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## Part Two

# Coping with Success: International Projections and National Counter Narratives

## The Use of PISA Results in Education Policy-Making in

### Finland

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#### Introduction

Finland has long been considered one of the top-performers in international large-scale assessments (ILSAs), including, most prominently, PISA. Scholars seeking to understand the reasons behind PISA outcomes have articulated the sociohistorical context of Finland's schooling system (Simola [2005](#), [2015](#); Chung [2009](#); Simola and Rinne [2011](#); Grek and Rinne [2011](#)). Normative approaches have also been used, with some studies asking what the world can learn from the Finnish model (Sahlberg [2011a](#)). Despite a few exceptions (Rautalin [2013](#)), studies have focused on “cross-national policy attraction” (Steiner-Khamsi [2014](#)) and investigated how non-Finnish policy actors have used an idealized story of “Finnish success” to criticize or justify reforms to their own system (e.g., Takayama [2010](#); Dobbins and Martens [2012](#)). However, scholars and analysts have devoted much less attention to how Finnish policy actors have themselves used the PISA results for school reform in Finland. This study draws on the government's official press releases (see Appendix for full list) to understand policy usage of PISA in Finland.

This chapter traces the varied policy reactions to PISA in 2000, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, and 2015. The first round results (PISA 2000) did not receive nearly as much attention within Finland as they did outside. It was only after PISA 2003 and PISA 2006 that Finnish politicians and policy actors discovered that their country's performance in international large-scale assessment could be a useful tool to argue for more resources for compulsory education. The preoccupation with PISA became further pronounced when the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) launched an international campaign to showcase and promote various types of education export. However, after four rounds as the league leader, and three years of showcasing themselves for policy export, Finnish math scores for fifteen-year students in Finland slipped in 2012. In this chapter we will examine policy actors' reactions to grandeur and loss, and show that the (self-) projections into PISA success (2000, 2003, 2006, 2009) and slippage (2012, 2015), respectively, must be understood against the backdrop of national reform debates. It is the national policy actors who, after each round of results, determined again whether the test could help support their reform agenda. As we show, the government-sponsored export of Finnish education<sup>1</sup> in 2009, and its subsequent marketization, mark a discursive shift from being to staying a league leader.

The agenda-setting literature is the starting point for this study. The notion of punctuated equilibrium suggests that change happens in bursts, supported by mounting positive feedback diffused through other systems, for instance, and as a

growing number of policy actors become interested in the issue (Baumgartner and Jones 2009). The multiple streams approach similarly suggests that these actors hold on to their pet policies while searching for right the problem to implement them, as opposed to inventing new solutions in response to arising issues (see Kingdon 2003). What our analysis discusses is whether PISA can change the Finnish education policy agenda or whether PISA rather is used as a means to support the existing one.

In this chapter, we first describe Finland's national education policies in relation to its sociohistorical context and consider some of the latest trends toward social segregation in Finnish comprehensive schooling. Based on an analysis of policy documents, we propose two interpretations for how PISA-based scandalization and projection have been and are used as national education policy agenda-setting tools in contemporary Finland. These include one, an equality emphasis and the need to stay "a cutting-edge country" (Gov. 7, Doc. 37) and, two, building up education export policies with the country's PISA brand.

## **Uniform Comprehensive School Model and Segregating Trends**

The comprehensive school system for seven- to fifteen-year-olds in Finland relies on the Nordic model of one school for all. Like other countries in the region, Finland, a sparsely populated country with 5.5 million inhabitants, has a welfare-state organized to facilitate equality (e.g., Tjeldvoll 1998; Antikainen 2008). Since the post-war era,

these ideals have been promoted through educational, labor, youth, and social policies, with inclusion, universalism, and equality as cornerstones (Rinne 2010).

Since the introduction of the comprehensive school (*peruskoulu*) in the 1970s, Finnish education policy has focused on diminishing differences in educational outcomes in relation to individuals' socioeconomic background, gender, place of residence as well as, more recently, ethnicity. The compulsory education system is publicly owned, funded, and governed. The Basic Education Act (628/1998) assigns responsibility for compulsory schooling to municipalities. Therefore, the role of private and even publicly funded private providers in pre-secondary schooling is very limited in comparison to, for instance, Sweden (Alexiadou and Lundahl 2016). Schools are not allowed to collect fees, and must provide warm meals as well as school supplies free of charge. In this sense Finland's comprehensive school system functions as a vast public service, which provides pupils with comprehensive social and welfare services.

Following the principal of equal educational opportunity for all, Finland has focused on developing compulsory education (grades 1–9) as “uniform instruction catering for the whole age group and securing equal prerequisites for all” (MoEC 2012, 26). Every school provides a similar broad national core curriculum, which is elaborated at the municipal and school levels. Officially, there are no ability-based groupings, and the aim is to include students with special educational needs. Children in densely populated areas have access to schools near their residences; otherwise,

transport is offered to pupils free of charge. After completing compulsory education pupils are able to apply for further studies in general or vocational upper secondary schools. All secondary certificates provide eligibility to apply for further studies at the university level.

