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Trust in Finnish Education: A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the origins of generalized trust in Finnish society and how this relates to trust in education. The study was based on a historical analysis of the role of education in building a Finnish society and nation state. The author discusses the development of a Nordic welfare state and analyzes the relationships between generalized trust and education from the perspectives of democracy, corruption, egalitarian attitudes, wealth, and culture. A reflection was performed of the relationships between generalized trust, school autonomy, and the professional autonomy of teachers.

Introduction

There is a general concern that social cohesion is declining worldwide. A crucial aspect of social cohesion is trust, with emphasis being placed on trust as a component of social capital (Coleman, 1988) and its role in relation to the cohesion, prosperity, and democratic stability of society (Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 1995). However, according to European statistics, Finland is an exception to global trends since, in contrast with other nations, it is characterized by high levels of generalized trust and social cohesion (see European Union, 2018, 2021).

The aim of the current study was to analyze the origins of trust in Finnish society and how generalized trust relates to trust in education. The research considers generalized trust from a historical perspective rather than analyzes different theoretical perspectives of trust. The analysis begins, firstly, by assessing the history of Finland to provide a context for the importance of education in the country's development and, secondly, by discussing the nature of Finnish welfare society, which is based on the core value of equality.

Niedlich et al. (2021) proposed that there is a cyclical relationship between society, educational governance, and generalized trust. However, education has a special role in society because, on the one hand, the educational system socializes new generations into societies and, on the other hand, teaching and learning take place in certain socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts, which, in turn, influences the values, norms, and goals of education. Thus, educational systems have the potential to both reproduce and change societal structures (Bourdieu, 1984). In keeping with this dual role, the Finnish educational system should be analyzed in its cultural and societal context. In addition, understanding historical traditions is important because past social actors have shaped contemporary social structures (Välimaa & Nokkala, 2014). Quite often, however, traditions and cultures are described as homogenous or even stereotypical entities even though

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change is the only constant characteristic of a culture or a society (Välilmaa, 1998; Välilmaa & Saarinen, 2012). For this reason, tensions in Finnish history and contemporary society were identified to depict a comprehensive picture of the social reality in which contemporary education is taking place.

This desk study was based on a critical analysis of publicly available sources and relevant research publications identified using the following keywords: “trust,” “education,” and “Finland.” However, an extensive discussion is not held on trust as a concept or component of any social theory; instead, the discussion unfolds based on the definitions of “trust” and “generalized trust” proposed by Niedlich et al. (2021). As a concept, trust “generally refers to a willingness to make oneself vulnerable when relying on others” (Niedlich et al., 2021), whereas “generalized” trust refers to an “abstract attitude toward people in general (including strangers) as well as towards groups of people or institutions” (Niedlich et al., 2021, pp. 124–125). Generalized trust is also referred to as social trust. Therefore, in this paper, generalized trust was used as the core concept that provided relevant perspectives on relationships between institutions and people in Finnish society.

The paper begins with a discussion of the geo-political context in Finland because this has shaped both the identities of Finnish citizens and Finland as a nation and society. Thereafter, the role of education in the making of the Finnish nation is deliberated, and a reflection is performed of the interrelated relationship between trust, education, and the development of the Nordic welfare state.

Geo-political Context in Finland

Geographically speaking, Finland is a large country (the fifth largest in Europe, measuring 338 400 km²); however, it has been reported to have the smallest population density in the European Union (see <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>). Finland’s geo-political position between two stronger nations (Sweden in the West and Russia in the East) has meant that it has frequently become a battleground in wars between the Swedish Kingdom and the Russian Empire, especially from the 12th to the 19th centuries (Välilmaa, 2019). The border between East and West, along with the impact of German culture via Baltic Sea trade routes, has influenced Finnish culture. Regarding governance, Finnish juridical tradition originated in Sweden where there is a strong belief in the rule of law, whereas Russian (autocratic) bureaucracy has influenced the mentality of civil servants and state departments (Välilmaa, 2019). When describing cultural tensions, sociologist, Risto Alapuro, asserted that Finland has had a culturally ambivalent relationship with Sweden and a politically ambivalent relationship with Russia (Alapuro, 1988). Traditionally, a typical feature of Finnish culture is deep respect for and trust in the authorities and institutions of society and the conviction that the law is above everyone else.

