Article

Sustainable Development: A Comparison between the Finnish and the Italian Education Systems

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Abstract: The quality of education is a political priority. The European Union contributes through the principle of subsidiarity. In the Finnish and Italian education systems, assessment becomes fundamental and is closely connected to qualitative organization and to the objective of providing reliable information to plan effective policies with an increase in learning outcomes at various levels (i.e., local, regional, and national). This research explores the Italian and Finnish education systems to outline how they facilitate creating schooling systems that follow the objectives set by Agenda 2030 and are increasingly aimed at sustainability, an essential element in the relationship between humans and the environment. This study was enriched by new ideas and further research perspectives through field experience from a methodological point of view, starting from the international debate linked to the issue of sustainability and examining the OECD survey (PISA, in which European countries took part, specifically the experience of job shadowing in the city of Oulu). This investigation has highlighted the actions carried out in the Finnish educational path with the aim of tracing a "sustainable path" as an international model to follow.

Keywords: sustainable development; Agenda 2030; education system

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of globalization and the needs of a territory make it necessary to search for new strategies that aim to enhance resources in relation to the needs of demand and their differentiation. "It is through an adequate business model that a territory can be transformed into a sustainable destination" [1] (p. 50). Sustainability represents the main ingredient to create a long-term competitive territory and must focus on different models. Elfert, in his studies, stresses the importance of lifelong learning in sustainable development and reiterates the value of promoting with UNESCO empirically based policies in higher education [2] by assisting member states in a process of examining strategies to ensure access to high-quality education for all, academic mobility, and academic accountability [3]. Especially, through Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, it is reiterated that it is necessary to promote "equal access for all men and women to quality technical, vocational and higher education, including tertiary education" by 2030 [3,4]. Ghosn-Chelala reiterates in her research that education is the basis for improving quality of life and achieving global sustainability [5,6]. Comprehensive and equitable education helps give people the skills they need to find creative solutions to problems faced in widely observed areas of life and work.

1.1. Education for Sustainable Development

The Finnish school system is based on a cultural model that focuses on sustainable development in its three dimensions, economic, social, and environmental, in a balanced and interconnected way for future growth and the development of integrated value networks. These policies generate chain effects in different sectors; cultural and creative production

becomes an important engine, particularly in areas such as entrepreneurship and employability, with the development of skills and technological innovations [7] (p. 70). In recent years, the Italian school system has also expanded towards new transversal areas and has laid the foundations for a different way of relating to the territory, with the institutional and professional realities that operate there, for growth towards the common good on the issues of environmental education, sustainability, cultural heritage, and global citizenship. The term sustainable development is rooted in both ecology and economics. Growth, understood as a process of "modernization," leads, as reaffirmed by A. Cunha (1988), towards uncontrolled trust in social and cultural evolutionism and economic rationality as a regulatory mechanism for relations between society and nature. The environment is a "collective asset" that brings well-being to society as a whole and not an exclusive asset [8] (pp. 479–482).

1.2. A Path to Sustainability

The first part of the article also highlights the Finnish way of life as a green method, after emphasizing the importance of achieving the 2030 Agenda Goals among EU countries and proceeds with particular attention to comparing the Finnish and Italian educational systems. In the second part, this research presents the characteristics of Finland's education system as a model to create an ecological, inclusive, and innovative school that aims to train future citizens to be increasingly aware and capable of acting for the common good [9]. The job shadowing experience was made possible through the Erasmus plus project dealing with the areas of education, training, youth, and sport sectors at the European level to increase opportunities in a well-defined time phase (2021–2027). The European program, which involves numerous students and teachers, is based on objectives that focus on the growth of Europe from a cultural, economic, professional, and sustainable point of view [10]. In particular, the specific objectives of international policies are part of a broad perspective for the future: promoting the mobility of individuals and groups and collaboration, quality, inclusion and equity, excellence, creativity, and innovation, both in the field of training and education; and increased non-formal and informal learning and the active participation of young people. Social inclusion, environmental sustainability, the transition to digital technologies, as well as participation in democratic life, are predominant elements of universal action [11]. To generate the growth of a global society, pluralistic, united, integrated strategic policies are needed in relation to the various fields of action. The territory becomes the element that unites these individual aspects to undertake structural transformations capable of promoting inclusive and sustainable growth in relation to the planet's environmental resources. Therefore, the ultimate goal of the research is to compare the two education systems, Finnish and Italian, so that Italy, too, committed to sustainability, can implement an increasingly inclusive and innovative education model.