Despite these measures there is a growing body of research literature in Finland showing how seemingly uniform, neighborhood-based schooling and the public comprehensive school system are segmenting pupils in larger towns. Although social segregation between schools to some degree reflects the social segregation in cities, the more significant segmentation tendencies involve pupil selection and parental school choice policies in urban areas. Parental school choice policies in Finland have led to a corresponding rise in school selectivity, although both are still modest compared to some other countries (e.g., Seppänen, Carrasco et al. [2015](#)). Empirical evidence from urban Finland shows that parental school choice as a pupil allocation practice divides along social class lines (e.g., Kosunen and Seppänen [2015](#); Seppänen, Kalalahti et al. [2015](#); Kosunen et al., [2016](#)), resulting in significant achievement differences (Hautamäki et al. [2013](#); Berisha and Seppänen [2016](#)).

## Research Task, Data, and Methods

This chapter addresses the question of how the PISA-based scandalization and projection have been used to formulate education policy in contemporary Finland. To answer it, we analyze two types of government policy documents (see [Appendix](#))

1. Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) press releases, which refer to PISA results between 2000 and 2016. Out of the 1,774 press releases categorized as “Education and ECEC” from the MoEC we considered 43.<sup>2</sup>
2. Seven government programs, which focused on education after the 1999 Basic Education Act reform which were issued during four parliamentary election terms in 1999–2002, 2003–6, 2007–10, 2011–15, and 2015 to the present. The MoEC was run by the Social Democratic Party from 1999 to 2010, and by the Center-Right National Coalition Party since 2011.

Our analysis focused first on how PISA results set, confirmed, or changed education policy agendas in Finland, and second, on how PISA is referenced—if at all—in government education policies.

## Equality Nobility at Risk and the Need to Stay a “Cutting-Edge Country”

Despite global interest to Finland’s outstanding PISA results, they have received comparatively little attention within Finland itself. This is evident in the fact that—as mentioned above—only 47 of the 1775 press releases (2 percent) issued by the MoEC between 2000–16 mentioned PISA (see [Appendix](#)). Our analysis of these selected press releases reveals that, even in the early 2000s, PISA results were not focused on

the highest performing educational systems. Rather, the PISA results were understood as a sign of education equality being in danger. The 2015 results in particular were interpreted to show how wide differences are in learning outcomes when considered in terms of gender, social class and geographic location (Gov. 7, Doc. 50). In this section, we analyze how the Finnish government dealt with the PISA results in press releases, and how it influenced their education policy agenda.

The first PISA round in 2000 happened during the period of the so-called Rainbow Government, a coalition of five parties ranging from left to right, which ruled the country from April 1999 to April 2003. The Rainbow Government's program emphasized equal rights in education, and introduced education policy as a tool for promoting people's belonging to society.

Everyone has an equal right to education and training regardless of their place of residence, age, [first] language and economic situation in compliance with the principle of lifelong learning. Education policy is aimed to prevent marginalization and respond to the challenges of an elderly population. (Gov. 1, Doc. 1)<sup>3</sup>

The MoEC did not issue a press release regarding PISA 2000 when its results were internationally published in late 2001. However, when the national newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* published two news items about the "World's Best Readers" in PISA 2000, Maija Rask, the Minister of Education and member of the Social Democratic Party, was asked to comment. According to the newspaper, regardless of Finland's PISA results she would increase the number of hours students were required



to spend learning Finnish due to a need to improve writing skills across the boards, and raise the scores of young boys in reading (Helsingin Sanomat [2001a](#), [b](#)).

The June 2003 to April 2007 Center-Left government program which followed highlighted the importance of caring, inclusive, neighborhood schools, with a focus on different aspects of equality in education and the reinforcement of local decision-making in order to increase quality. This program did not mention PISA 2000 at all.

The fundamental principle in the provision of basic education is a uniform comprehensive school. The principle of giving preference to the nearest school will be reinforced. . . . Quality recommendations for good comprehensive education and successful schools will be drawn up. Local evaluation will be enhanced. Remedial teaching will be increased in support of early intervention and preventive action, and special needs teaching and care for school pupils will be reinforced. The emphasis will be on cooperation between home and school. Access to basic arts education will be safeguarded. The integration of children with special needs into ordinary schools will be promoted in all levels of early education and education and training. (Gov. 2, Doc. 2)

The very first press release by MoEC of PISA evaluation was about PISA 2003 in December 2004 by Minister of Education Tuula Haatainen, a Social Democrat like her predecessor. Although she specifically addressed how “[y]oung Finns were among the OECD top in mathematics, science and reading literacy and problem-solving” (Gov. 2, Doc. 3), a separate press release by the MoEC set a policy agenda by interpreting results as “an incentive for improving low achievers’ learning” (Gov.

2, Doc. 4). Also many policy issues such as exclusion in society, student welfare, and teachers' working conditions were addressed. The release emphasized that "excellent results" had been gained with "the same level of resources as in the other OECD-countries on average" and used Finland's PISA performance as a call for more funding to basic education:

Finnish basic education must be able to meet future challenges and maintain the high standard we have achieved. A high level of knowledge is an asset in international contexts and we must make sure we keep it. Basic education resources need to be increased further because it will generate welfare for future generations. (Gov. 2, Doc. 4)

The following Center-Right government that subsequently held power from April 2007 to June 2010, which included the Green League and Swedish People's Party as minor partners, specified that "[r]esources available for basic education will be increased with a view to preventing and alleviating exclusion among children and young people" (Gov. 3, Doc. 5). Extra funding was allocated for achieving smaller study groups in schools, and the text included a discourse on quality improvement:

The resources made available by smaller age groups will be used to improve the quality of education . . . to reduce group sizes, to strengthen remedial and special needs teaching, guidance counselling and student welfare, and to invest in extracurricular club activities. (Gov. 3, Doc. 5)

The government agenda in early 2007 did not emphasize literacy or mathematics, as would have been the case if their concern was PISA-focused. Instead, the program underlined skills and arts subjects, as well as foreign languages (Gov. 3, Doc. 5).