Historically speaking, Finland was a core area of the Swedish Kingdom’s eastern provinces from the 12th century to the Napoleonic wars (1809) when it was conquered by the Russian imperial army. However, the Russian Emperors afforded Finland the status of an autonomous Grand Duchy (1809–1917). Consequently, the Finnish authorities exerted control over the internal administration of all societal institutions, including education at the primary school level up to the tertiary level. This period of autonomy laid the foundations for cultural, political, social, economic, and administrative development, and it resulted in the establishment of Finland as an independent nation state in December 1917. The developmental process was strongly supported by the only university in Finland at the time, the Imperial Alexander University, formerly known as the Royal Academy in Åbo and later as the University of Helsinki (Klinge, 1997; Välilmaa, 2019). However, the new Finnish Republic had a dismal start because during the spring of 1918, a bloody civil war broke out, with the German troops supporting the Whites (non-socialists) and the Soviet troops assisting the Reds (socialists) (Hentilä & Hentilä, 2016; Välilmaa, 2019).

The period between the First World War and the Second World War (WWII) was referred to as “White Finland” owing to the fact that the mentality in Finland was characterized by a narrow right-wing definition of nationalism that targeted Soviet Russia and the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland (Hentilä & Hentilä, 2016). The republic was deeply divided, both culturally and politically during the 1920s and 1930s. However, the Finnish nation was united during WWII, firstly, when Finland fought against the Soviet Union (the Winter War of 1939–1940), secondly, when it allied with Germany against the Soviet Union (the Continuation War of 1941–1944) and finally, when it fought against German troops in Lapland (the Lapland War of 1944–1945). However, Finland was conquered neither by German nor Soviet troops. The outcome of the wars was defined a “defensive victory” because Finland managed to maintain its independency and democracy throughout and afterward (Välilmaa, 2019).

After WWII, the political, cultural, and economic context begun to change rapidly. Finnish society experienced a rapid transformation from an agricultural society into an industrial society between the 1950s and 1970s. The number of jobs in primary production decreased rapidly, whereas those in industrial production and the service sector increased exponentially. Strong urbanization was a consequence of this change because people seeking jobs moved from the rural areas to towns and cities and also to Sweden, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, changes in the structure of the economy and society challenged the system of education to change, especially during the 1960s (Välilmaa, 2019).

The Role of Education in the Making of the Finnish Nation

Finland was a Lutheran Protestant country from the 16th century onward. The ability to read was an important skill, both theologically and for practical reasons. In principle, according to Lutheran theology, every Christian was expected to create a personal relationship with God based on knowledge and by reading the Holy Bible (Karonen, 2014). In practice, however, this ambitious goal was never reached, but it was replaced with the rule that permission to get married depended on knowledge (not just memorization) of Lutheran Catechism. The church was responsible for the education of people after the Reformation (from around the 1530s) until the 1860s. The main goal was the education of “good” Lutheran Christians. In turn, the first university in Finland, the Royal Academy, located in Åbo and established in 1640, primarily concentrated on training priests for the Lutheran Church and civil servants for the service of the Swedish King. It is fair to say that the importance of education in Finland has a long tradition, both among common people and as an institution that maintains social order (Välilmaa, 2019).

The importance of education increased significantly during the 19th century when Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy. The goal of emerging Finnish-speaking nationalists (known as *Fennomans*) was to create a Finnish nation by educating Finnish-speaking common people and nationalizing the ruling Swedish-speaking elite.¹ The establishment of folk schools (*kansakoulu*) and teacher training seminars (or colleges) in the 1860s was important for the implementation of Finnish nationalism based on *Fennoman* ideology. Folk schools borrowed their pedagogical ideas from the authorities at the time (Diegerweg, Pestalozzi, and Fröbel) and aimed for vivid, realistic, and constructive teaching of academic subjects (i.e., mathematics, history, reading, and writing) and the development of practical skills (i.e., handicrafts and physical education) (Nurmi, 1995). In turn, an increasing number of Finnish-speaking folk schools and grammar schools (or gymnasiums) led to an increase in the number of Finnish-speaking male and female

¹According to *Fennoman* philosophy, formulated by the Professor of Philosophy, J. V. Snellman, history advances in and through nation states. As per this version of Hegelian philosophy, the development of the Finnish language laid the basis for a Finnish nation, which, in turn, was a precondition for the establishment of a Finnish nation state. Consequently, education of the people and the development of the Finnish language were the most important objectives of *Fennoman* ideology with respect to building a nation (e.g. Välilmaa, 2019).

university students, whereas the university was previously dominated by Swedish-speaking male students (Välilimaa, 2019).