2. Aim and Objectives of the Study

Starting from the international debate on the importance of sustainable education, this article aims to offer some insights through a comparison of the Finnish and Italian educational systems, emphasizing, in particular, the virtuous actions of the Finnish model to create a more sustainable school. This research aims to contribute a "green way" to create a school that aims to develop skills for sustainable living [12] and give our planet a future.

3. Research Questions

Starting from the importance of educational objectives on sustainability, through a comparison with the Italian education system, this contribution aims to focus on a question: The Finnish educational model can help transform education in different learning contexts? Through exploring the following points some of the most significant aspects of promoting sustainable education are highlighted in this article, through the following questions:

1.   What are the actions for green living and educational objectives aimed at sustainability?
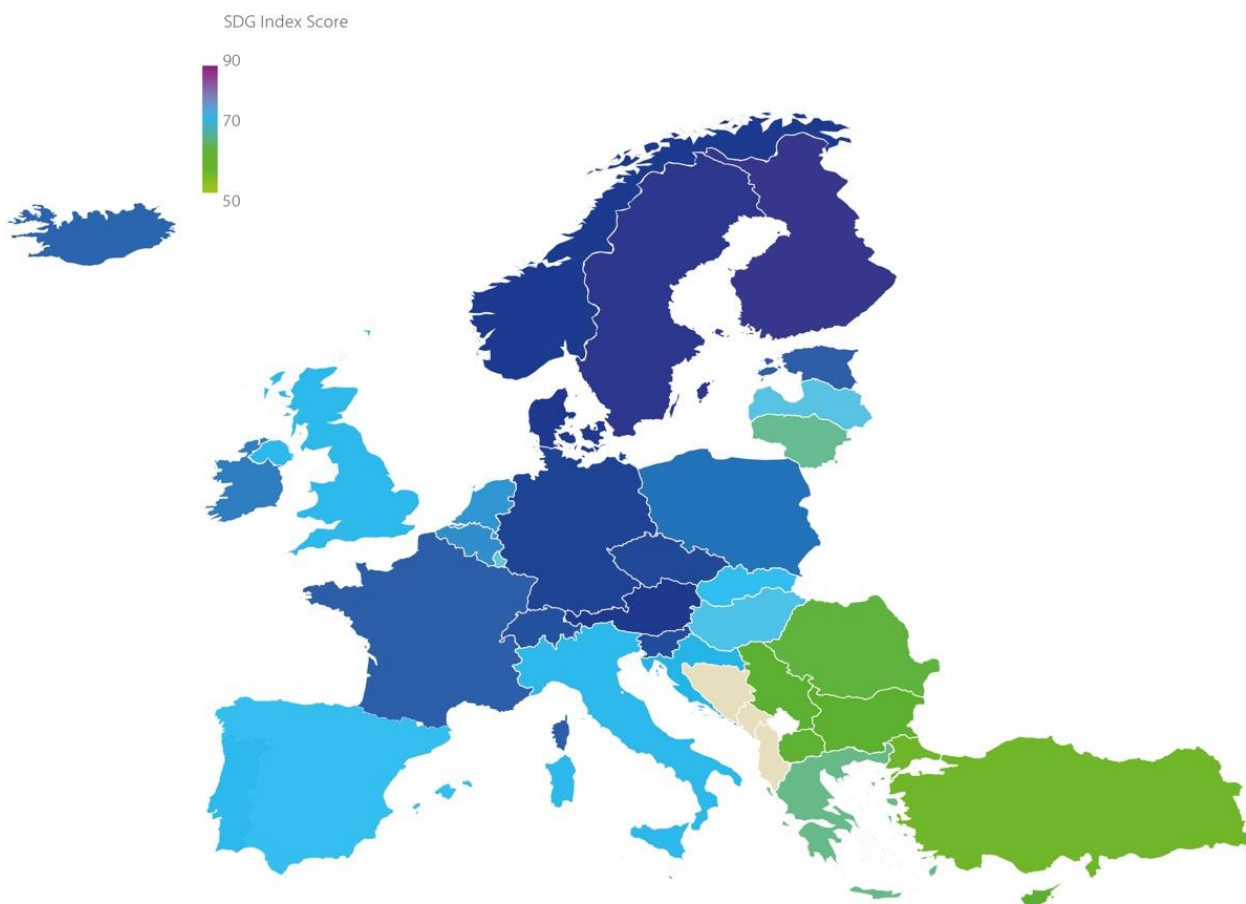
2. What are the focuses on sustainable education and the 2030 Agenda?
3. How are the two education systems structured: Finland and Italy?
4. What are the determinants of Finnish educational success as a sustainable model?
5. What types of educational governance are needed to build a sustainable school?