Once the PISA 2006 results were released showing Finnish students had achieved particularly well in science literacy, the government made the outcome of focus of praise and celebration (Gov. 3, Doc. 6). The fact that the official remarks were published not only in the two official languages—Finnish and Swedish—but in English, French, and Dutch as well, shows this message was addressed to an international audience. This marked a shift in which it was now evident the government did indeed value Finland’s outstanding performance and would allow it to influence their official discourse on education.

The subsequent interpretation of PISA 2006 by Sari Sarkomaa, Minister of Education from the National Coalition Party, was published in a Finnish language-only press release. Though she expressed satisfaction with the excellent results, she also stressed that policy must support “all sorts of talents” (Gov. 3, Doc. 7). She also pointed to the government’s earlier decision (Gov. 3, Doc. 6) to allocate extra funding to the development of basic education.

PISA researchers criticize our schools for lacking the highest top-performers. For this reason our goal is that comprehensive education better answers the needs of different children. It is important to support different types of talents to promote individual learning. Practical and arts subjects will be emphasized. . . . In addition to pure

theory, teaching must offer aesthetic experiences and possibilities for developing practical skills, creativity and physical exercise. (Gov. 3, Doc. 7)

This comment reveals an interesting contradiction: PISA was used to show that the Finnish education system was failing its highest achievers, while also emphasizing the need for art subjects, aesthetic experiences, and practical skills not measured by PISA. The subsequent government, briefly led by the Center Party from June 2010 to June 2011, reversed this emphasis on comprehensive schooling (Gov. 4, Doc. 11).

When the results of PISA 2009 were released in December 2010 the MoEC press release was once again addressed to a global audience and published in multiple languages—including now Russian instead of Dutch (Gov. 4, Doc. 12). Minister of Education Henna Virkkunen of the National Coalition Party then published a separate press release in Finnish and English describing, “Excellent PISA results, with some worrying signals,” meaning a deepening difference in achievement levels between particular schools (Gov. 4, Doc. 13).

The Minister also stated that the reason to improve schools is not “because we want our 15-year-olds to do well in the OECD comparisons,” but rather to offer children, in addition to basic knowledge and skills, a “confidence, motivation and joy of learning that will carry them in further education and training and throughout their lives” (Gov. 4, Doc. 13).

The Right-left government which followed from June 2011 to June 2014, comprised primarily of an alliance between the National Coalition Party, the Social Democrats and four minor parties made strong reference to the ILSAs:

The Government aims to make Finland the most competent nation in the world by 2020. By 2020, Finland will be ranked among the leading group of OECD countries in key comparisons of competencies of young people and adults, . . . (Gov. 5, Doc. 14)

Although this reference to ILSAs was finally incorporated into the government's program in 2011, there were numerous education policy agendas that were not connected to PISA by the government: continuing reduction of class size and strengthening special needs education (both already in 2003 agenda Gov. 3, Doc. 5), multi-professional student care to prevent the social exclusion of children and young people, reducing bullying, consolidating extracurricular activities, fostering use of ICT in education, supporting the educational role of parents by schools, and enhancing parent–teacher cooperation. Due to the reformed national curriculum policy agendas also included strengthening the teaching of practical subjects, arts and sport, civic and citizenship education, environmental education, and collaboration between subjects, as well as diversifying language programs, focusing on communication skills and learning-to-learn skills (Gov. 5, Doc. 14).

When an analysis of the causes and trends in PISA 2009 (Gov. 5, Doc. 15) was published in April 2012, the new Minister of education, the Social Democrat

Jukka Gustafsson interpreted Finland's diminished performance stemmed from a faulty education policy:

The success of the Finnish school draws on our strong endeavour to support educational equality. New research shows that in many aspects, which we thought were national strengths, we see a worsening trend. The variation of the results between schools is also greater in the current than in the former PISA studies. (Gov. 5, Doc. 15)

Shortly afterward, in June 2012, the government announced (Gov. 5, Doc. 16) an educational equality program. To legitimate the stronger policy agenda toward equality in education it used the PISA results indicating that children from families with low socioeconomic status are 1.5 years behind in reading skills compared to children from families that are better off and the difference between the weakest and the strongest schools is equivalent to 2.5 years.

In November 2013, just a couple of weeks before the release of PISA 2012 results, the MoEC published a press release (Gov. 5, Doc. 21) stating that a study conducted by Finnish academics on the learning-to-learn skills of Finnish fifteen-year-olds indicated they had deteriorated when compared to the results of studies published in 2001 and 2012. Once PISA 2012 results showing decline were announced, it was this time communicated only three languages: Finnish, Swedish and English (Gov. 5, Doc. 25<sup>[4]</sup>). Despite highlighting the decreased results, the report framed them a relatively positive way.