In addition, the Imperial Alexander University played a crucial role in all processes related to the development of Finnish society and culture. *Fennoman* university professors and students were active in public life, culture, and politics, but they were opposed by Swedish-speaking professors and students whose ideological standing was inspired by liberalism (Klinge, 1997). Historical, ethnographic, and linguistic studies made pivotal advances in the “national awakening” of Finns. *Fennoman* academics also developed Finnish, a language mainly used by peasants, into one that could be used in every sphere of society, including culture, legislation, and scientific research. It is not an overstatement to say that the only university, the Imperial Alexander University, was at the center of the process of developing a Finnish nation and nation state (Välilimaa, 2019).

Education became even more important in the Republic of Finland, a country that was re-defining its national identity after the civil war. The failure of the previous education system to educate patriotic citizens was defined as one of the main causes of the civil war. It is not important whether this interpretation was correct; what is significant is that the education of the people was perceived to be critical to the future development of the nation. Consequently, the Compulsory Education Act was passed in the Finnish Parliament following heated debates in 1921. It was supported by a moderate center party that represented agricultural population and by social democrats who supported the education of the working class. The act aimed to cultivate “right white values” in Finnish citizens to strengthen national unity while continuing, however, with the original pedagogical aims of the folk schools. Consequently, folk schools were established all over the country, and this resulted in 80% of students of the relevant age attending school in the 1930s (Jussila et al., 2009; Välilimaa, 2019).

Higher education began to expand at the same time, and an increasing number of students entered universities in response to the establishment of two new universities (the Swedish-speaking Åbo Academy and the Finnish-speaking University of Turku), two business schools, and one technical university during the first two decades of the 20th century. However, higher education remained an elite system, with a clear over-representation of students with high socioeconomic status in higher education prior to WWII. Nevertheless, university studies were quite popular among students of low socioeconomic status too. Approximately 15–20% of students in higher education originated from working-class families, and roughly the same number of students came from farming families. In addition, by the 1930s, over a third of all university students were female, which constituted a high proportion compared to Western European countries at that time. The relatively high numbers of both female students and those of low socioeconomic status indicated that education and higher education were widely appreciated in Finnish society from the beginning of the 20th century. Universities and higher education degrees have continued to be conferred with high status in Finnish society (Välilimaa, 2019).

The aim of this historical overview was to demonstrate that education was an important objective in itself and a crucial instrument in the making of the Finnish nation from the 19th century onward. This trend continued after WWII; however, the national policy aims changed from white nationalism toward an ethos that supported the creation of an equal and fair society for all Finnish citizens. This policy shift was supported by left-wing and center parties and began after WWII with the emergence of a national educational policy. This was in tune with other social and economic policies that aimed to develop Finland as an industrial society that share the values of a Nordic welfare society (see Esping-Andersen, 1990).

One of the most important reforms of the Finnish education system was the establishment of comprehensive schools in the 1970s. Reform was adopted by the parliament in the early 1960s after which it was systematically planned and implemented by subsequent governments. The implementation of reform began in Northern Finland and was extended gradually to all Finnish

schools during the 1970s. Its main objective was to provide a good basic education to all citizens irrespective of their socioeconomic background, gender, or geographical location (Ahonen, 2012; Nurmi, 1995; Välimaa, 2019). The policy aim followed the principles of the radical conception of equal educational opportunities, as defined by Husen (1975), according to which educational policy was an important factor in developing an equal society. The aim of reform was to support each pupil in his or her learning and provide every citizen with equitable access to high-quality education in every school across the country (Ahonen, 2012; Välimaa, 2019).

Comprehensive school reform served a dual function in the process of creating a fair and equal society in Finland. Firstly, equal educational opportunities for all citizens were defined as the primary educational goal. Secondly, education itself was understood to be one of the main instruments necessary for the creation of an equal society. These two interlinked processes indicated a high degree of trust in the benefits of education for Finnish society, the nation, and Finnish citizens.