4. Methodology

The methodology used in this study is based on the analysis of reference literature by authors related to the national and international through the consultation of texts and materials in university libraries and the in-depth study of projects and research carried out by teachers from various educational institutions operating in Finland in which scene who emphasize the importance of using targeted policies [7,13–15] and actions to create a virtuous educational system as a model for a more sustainable school [16–18]. In addition, the study was based, through open access scientific journals, on the analysis of some green projects implemented in the city of Helsinki and Oulu in order to highlight a sustainable lifestyle as an example of good practices to be implemented in other areas.

The qualitative approach to European documents (2030 Agenda, regulations launched by the UN and the European Commission) has made it possible to highlight the status of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (Figures 1 and 2) that each country needs to achieve [2,19,20]. The analysis of the Index data, through the official page of the European Analysis Centre, highlighted, in particular, the progress of the goals in Italy and Finland by noting those that will need to be the subject of concrete and targeted actions to achieve positive results. Starting from the study of these elements, the research focused on an in-depth study of the educational systems: Finnish and Italian, through a careful reading of ministerial documents, consulted through the databases of the Ministries of Education. This gave rise to the need to compare the two systems and highlight, through an analytical approach, the educational actions of the Finnish school system as a virtuous model that achieves excellent results, as reflected in the OECD-PISA results published in official reports [21–23]. In addition, the empirical study was carried out through job shadowing, whereby a direct observation of the teaching methodology was carried out. This field experience was carried out in September 2021 at four basic education schools in the city of Oulu (Finland) within the framework of the Erasmus plus project "Eco School, Inclusion and Innovation", and the role of educational training in the Finnish education system was surveyed, highlighting elements that can contribute to the development of an excellent education system based on sustainability.

During the observation period, it was possible to engage in discussion with the Finnish students and teachers involved in the project. The confrontation and direct observation of the students during the course of the school activities made it possible to highlight the fundamental actions for developing a sustainable lifestyle. The following paragraphs set out the lines on which an Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) school must be based in order to become a sustainable model. In Finland in 2014, a key objective was to increase pupils' basic education of a sustainable lifestyle. In general, school curricula are very subject-oriented and, as a result, cultural integration and interdisciplinary implementation of ESD is not realized, as reiterated by the National Board of Education. During the empirical study, it became clear that ESD in education must be part of a school's culture; it should be rooted in its values, policy-making and all school activities. The observation made in schools was crucial to take a closer look at the individual steps students took in the RoadMap project, consolidating concrete actions during school activities and developing a sustainable lifestyle.

SDG Index Rank	Country	SDG Index Score							
1	Finland	81.7	18	Portugal	70.6		European Union	72.0
2	Sweden	80.6	19	Italy	70.6		Baltic States	69.1
3	Denmark	79.2	20	United Kingdom	70.5		Candidate Countries	57.8
4	Austria	78.2	21	Slovak Republic	70.2		Central and Eastern Europe	69.6
5	Norway	77.2	22	Spain	70.1		
6	Germany	74.8	23	Hungary	69.9		EFTA Countries	75.1
7	Czechia	74.2	24	Latvia	69.5		Northern Europe	80.8
8	Slovenia	74.0	25	Luxembourg	68.7		Southern Europe	70.0
9	Switzerland	73.7	26	Lithuania	66.1		Western Europe	73.7
10	Estonia	73.2	27	Greece	65.7			
11	France	73.1	28	Malta	64.9		Albania	NA
12	Iceland	72.8	29	Romania	63.4		Bosnia and Herzegovina	NA
13	Poland	72.4	30	North Macedonia	62.9		
14	Ireland	72.2	31	Serbia	61.1		Liechtenstein	NA
15	Belgium	71.7	32	Cyprus	60.7		Montenegro	NA
16	Netherlands	71.6	33	Bulgaria	60.7			
17	Croatia	70.7	34	Türkiye	56.7			

Figure 1. Total SDG Index Score. Source: Europe Sustainable Development Report 2022 [20]—Graphic elaboration by the author.