The national average score in mathematics has decreased significantly since the 2003 assessment. Reading and science literacy have also deteriorated markedly. Despite the clear downturn, Finnish students remain one of the best performers among the OECD countries. (Gov. 5, Doc. 25)

The following Minister of Education, also a Social democrat, Krista Kiuru saw the need for “a broad-based forum” committing diverse social groups to the development of basic education (Gov. 5, Doc. 25). Such a development project was launched soon after in February 2014 (Gov. 5, Doc. 26).

That year communications from the MoEC used discourse of failing to promote its work. An April 2014 press release announced that in the new area tested by PISA, problem-solving, the performance of Finnish students was among the best, but the Minister of Education simultaneously commented that “[t]he survey shows that one in seven students fails to gain sufficient knowledge and skills to cope in society” (Gov. 5, Doc. 27). When doing so she used the PISA results to legitimize recent government work to reform school education. Six months later the MoEC released additional messages concerning the “declining level of reading and counting competences” and the level of educational equality in a project report on the “Strengthening the national competence basis” (Gov. 5, Doc. 27).

The outcome of the government’s development project was a report Tomorrow’s Comprehensive School (Gov. 5, Doc. 29), published in March 2015, highlighting the education of entire age cohorts as Finland’s most important

advantage in the global arena. Achieving this focus was said to require, among other things, securing the neighborhood school principle, addressing socioeconomic equality, and developing continuing education for teachers (Gov. 5, Doc. 29). The following short-term government (June 2014 to June 2015) did not state anything about basic education in its program, “[a] new boost for Finland: growth and employment” (Gov. 6, Doc. 32).

The Center-Right government that has held power since May 2015 maintains a strong position on international education in its program (Gov. 7, Doc. 35). Its key aim to provide “[n]ew learning environments and digital materials [for] comprehensive schools” is meant to address the “problems” raised by previous PISA reports, while still addressing the perennial topic of student well-being:

This project will aim to improve learning outcomes and reduce differences between them. Steps will be taken to improve the learning environments so that students enjoy being at school and to raise the level of emotional and physical wellbeing of children and young people. (Gov. 7, Doc. 35)

Furthermore, the current government’s reflections on ILSAs are more explicit than those of previous governments in that they promote the “goal to make Finland a cutting-edge country of modern and inspiring learning” (Gov. 7, Doc. 37). This goal clearly references ILSAs in the context of participating in international competition, as evident in the most recent press releases on PISA 2015 as well as TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study).



The results of the 2016 TIMSS, coordinated by the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), indicated “a clear decrease in Finnish fourth graders’ science and mathematics achievement between 2011 and 2015” (Gov. 7, Doc. 49). When the PISA results were released a week later in December 2016 (Gov. 7, Doc. 50) the MoEC highlighted its ongoing “key project New Comprehensive School” (Gov. 7, Doc. 43) focusing on curriculum and pedagogy reform and digitalization as reactions to PISA decline.

During its preparations for the centenary of Finnish independence in December 2017, the government established “a comprehensive school forum to participate in the work being carried out to improve and update the Finnish comprehensive school system” (Gov. 7, Doc. 48). This initiative repeatedly addressed the discourse surrounding the decline in education learning outcomes and equality.

The Finnish comprehensive school has opened doors to higher education and lifelong learning for all children irrespective of their family background. In recent years, the decline in the learning outcomes and fractures in the equality of education have caused concern. The efforts to improve and update the comprehensive school require the support of the entire nation. (Gov. 7, Doc. 48)

## **Building Up Education Export Policies Using the Country’s PISA Brand**

The clearest impact of national policy actors’ use of PISA assessment results in policy agenda-setting are also evident in areas besides national basic education. Since the

late 2000s, governmental press releases have used interest from other countries to launch policies building a new type of export business to benefit from Finland's internationally established PISA reputation. Here projection to PISA was mentioned in 2009 as a source of anxiety in the sense that if Finland's performance declined the country's image would suffer correspondingly (Gov. 3, Doc. 9). In this section of the chapter, we track the developments that led several different governmental bodies to emphasize educational export.

Based on press releases by MoEC, the timeline to begin activities on education export was short, but expanded dramatically in recent years. In July 2009 Minister of Education Henna Virkkunen of the Coalition Party announced that she had established a working group to prepare "an export strategy" (Gov. 3, Doc. 8). Later that same year she argued for a whole "new area of export" (Gov. 3, Doc. 9), which was implemented by the government in April 2010 (Gov. 3, Doc. 10). The MoEC press releases portrayed Finland as prepared to contribute "significant know-how to highly competitive markets" (Gov. 3, Doc. 8), and argued that the three PISAs published in 2000 had established Finland's strong reputation in education. This, in turn, had supposedly attracted a flow of visitors from abroad "who have familiarized themselves with the Finnish educational miracle" (Gov. 3, Doc. 8), and from whom it was in turn possible to profit.