The same principle of equal educational opportunities guided the expansion of higher education between the 1950s and the 1990s. Consequently, the number of universities increased from three in the 1950s to 10 in the 1980s. In addition, two new technical universities and three art academies were established during the same period. The establishment of vocational higher educational institutions (initially referred to as polytechnics and later as universities of applied sciences), in turn, created a new sector in Finnish higher education in the 1990s. The sectors of universities and polytechnics were defined as equal but different, and this continues to be the case (Välimaa, 2019).

Having discussed the role of education in the development of Finland, an analysis is now performed of how trust relates to education in contemporary Finnish welfare society.

Trust, Education, and a Welfare Society

Generalized trust is an important element in fostering social cohesion; simultaneously, trust is a process that develops over time in a society and in the institutions of society. Therefore, contextual matters are crucial when attempting to understand the relationship between generalized trust and education. According to the synthetic analysis performed by Niedlich et al. (2021), a positive relationship was identified between generalized trust and educational attainment. In addition, a number of contextual characteristics that are linked with trust and education have been identified at the national level, the main characteristics of which are as follows: (1) democracy, (2) low corruption levels, (3) strong egalitarian attitudes, and (4) a wealthy state (Niedlich et al., 2021). In this paper, the Finnish case is analyzed from these perspectives, and it is deliberated whether they are useful in understanding and explaining the relationship between generalized trust and education.

Democracy

According to the Democracy Index, Finland, along with other Nordic countries, Canada, and New Zealand, are the only countries that have belonged to the highest category of “full democracies” from 2006 onward (see The Economist Intelligence Unit, n.d.). However, different indices are not necessarily reliable sources of scientific information; however, they do reveal the relationship between a measured entity, frequently a country, with other measured entities. The fact that Finland belongs to the same category as other established democracies suggests that Finland, too, is a stable democratic country. Typically, Finland has a coalition government. This means that Finnish parties commonly make compromises with other political parties, the result of which is that all of them may be, or have been, in the same government. It is typical in Finnish politics for popular opposition parties to be integrated into the political system by being

taken into the government. This policy of political integration began after the Finnish Civil War in 1918 when the social democrats (“the Reds”) were accepted into the government in the 1920s. In the field of education, this political tradition and dynamic has resulted in rather predictable and stable education policies, which means that changes in governments or ministries of education do not radically change the objectives of educational policies (Rautopuro et al., *in press*; Välimaa, 2019). However, a consequence of coalition governments is the difficulty of implementing extensive or radical reform. This may be a positive or a negative factor, depending on one’s perspective. Thus, it can be assumed that the stability of educational policies helps to strengthen trust in education because the policies are predictable. Citizens, schools, and teachers know what to expect today and in the future.

Low Corruption Levels

Finland is proceeding relatively well in terms of low levels of corruption, compared with other countries. According to Transparency International’s Corruptions Perception Index, the public sector in Finland is one of the least corrupted sectors in the world (see Transparency International, *n.d.*). In the last decade, from 2012–2020, Finland was among the three least corrupted countries in the world, along with Denmark and New Zealand. This index does not suggest that corruption does not exist in any country; rather, it argues that certain processes and institutions exist that aim to reveal, make public, and punish acts of corruption. In relation to education, a lack of corruption means that there is trust in the integrity of teachers and their professional quality. It also means that degrees cannot be bought by bribing schoolteachers, university professors, or educational institutions (i.e., by making sizable donations). A lack of corruption helps to build trust in educational professionals, educational establishments, and the degrees conferred by them on educational professionals.

Strong Egalitarian Attitudes

The third factor that supports generalized trust is egalitarian attitudes in a country. This is an important position that deserves to be discussed because it could be argued that equity and equality are the most commonly shared values in contemporary Finland. However, this has not always been the case. It is necessary to analyze the origins of equality in Finnish culture and society to understand how equality has become a core value.

One of the factors in favor of equality is that the majority of Finnish farms have always been relatively small, and the division of labor between men and women has supported the idea that both genders are important to the success and well-being of farms and families. In addition, the peasants in Finland have always been free, similar to the case in other Nordic countries. Until 1906, free peasants were represented in the assembly of the representatives of the estates, diet. In addition, the peasants made decisions on common issues in rural parish meetings. However, membership in the local decision-making body, the communal council, was based on wealth until 1917, after which the members of the councils were elected in elections based on universal suffrage. Finnish towns, in turn, were ruled by city councils following the tradition of German cities (Mylly, 2006; Välimaa, 2019). In other words, Finnish citizens have a strong tradition of local self-governance. One of the preconditions for local self-governance is trust in the fairness of the decision-makers.