	NO POVERTY	ZERO HUNGER	GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	QUALITY EDUCATION	GENDER EQUALITY	CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION	AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY	DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH	INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE	REDUCED INEQUALITIES	SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES	RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION	CLIMATE ACTION	LIFE BELOW WATER	LIFE ON LAND	PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS	PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Albania																	
Austria																	
Belgium																	
Bosnia and Herzegovina																	
Bulgaria																	
Croatia																	
Cyprus																	
Czechia																	
Denmark																	
Estonia																	
Finland																	
France																	
Germany																	
Greece																	
Hungary																	
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Malta																	
Montenegro																	
Netherlands																	
North Macedonia																	
Norway																	
Poland																	
Portugal																	
Romania																	
Serbia																	
Slovak Republic																	
Slovenia																	
Spain																	
Sweden																	
Switzerland																	
Türkiye																	
United Kingdom																	
European Union																	

Legend:
- SDG achieved
- Challenges remain
- Significant challenges remain
- Major challenges remain
- Data not available
- ↑ On track
- ↗ Moderately Increasing
- → Stagnating
- ↓ Decreasing
- Data not available

Figure 2. SDG Trend Dashboard for the European Union. Source: Europe Sustainable Development Report 2022 [20]—Graphic elaboration by the author.

5. Living Green: Sustainability Actions in Finland

The increasingly complex global dimension has made the European Union (EU) the universal leader in fostering a circular economy and the well-being of citizens, promoting skills, education and training, regional equity, social and gender equality. The goal is to make European education training and research the best in the world. The EU must focus on a future-oriented and far-reaching strategy for lifelong learning that considers the

transformation of work and digitization [24]. To promote education, skills, and mobility and strengthen European universities, it is necessary to aim for an ever stronger and inclusive Erasmus program. Job mobility within the EU and the recruitment of the best talent from third countries should be encouraged through targeted actions by removing obstacles and expanding the European labour market [25]. In education system policies in EU countries, the establishment of a route system that trains future generations to achieve the objectives of the green economy [26] is essential. Finland took over the presidency of the European Council in 2019 at a crucial moment, when there was a drive to make the EU more competitive and to address the challenges related to sustainable development, where possible solutions had to be put in place to address the fight against global warming and the loss of biodiversity. European leaders jointly agreed on a strategic, ambitious, and forward-looking agenda for the years 2019–2024, in which the common denominator for all actions is sustainability, with implementation of the 2030 Agenda both inside and outside all countries [27]. The first steps in this direction were taken by Finland, which openly aims to eliminate the use of fossil fuel energies by 2035 with a project that invests in all areas: economic, ecological, social, and cultural. As early as 2016, Finland had ranked as the greenest country in the world. It was awarded this title by the Environmental Performance Index (EPI), which is calculated by researchers from Columbia and Yale University of the United States, in collaboration with the World Economic Forum and the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, which establishes the level of sustainability of various countries. This study is based on two objectives: the protection of environmental health and that of the vitality of the ecosystem [28].