Finland's internationally strong reputation in educational know-how should be utilized commercially. Educational export is a business with a lot of potential. The

export of education and know-how requires strong co-operation between the public and private sector. (Gov. 3, Doc. 9)

The space in which education business could operate was created by government and PISA's effects on policy-making meant loosening regulations that hindered this emerging education export business. However, the state was also expected to support the export business via collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Despite these roles, the MoEC emphasized that private actors needed to take responsibility for both the business and its risks (Gov. 3, Doc. 9).

In the wake of these initiatives education export policies were strongly promoted in June 2013. At this point the MoEC announced that "education export has not grown as expected" and argued that there was an urgent need to analyze "what are the obstacles to the growth and what means could support it better" (Gov. 5, Doc.. 17). Unlike previous policies, this new agenda created a joint effort among Finnish actors who were viewed as too small to act alone. Thus the government's initiatives in education export aimed to foster collaboration between different actors in the field.

Education export has been supported in the spirit of Team Finland by examples such as co-operation between the ministries of Work and Finance, Education and Culture, and Foreign affairs, along with the help of the project Future Learning Finland, which has pooled stakeholders interested in education export and offered support ranging from productization to export delegations. (Gov. 5, Doc. 17)

Since then the MoEC has stayed busy sending delegations abroad to promote education export, an effort documented in numerous press releases. In October the

Minister of Education travelled to Latin America to promote the possible use of Finnish expertise in higher education and research. The delegation also included representatives from the fields of vocational teacher training and learning technology (Gov. 5, Doc. 18). The MoEC's trip to East Asia in November 2013 was reported in the press as meant to foster collaboration and promote Finnish education expertise (Gov. 5, Doc. 22 and 23).

Document analysis shows how PISA has had fairly peculiar effects. In particular, Finland's education export has focused significantly on the university and vocational education sectors, although the PISA reputation is based on the scores of fifteen-year-olds and, thus, lower-secondary education. The reported discussion topics, contracts or agreements produced by the Minister of Education's "education export tour" included higher education exchanges between Finland and Japan, and joint efforts with China, which were to provide "a more systematic platform for collaboration projects in education to encourage cooperation between businesses and higher education institutions" (Gov. 5, Doc. 22). A consortium of Finnish stakeholders and the regional administration of Shanghai was fostered to develop vocational education (Gov. 5, Doc. 23), an agreement with South Korea focused on university education as well as "school well-being" and bullying (Gov. 5, Doc. 24), and a March 2014 deal with Indonesia was intended to engage in "mutual collaboration in education" in forestry training and higher education (Gov. 5, Doc. 30).

A trip to the United States in May 2014 focused primarily on basic education in reference to PISA. Finland’s Minister of Education stated she was glad that the U.S. Secretary of Education expressed his interest in establishing “a network of education superpowers” (Gov. 5, Doc. 31). The Finnish software company Rovio organized a Fun Learning Event in cooperation with the World Bank, which reportedly identified equality and motivation as keys to success (Gov. 5, Doc. 31). In June 2015, the MoEC declared an initiative for “expanding education collaboration” between China and Finland (Gov. 7, Doc. 36), and it seems education export will continue to remain on the Finland’s policy agenda in the foreseeable future. “Education and research have become more international and obstacles to education exports have been removed,” as a recent missive states (Gov. 7, Doc. 35) and here the focus is primarily on vocational and tertiary education (Gov. 7, Doc. 39).

The government’s goal of benefitting from Finland’s success on PISA—that is, to “turn Finland’s strongest international brand into a thriving business” (Gov. 7, Doc. 45)—accelerated in August 2016, once three Ministries (Foreign Affairs, Education and Culture, and Economic Affairs and Employment) named a “Chief Specialist in Education Export” (Gov. 7, Doc. 43).<sup>5</sup> Each minister expressed the government’s desire to use PISA to commercialize Finnish education to facilitate export in the language of economics (Gov. 7, Doc. 43). The inaugural Ambassador for Education Export, Marianne Huusko, stated that “the greatest challenge in education export lies in the commodification and marketing of big principles” (Gov. 7, Doc. 45)

and in answering the question, “[a]t what point does international interaction and networking become [an] export[?]” As she stated, “we must not be so naive as to keep helping others out of the goodness of our hearts. After all, the goal is to achieve growth and success in business” (Gov. 7, Doc. 45).

## Conclusions and Discussion: What Does PISA Mean to Finnish Education Policy Agenda-Setting?

To answer the question asked in the beginning of this chapter—how PISA-based scandalization and projection have been used as national education policy agenda-setting tools in contemporary Finland—we conclude two things based on an analysis of press releases by MoEC and government programs in 2000–16. Overall in terms of policy content, international projections into “Finnish success” had an interesting impact on national agenda setting: the political discourse was fit into the framework of PISA, and to the success story and later to the slight decline the results showed.