In addition, academic research has emphasized that equality relates to the Nordic tradition of dealing with the societal roles of state, citizens, and the government. These relationships begun to develop at the time of the Reformation during the 16th century; thereafter, the kings often allied with the peasants against the aristocracy (Alestalo & Kuhnle, 1987; Välimaa, 2019). In addition, economically speaking, Finnish nobility has been quite weak, which has strengthened the

independent status of free peasants. The development toward the present Nordic welfare society is partly explained by the impact of the 19th century process of modernization. An important process was the rise in socialism as an ideology because it placed emphasis on socioeconomic equity from the end of the 19th century. Nationalism as an ideology also contributed to the development of egalitarian values by concentrating on national unity over group or social class interests. Kettunen et al. suggests that instead of making a choice between these different aspects, “it is reasonable to re-interpret the divergent ‘origins’ as temporal layers in the Nordic welfare state. Mediated through mentalities, traditions, values, epistemic practices and social movements, these layers are present in the formal and informal rules and norms of the Nordic model.” (Kettunen et al. (2014, p. 16).

The aforementioned processes were essential because equality and equity are the value basis for a contemporary Finnish welfare state. This was illustrated, for example, by Minister of Education and Culture, Jussi Saramo, who stated in April 2021 that, “Finland’s success has been based on the aim to ensure equal opportunities to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills in life. Educational equity is an asset we cannot afford to lose. ... That is the only way we can be successful in the future too.”² Equity and equality relate to generalized trust in society or trust in more or less unknown other citizens. This is how generalized trust helps to strengthen social cohesion in society (Putnam, 1995).

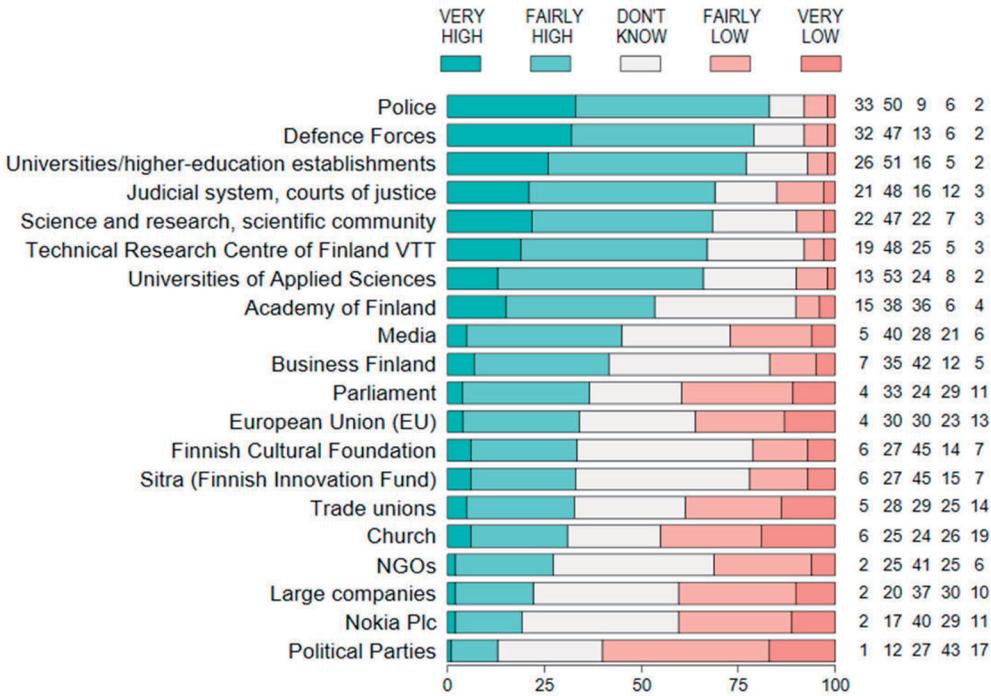
However, values become visible in and through public actions. The manifestation of gender equality provides an example on this. It was important that girls and boys were accepted as pupils in folk schools (*kansakoulu*) in the 1860s. This laid the basis for gender equality and further studies for women in higher education. However, enhancing gender equality and improving the situation of lower socioeconomic groups have been contested, and the implementation of this has only taken place after public debates. One of these debates focused on the question as to whether girls had the right to participate in further education in the 1880s. At that time, access by female students to university was based only on special permissions granted by the university leadership (Klinge, 1997; Välimaa, 2019). Around the same time, teacher training seminars provided a channel for female students, often from middle-class families, as well as relatively poor male students from peasant families, to advance in their studies (Välimaa, 2019). An important manifestation took place in 1906 when general strikes forced the Russian emperor to replace the former assembly of the representatives of the estates with a Parliament founded on general suffrage. Finland became the first country in Europe to extend universal suffrage to women in 1906. This resulted in the inclusion of the first female members of Parliament, worldwide, in 1907 (Mylly, 2006).

