates in Spain. Comprehensive school in Spain lacks the unanimous political and social support that it has in Finland. In Spain, this structural formula of the comprehensive school, that seemed to be accepted in 1970, has in 1990 now received criticism in relation to its proclaimed aims (ie. to guarantee the equality of results), to its inadequate attention to the diversity of its pupils, and to its diminution of the school performance and results.

5. Conclusions

Among the conclusions that could be taken from the present article, we would like to underline the following:

Contrary to what could be inferred from a superficial reading of the PISA Report and of other studies of international assessment of education, Finland is not at the vanguard of the international developments in education, nor does this country intend to be so. The educational tradition has elements of proven and permanent validity (ie. the principle of teacher authority) that must not be modified by unproven newly coined educational paradigms or by transitory pedagogical fashions. This has been demonstrated by the educational success of Finland.

The cultural and academic homogeneity of Finland constitutes a most important factor in the explanation of the constant success obtained by this country in international studies of education assessment. The cultural and academic landscape of Spain is extraordinarily more diverse and complex.

The high score of Finnish students in specific curricular skills determines the success of the comprehensive school *in the way* that it has been organized in Finland. The comprehensive school, as a concept and as a practice, constitutes a reality which can accommodate a great diversity of different structures, methodologies and didactics. The position of Finland among the top ten countries in the PISA Report does not determine the success of the progressive methods in education that, traditionally and from a theoretical point of view, have been linked to the comprehensive school model. Finnish comprehensive school, specifically, constitutes a school led and developed by conservative teachers who develop traditional teaching methods. The Spanish comprehensive school must reconsider the entity of its diverse components so as to achieve a balance between full social integration and the academic excellence of its students.

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