First, measured quantitatively, references to PISA have been sparse. The tiny share—2 percent—of all MoEC press releases published between 2000 and 2016 that mention PISA argue allocating sufficient funds to basic education, and position PISA results as a source of concern as opposed to pride is connected to fears for education equality in Finland. Throughout the press releases mentioning PISA—not only after the “PISA decline”—there were signals of worries referring to the PISA results. In addition, government highlighted related policy issues, such as social exclusion,

inequality and pupils' well-being. Based on evidence from these government policy documents, it is not possible to support Pasi Sahlberg's (2011b, 136) claim that international attention "made many decision makers and reformers careful not to disturb the high-performing education system." Regardless of PISA, Finland has initiated many reforms in comprehensive schooling. The defining factor in policy actions taken after the PISA results were published seems to be the government programs that steer and even limit the work of the MoEC (Kauko 2011; Kallunki, Koriseva, and Saarela 2015), rather than the PISA results themselves. Theoretically, this is supportive of the agenda-setting dynamics where policy actors stick to their pet ideas and try to offer them to arising problems (Kingdon 2003). Empirically, it demonstrates how PISA is not a major influence on the policy agenda in Finland, especially in contrast to the government program. This conclusion is supported also by a study suggesting that PISA, analyzed up until 2009, has been used domestically to bolster the interests of bureaucrats and teachers' unions, and that these groups faced little media criticism for their policy actions (Rautalin 2013).

Secondly, the programs and press releases we analyzed through 2016 indicate a gradual increase in the extent to which Finland's performance in PISA was referred to in the country's policy agenda. After the PISA results released in 2009, Finnish policy-makers began considering education not just domestically, but as a valuable commodity for export. Education as a form of industry, or a product to be promoted, bought or sold like any other product, is a significant contemporary global

phenomenon (Verger, Lubienski, and Steiner-Khamsi 2016). As an interesting contradiction, while education export exists mainly in upper secondary and tertiary education, the marketing is based on the OECD-mediated reputation of the primary and lower-secondary school stage.

In the future, PISA projection might have more effects on compulsory schools in Finland, if the mission of education export will get attached to national education policy. Some recent national education policy goals have been framed rhetorically to exploit the PISA-led education reputation. An example is the plan announced by the Prime Minister's Office (2016, 30–1) “to make Finland into a world-class laboratory of new pedagogy and digital learning” by allocating significant funds to the digitalization of education. In this sense, the PISA reputation might be harnessed for turning Finland into a “laboratory” for global education business.

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## Appendix

### List of Analyzed PISA-Related MoEC Press Releases and Government Programs in Finland between 1999 and 2016

|        | <b>Time in office /<br/>Date of the<br/>document</b> | <b>Party of the prime minister (person's<br/>name) and ruling parties of<br/>government/Name of the document and<br/>topic of the government program<br/>[translations by authors]</b>   | <b>Party of the<br/>Minister of<br/>Education<br/>(person's name)</b> |
|--------|--|--|---|
| Gov. 1 | April 15, 1999–<br>April 7, 2003                     | The Social Democratic Party (Paavo Lipponen). “Rainbow government” (Left, SDP, Right, Green, and Swedish parties).   | The Social Democratic Party (Maija-Liisa Rask).                       |
| Doc. 1 | April 15, 1999                                       | Pääministeri Paavo Lipponen II hallituksen ohjelma. [Government program of Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen's second cabinet]<br>Oikeudenmukainen ja kannustava—sosiaalisesti eheä Suomi. [Fair and encouraging—Socially harmonious Finland]  |   |
|        | December 2001  | No documents mentioning PISA in the Ministry of Education's database between December 2001 (of seventeen press releases, all only in Finnish, in the field of “Education and ECEC”) and December 2004. ( <a href="http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Tiedotteet/">http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Tiedotteet/</a> ) |   |
| Gov. 2 | June 24, 2003–<br>April 9, 2007                      | The Center party (Matti Vanhanen).<br>Center-Left government (Center, SDP, and Swedish parties).   | The Social Democratic Party (Tuula Haatainen and Antti Kalliomäki).   |

|         |                                 |   |  |
|---------|---------------------------------|---|--|
| Doc. 2  | June 24, 2003                   | The government program of Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen's government. Employment, entrepreneurship, and common solidarity: The keys to an economic rebound.                                     |  |
| Doc. 3  | December 7, 2004                | OECD PISA 2003: Young Finns among the world top in learning outcomes  |  |
| Doc. 4  | December 7, 2004                | Haatainen: PISA-tutkimustulokset kannustavat vahvistamaan heikoimmin menestyvien oppimisedellytyksiä [Minister Haatainen: PISA findings are an incentive for improving low achievers' learning] |  |
| Gov. 3  | April 19, 2007–<br>June 2, 2010 | The Center Party (Matti Vanhanen).<br>Center-Right government (Center, National Coalition, Green and Swedish parties).  | The Coalition Party (Sari Sarkomaa and Henna Virkkunen). |
| Doc. 5  | April 19, 2007                  | Government program of Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen's second cabinet. A responsible, caring, and rewarding Finland.   |  |
| Doc. 6  | December 4, 2007                | OECD PISA 2006: Excellent results for Finnish students  |  |
| Doc. 7  | December 4, 2007                | Minister Sarkomaa: Hyviin PISA-tuloksiin pyritään myös tulevaisuudessa [We also strive for good PISA results in the future]   |  |
| Doc. 8  | July 14, 2009                   | Minister Virkkunen: Koulutusosaamisesta vientituote [Making educational know-how an export product]   |  |
| Doc. 9  | November 27, 2009               | Minister Virkkunen: Koulutuksesta uusi vientiala [Making education the new branch of export]  |  |
| Doc. 10 | April 29, 2010                  | Ministers Virkkunen and Pekkarinen: Koulutuksesta vahva tulevaisuuden vientiala [Making education the strongest future branch of export]  |  |
| Gov. 4  | June 22, 2010–June 2, 2011      | The Center Party (Mari Kiviniemi).<br>Center-Right government (Center, National Coalition, Green and Swedish parties).  | The Coalition Party (Henna Virkkunen).                   |
| Doc. 11 | June 22, 2010                   | Government statement to parliament on the Government Program of Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi's government, appointed on  |  |