Concerning education, the concept of equal educational opportunities was defined in three main ways historically. Torsten Husen’s radical perspective of the need for equality of educational opportunity was dominant in Finland from the 1960s onward (Husen, 1975). According to this conception, the aim was to support every pupil in his or her learning instead of assuming that success in school would depend on a God-given talent, as assumed by conservatives, or on personal qualities, accepted as a matter of fact by liberals (Husen, 1975). Following the implementation of this radical approach, Finnish schools were no longer monitored, and education was provided free of charge to all Finnish (and European Economic Area) citizens from primary to tertiary education. In addition, secondary and tertiary education students became eligible for financial support from the state during their studies (Välimaa, 2019).

²This quote was taken from a press release at the launch of the *Education Policy Report* (<https://minedu.fi/en/-/education-policy-report-equitable-education-of-high-quality-essential-for-growing-skills-requirements-and-shrinking-age-cohorts-in-finland>).

The Finnish Science Barometer 2019

Figure 5. LEVEL OF TRUST FELT TOWARDS VARIOUS SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS (%).



Finnish Society for Scientific Information / Yhdyskuntatutkimus Oy 2019

Figure 1. The Finnish Science Barometer 2019.

A Wealthy State

The suggestion that a wealthy state is associated with a culture of trust and education at the national level is an interesting argument (see Niedlich et al., 2021) especially in Finland. Namely, there is a long tradition of defining Finland as a poor, agrarian, and peripheral country in the northern most corner of Europe. Indeed, at the beginning of the 19th century, Finland had one of the lowest gross domestic product (GDP) values in Europe, and, at that time, agriculture and forestry were the most important sectors of the economy. In addition, life expectancy was 10 years less than that in other Scandinavian countries at the beginning of the 20th century. However, this situation changed rapidly after WWII. The structure of the Finnish economy and society transformed from a rurally dominated economy based on agriculture and forestry into an urban, industrial, and post-industrial society between 1950 and 1980. By the first decade of the present millennium, the standard of living was high (14th globally, based on GDP per capita in 2020), as was life expectancy at the Nordic level (Kangas & Saloniemi, 2013; Worldometer, n.d.). It is rational to assume that the expansion of the national economy and the increase in GDP supported investments in the Finnish educational system.

This paper has discussed how a strong democracy, a lack of corruption, egalitarian attitudes, and a wealthy nation tend to promote the development of trust in education. Hereinafter, consideration is given to sources of trust in contemporary Finnish society. According to the findings of a study by Kouvo (2014), two main hypotheses can be utilized to explain generalized trust in society. According to the institution-centered hypothesis, emphasis is placed on the important role played by fair, just, and well-functioning public institutions in reinforcing trust among

citizens. By contrast, the society-centered hypothesis emphasizes the role of civic engagement in associations and the social interactions that take place at the grassroots level of society. Based on the findings of the European Social Survey and the International Social Survey Programme, Kouvo (2014) concluded that the institution-centered hypothesis better explained the nature of generalized trust because it illustrates how generalized trust relates to fair and well-functioning public institutions. Impartial and objective taxation as an institution is an important requirement for the reinforcement of generalized trust in a welfare society (Kouvo, 2014). In addition, the experience of trusting institutions helps to support trust in the nation itself. The findings of the study by Kouvo (2014) clearly support the perspective that a universal welfare state is an important element needed to build a trusting society. Thus, it is not surprising that generalized trust is high in all Nordic countries, including Finland.