|         |                            |  |
|---------|----------------------------|--|
|         |                            | June 22, 2010. Finland toward a consistent path to growth, employment, and stability.  |
| Doc. 12 | December 7, 2010           | Finnish students high performers in PISA   |
| Doc. 13 | December 7, 2010           | Minister of Education and Science: Excellent PISA results, with some worrying signals  |
| Gov. 5  | June 22, 2011–June 4, 2014 | The Coalition Party (Jyrki Katainen). Left-right government (National Coalition, SDP, Green, Swedish, Christian Democrat, and Left parties), until March 25, 2014. The Social Democratic Party (Jukka Gustafsson and Krista Kiuru).  |
| Doc. 14 | June 22, 2011              | Program of Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen’s government. An open, fair, and confident Finland.   |
| Doc. 15 | April 11, 2012             | PISA 2009—raportti selittää PISA—tulosten syitä ja muutossuuntia [PISA 2009—Report explaining the causes and directions of change for PISA Results]  |
| Doc. 16 | July 28, 2012              | Gustafsson lupaa syksyllä esityksen koulutuksellisen tasa-arvon toimenpideohjelmaksi [Minister Gustafsson promises an action program for educational equality for the Autumn]  |
| Doc. 17 | June 13, 2013              | Minister Kiuru: Koulutusviennissä tarvitaan tiivistä yhteistyötä [Close cooperation is needed for educational export]  |
| Doc. 18 | October 25, 2013           | Opetusministeri Krista Kiuru koulutusvientimatkalta Brasiliaan ja Chileen, valtiosihteeri Pilvi Torsti Peruun [Ministry of Education to conduct education export journey to Brazil and Chile, State Secretary Pilvi Torsti to Peru]  |
| Doc. 19 | October 31, 2013           | Opetusministeri Kiuru Brasiliassa: Yhteistyö koulutuksessa Suomen ja Brasilian välillä laajenee merkittävästi [Ministry of Education Kiuru to Brazil: Cooperation in education between Finland and Brazil will expand significantly] |
| Doc. 20 | November 4, 2013           | Minister Kiuru: Selvitys antaa pohjan sopia toimenpideohjelmasta koulutusvientiin [This account lays the groundwork for developing an agreement for an action program for educational export]  |
| Doc. 21 | November 14, 2013          | Assessment study: Learning skills of year nine students have deteriorated  |



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|---------|---------------------------|--|---|
| Doc. 22 | November 20, 2013         | Minister Kiuru in Tokio and Beijing: Significant increase in collaboration in the education sector   |   |
| Doc. 23 | November 21, 2013         | Minister Kiuru in Shanghai: Collaboration among top-ranking countries set in motion  |   |
| Doc. 24 | November 22, 2013         | Minister Kiuru in Soul: Kouluviihtyvyyteen panostaminen yhdistää Suomea ja Etelä-Koreaa [Investments in school well-being unite Finland and South Korea]   |   |
| Doc. 25 | December 3, 2013          | PISA 2012: Proficiency of Finnish youth declining  |   |
| Doc. 26 | February 28, 2014         | Kiuru: Broad-based project to develop future primary and secondary education   |   |
| Doc. 27 | April 1, 2014             | Finnish student performance in PISA 2012 problem-solving assessment among the best   |   |
| Doc. 28 | October 21, 2014          | Suomen osaamisperusta jää jälkeen kansainvälisestä kehityksestä [Finnish competence is falling behind in terms of international development]   |   |
| Doc. 29 | March 12, 2015            | Tulevaisuuden peruskoulu vastaa kehittyvän työelämän ja sosiaalisen elämän vaatimuksiin [The future's comprehensive school answers to the demands of developing work and social life]  |   |
| Doc. 30 | March 19, 2015            | Ministeri Kiuru syventämässä koulutusviennin mahdollisuuksia Indonesiassa [Minister Kiuru on deepening the possibilities of education export in Indonesia]   |   |
| Doc. 31 | May 6, 2014               | Opetusministeri Kiuru Washingtonissa: Yhdysvalloissa merkittävää kiinnostusta suomalaista koulutusosaamista kohtaan [Minister Kiuru in Washington: There is remarkable interest in Finnish educational expertise in the United States] |   |
| Gov. 6  | June 24, 2014–May 9, 2015 | The National Coalition Party (Alexander Stubb). Right-left government (National Coalition, SDP, Swedish, Christian Democrat, and Green parties), until September 18, 2014)   | The Social Democratic Party (Krista Kiuru). |
| Doc. 32 | June 24, 2014             | Program of Prime Minister Alexander Stubb's Government. A new boost for Finland: growth and employment.  |   |