However, the enduring tradition of defining Finland as a peripheral and poor country has influenced the national self-image of Finns as a nation that is living on the margins of Europe. The traditional perception of Finns is that they are hard-working, modest, humble, independent, self-standing, and socially conscious. This image (and normative description) was especially popular among *Fennomans* whose idealized picture of the Finnish nation was based on a romanticized notion of independent peasants in the nineteenth and early 20th centuries (Välilmaa, 2019). Similarly, contemporary Finns choose to see themselves as hard-working, honest, independent, and law-obeying citizens who trust authorities and societal institutions (Figure 1). In practice, it is not socially acceptable to demonstrate one's wealth in public appearances or street life in contemporary Finland. Humbleness and modesty make an easy transition into social expectations that favor moderateness. In other words, equity is a strong value in Finnish culture, and it readily translates into cultural expectations and social norms that aspire to unity, homogeneity, and moderateness. Nonetheless, Finns are managing their cultural tensions well, based on their ranking as the "happiest" nation in the *World Happiness Report* for four years in a row (Helliwell et al., 2021).

Trust in Education

Until this point, this paper has elucidated the reasons why Finland has evolved into a country with high level of generalized trust. Hereinafter, the focus is on factors that support trust in Finnish education. According to Niedlich et al. (2021), there is empirical evidence to suggest that local autonomy is an important aspect of educational governance. This argument is supported in Finland where the municipalities are responsible for running the schools. The local educational authorities and schools plan their own curricula for pre-primary and basic education; however, this takes place within the framework of the national core curriculum. The school rectors also have significant executive power over the recruitment of teachers and other practical management issues (Pollari et al., 2018). In addition, Finnish teachers have wide professional autonomy in all pedagogical matters (Bormann & René, 2014). According to Pollari et al. (2018), "Each teacher has a great deal of pedagogical freedom to plan and carry out their teaching and assessment procedures as they best see fit. Even though there are national learning objectives and contents set in the national core curricula, teachers can choose the methods and materials themselves as well as the assessment methodologies" (p. 5) (see also Linnakylä & Ja Välijärvi, 2005).

Concerning higher education, the autonomy of universities and the academic freedom of academics is founded in the Finnish constitution and the Universities Act 558/2009 (Välilmaa, 2011). This illustrates that institutional autonomy is respected in Finnish society, even though there may be contrasting opinions about the nature of autonomy (Välilmaa, 2019).

It has also been argued that Finnish teachers have a strong work ethic that is supported by their autonomy in teaching practices (Pollari et al., 2018). At the national level, teacher education is one of the most popular study fields in Finnish universities, and the teaching profession is one

of the respected professions in Finland (Heikkinen et al., 2020). According to the National Board of Education, teachers are viewed as trusted professionals (see Finnish Education. Why Teachers Are Important, n.d.). Respect for professional autonomy and trust in professionals, including teachers, is a typical characteristic of Finnish society. According to Ialenti (2020), there is considerable trust in institutions, the authorities, and professionals in Finland. The argumentation by Ialenti (2020) was based on an ethnographic study in which he analyzed the planning of nuclear waste repositories in Finland, but it describes the general attitude held toward professionals in Finnish society. It is likely that the definition of teaching as a trusted profession also relates to generalized trust in the Finnish education system.

However, trust is based on a process in which trustworthiness is demonstrated; therefore, the need to earn trust in schools is ongoing. Evidently, a factor that supports the process of trust is the high quality of teaching and teachers. According to PISA studies, the popularity of teaching as a profession is a factor that has helped to maintain the good quality of teaching and teachers in Finland (Pollari et al., 2018). The high quality of teaching, as a profession, is supported by four to five years of teacher training because the study process, which is of a relatively long duration, helps the students to mature and meet the expectations of the teaching profession. For this reason, all Finnish teachers have a MA degree and, more importantly, they have time to reflect on the demands and pedagogical skills required by the profession during their studies. Extensive programs are also available to support the transition of new teachers who have graduated from teacher training to join the teaching profession in schools (Heikkinen et al., 2010).

Another important indication of trust in education is the absence of school inspections, standardized tests, and school rankings in Finland (Ouakrim-Sovio et al., 2021). The only exception to the rule is the matriculation examination at the end of general upper school (*lukio*) (Pollari et al., 2018). The decision to discontinue school inspections was taken in the 1990s and related to the neo-liberal idea of the need to empower local authorities and for schools to take responsibility for their activities. However, the decisions taken in relation to the educational policy that followed were attributable to the respect and trust that Finns have in institutions and professional autonomy.

However, national evaluations are conducted by the Finnish Education Evaluation Center, while international comparative evaluations (PISA, TIMSS, and ICILS) are performed by the Finnish Institute for Educational Research at the University of Jyväskylä (University of Jyväskylä. Finnish Institute for Educational Research. <https://ktl.jyu.fi/en>). The evaluations help to ensure quality and continuous development of the Finnish educational system. Different assessments also contribute reliable data to political decision-making processes (Ouakrim-Sovio et al., 2021). Good learning outcomes, especially those gained from PISA studies, support general trust in education because the latter show that the Finnish educational system works well, is of high international quality, and is relevant to society as a whole. However, there is an ongoing debate on how to improve and develop the Finnish education system and teaching and learning in schools, a recent example of which pertains to reforms to expand the compulsory school going age to 18 years, starting in autumn 2021 (see Heikkilä, 2021).

High levels of trust in the system of education are also illustrated by the Finnish Science Barometer, a statistically reliable source of information, which is based on a sample of randomly selected citizens and is published every three years. The Finnish Science Barometer is supplemented by a Gallup panel of respondents ranging in age from 18 to 70 years (see http://www.tie-teentiedotus.fi/files/Sciencebarometer_2019_23122019.pdf). The barometer measures generalized trust in institutions in society. It also illustrates general attitudes to science, research, and higher education by showing that there is trust in the system of education even though the latter is not included in the barometer. According to the latest findings of the *Finnish Science Barometer 2019*, the five most trusted institutions in Finnish society were as follows: (1) the police, (2) the defense forces, (3) universities and higher education institutions, and (4) the judicial system and courts of

justice, (5) the science, research, and scientific community (Figure 1). The top five are closely followed by the Technical Research Center of Finland, the Universities of Applied Sciences, and the Academy of Finland. By contrast, the least trusted institutions, in ascending to descending order, are as follows: political parties, Nokia PLC, and large companies. The order of the most trusted institutions has not really changed over the last 20 years when the barometer surveys have been conducted. Thus, based on the findings of this survey, it is reasonable to deduce that higher education is a trusted institution in Finnish society.

This study has demonstrated the high status of education and higher education, not only a phenomenon of contemporary society, but also as a long tradition that was interconnected to and helped define the making of the Finnish nation and nation state. In addition, during the last century, education and higher education have provided a significant channel for upward social mobility, along with promoting the cultural value of *Bildung* (*sivistys* in Finnish) and increasing the quality of life of citizens (Nevala, 1995; Välimaa, 2019).

Discussion and Conclusion

Generalized trust is clearly a strength of Finnish society, and it is rooted in institutions and societal structures and supported by the traditional cultural depiction of Finns as hard-working, honest, humble citizens. Similarly, it is evident that building and reinforcing generalized trust in a society is a process that takes time. The analysis also revealed that a welfare state, such as Finland, is strongly founded on the core values of equality and equity, and this has helped to build trust in societal institutions.

The Finnish system of education has a core role as an institution in building generalized trust because it has the potential to reinforce the core values of society (equality and equity), and, consequently, to reinforce generalized trust in society. In addition, the trustworthiness of education as an institution is supported by the institutional autonomy of schools and other educational establishments, as well as by the professional autonomy of teachers and school leadership. Respect for the educational system is associated with the opening up of equal educational opportunities, an ongoing process, as well as opportunities for the social upward mobility of Finnish citizens.

Universal welfare policies in Nordic countries are key to their high levels of generalized trust. This can be seen in the Nordic conviction that universities should be autonomous, despite being publicly funded and steered through national legislation and higher educational policies (Välimaa, 2018). The same approach applies to educational establishments since the State of Finland has recognized that schools should have autonomy in making decisions on internal matters. There is a shared cultural conviction that institutional and professional autonomy support high-quality teaching and learning. In the Finnish context, it is natural to think that the aim of both autonomous educational establishments and the Ministry of Education and Culture is to ensure the effectiveness and relevance of educational establishments to the state, society, and academia. These assumptions are rooted in generalized trust in Finnish society.

Author Biography

Professor Jussi Välimaa acts as the director of the Finnish Institute for Educational Research. Dr. Välimaa was trained as a historian and social scientist. His research often focuses on the relationship between education and society.

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