|         |                   |  |   |
|---------|-------------------|--|---|
| Doc. 33 | July 18, 2014     | Minister Kiuru: Suomi käynnistänyt kansainvälisen koulutusverkoston [Finland has established an international education network]   |   |
| Doc. 34 | May 19, 2016      | Opetushallituksesta ja CIMO:sta yksi virasto vuoden 2017 [Combining the Finnish education board and CIMO]  |   |
| Gov. 7  | May 29, 2015      | The Center Party (Juha Sipilä). Center-Right government (Center, National Coalition, and Finns parties).   | The Coalition Party (Sanni Grahn-Laasonen). |
| Doc. 35 | May 29, 2015      | Strategic program of Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's government. Government Publications 12/2015. Finland, a land of solutions.   |   |
| Doc. 36 | June 12, 2015     | Kiinan ja Suomen koulutusyhteistyö laajenee [Educational cooperation between China and Finland is growing]   |   |
| Doc. 37 | 04 September 2015 | Osaamisen ja koulutuksen kärkihankkeilla uudistetaan suomalaista koulutusta [Finnish education is being reformed by the drivers of know-how and education]                                   |   |
| Doc. 38 | October 20, 2015  | Minister Grahn-Laasonen: Yritykset vauhdittamaan koulujen oppimisympäristöjen uudistamista [Enterprises to speed up schooling environment reforms]   |   |
| Doc. 39 | October 22, 2015  | Ministers Grahn-Laasonen and Toivakka: Esteet koulutusviennin tieltä puretaan [The hindrances of educational export have been overcome]  |   |
| Doc. 40 | November 24, 2015 | OECD: n koulutusvertailu Education at a Glance ilmestyi [The OECD "Education at a Glance" has been published]  |   |
| Doc. 41 | May 4, 2016       | Minister Sanni Grahn-Laasonen: Peruskoulun uudistamisessa keskitytään opettajien osaamisen kehittämiseen [Comprehensive school reforms focus on developing teachers' know-how]               |   |
| Doc. 42 | June 28, 2016     | Työryhmä esittää toisen asteen koulutuksen koulutusviennin esteiden purkamista [A working group is stating that the hindrances of educational export are reduced in the secondary education] |   |
| Doc. 43 | August 19, 2016   | Press release 152/2016 by The Ministry for Foreign Affairs: Ambassador Marianne Huusko to boost education export   |   |

|         |                    |  |
|---------|--------------------|--|
| Doc. 44 | September 9, 2016  | Ministeri Grahn-Laasonen: Uusi Peruskoulu -ohjelma julki— jokaiseen peruskouluun tutoropettaja tukemaan uudistumista [Minister Grahn-Laasonen: New comprehensive school program announced—every school will have a tutor—teacher to support the reform]  |
| Doc. 45 | October 5, 2016    | Webnews by Ministry of Education: Marianne Huusko—a trailblazer in education export  |
| Doc. 46 | September 15, 2016 | Suomen koulutusta vertailtiin OECD:n Education at a Glance— julkaisussa [Finland’s education was compared in the OECD’s “Education and a Glance”]  |
| Doc. 47 | October 7, 2016    | Ministeri Grahn-Laasosen johtamalta koulutusvientimatkalta useita sopimuksia - suomalainen päiväkotit Dubaihin, jopa 1000 opettajaa Saudi-Arabiasta Suomeen koulutukseen [Several agreements from the education export trip led by Minister Grahn-Laasonen—Finnish day-care center to Dubai, including a thousand teachers from Saudi Arabia to Finland] |
| Doc. 48 | November 16, 2016  | Parliamentary working group to reform comprehensive school— Theses for the centenary of Finland’s independence   |
| Doc. 49 | November 29, 2016  | Neljäsluokkalaisten matematiikan ja luonnontieteiden osaaminen heikentynyt [Fourth class pupils’ competence in mathematics and natural sciences has weakened]  |
| Doc. 50 | December 6, 2016   | PISA 2015: Finnish youth still at the top, despite the drop  |

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<http://valtioneuvosto.fi/tietoa/historiaa/hallitusohjelmat>

<http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Tiedotteet/> (except Docs 43 and 45, which come from

<http://www.minedu.fi/osaaminenjakoulutus/ajankohtaista/?lang=fi>)

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> *Education Finland* (<http://www.eduexport.fi/the-role-of-flf>) was created in 2015 to “bring together first-class private companies, vocational institutions, and higher education establishments in Finland, to help export their education expertise, which comes in rich and varied forms, from educational and learning products—technologies, programs, applications, digital learning suites and software, educational content and materials—to services covering teacher training, pedagogical and vocational programs, as well as multi-functional solutions in the physical and digital learning environments.” The organization is government supported and managed by the Finnish National Agency for Education. Education Finland is a part of the *Team Finland* network established to boost the success of Finnish companies abroad and promote Finland’s country brand ([team.finland.fi/en/](http://team.finland.fi/en/)). (See more in Schatz [2016](#))

<sup>2</sup> One document (Doc. 43) was published jointly by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education. One of the documents (Doc. 45) included in the data was online webnews by the Ministry of Education based on press release (Doc. 43).

<sup>3</sup> The quotations from those documents with Finnish names (see [Appendix](#)) have been translated by the authors.

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4 Unlike previous ministers, the current MoEC head Krista Kiuru did not issue a separate press release of PISA as previous ministers, but did refer to Finland's performance in a more general press release on education.

5 The position is also alternatively referred to as Ambassador for Education Export.