Sustainability Projects

As has been seen personally through direct observation, living green is a way of life for all of Finland, but even more in its capital, Helsinki, which aims at the well-being of each individual citizen through a better quality of life. To this end, an eco-design project was developed with the construction of an eco-sustainable neighbourhood: Eco-Viikki [19]. The neighbourhood buildings were built with ecological criteria that guarantee the reduction of at least 20% of CO_2 emissions compared to conventional constructions; solar panels were installed on the roofs; a car free area was created for those who prefer to exclusively use public transport and not have a car and, finally, green areas were created in areas in a state of neglect for targeted redevelopment. After the construction of this neighbourhood, developed to demonstrate that it is possible to live in an ecological way, the rest of the city is "adapting" to this green revolution [29]. Among the actions put in place, Finland is working simultaneously on another very important objective linked to transport, with the promotion of low-emission vehicles that use renewable energies, such as hydrogen and biofuels, to have an ever-decreasing impact on the atmosphere. All of this will also be possible thanks to a Trans Smart vision, a project that plans to offer different transport services based on the user's needs, to implement sustainable and smart mobility, from bikes to carpooling, to the joint use of cars and transport, up to the use of the simplest public transport (fully electric trams and buses) [30]. In line with these projects, the environmental program of the city of Oulu is part of the aim of bringing the territory to zero emission production. The program, approved by the city council in 2019, defines objectives, targets, measures, and indicators to maintain and improve the state of the environment. To achieve the main objective, the plan is based on four fundamental objectives linked to a series of actions:

(1) Sustainable growth, with activities related to promoting a sustainable living environment, creation of versatile central areas and implementation of ecological mobility;

(2) Use of alternative resources, through the effective use of energy, zero-emission production and the development of a functioning circular economy;

(3) Respect for nature as a life force, with actions based on green living and the identification of solutions to face climate change, through a safe, healthy and comfortable living environment, improving the ecological status of inland waterways;

(4) Promoting environmental responsibility by making citizens more aware of their ecological footprint, through sustainable governance with the activation of targeted procedures.

These objectives, linked to the region's climate improvement, support not only climate change mitigation, adaptation, and conservation of biodiversity, but also the regional economy. Involving all aspects of sustainability and climate change mitigation is not only possible but represents an opportunity for all [31]. The cornerstone of the whole strategy is cooperation between research institutes, education and training bodies and corporate structures to generate and implement new innovations. Finland's growth potential is strongly linked to the education and service sectors, where the digital economy, new technologies and sustainable business models represent the beating heart of the functioning of different chains. In particular, the multidisciplinary research project "Oulu Mining School" developed by the University of Oulu, within the FESER (2014–2020), was created with the aim of training technical personnel specialized in mining and bringing together the scientific and technological excellence of the geology and engineering sectors, becoming the most important international centre in the whole country, from an innovative, technological and training point of view and above all a reference centre for research at national and international level [32]. One of the most ambitious objectives of the project is to build a cleaning and recycling unit for process water, as the only procedure in the world for floating foam. The equipment cleans process water and recycles it in the processing of minerals, subsequently, sandy waste is collected and, through heat treatment, is transformed into products to be used in other sectors, such as that of construction. The role of the Oulu Mining School (OMS) as the main mining university located in northern Scandinavia represents an added value for the development of the business sector in the region and presupposes the creation of company mining research for greater diffusion. The OMS research centre represents an innovative multidisciplinary platform to support the university's education and training development to meet the needs related to the world of work and especially the industrial sector. Recently, the city of Oulu has started an ecological support activity, as an operational model, to promote environmental issues in the workplace. The activity is carried out with the help of eco-supporters, who are appointed and trained among the working communities. At the end of 2020, around 300 volunteers were trained, and a new basic course is organized every year, as well as numerous follow-up courses on various topics. Eco-supporters guide and encourage their colleagues towards more environmentally friendly working methods, also increasing their environmental awareness. The action is based on the use of new tangible and daily practices and choices, such as waste reduction, more efficient recycling, and concrete energy savings. This example, linked to an increasingly sustainable country, should make us reflect by asking ourselves the following question: what can we do to achieve these green goals? Each EU country is implementing numerous actions that have made it possible to trace the sustainability ranking, even if there are still many measures that will have to be taken to protect the health of citizens [33]. Only by promoting a green industrial policy and developing a plan for the sustainable development of the economy in the context of the global change process will the growth potential of all countries be highly positive. It will be necessary to aim for development focused on training, innovation, and the use of new technologies for the construction of business models for the functioning of the different value chains.

6. Education for Sustainable Development and Objectives of the 2030 Agenda

It is noted, through this research, that continuous improvement of the quality of education and training is a key priority in Finland, essential for ensuring the necessary requirements for the world of work. The Finnish National Education Agency, which operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Culture, produces long-term national forecasts (more than ten years) on job demand and educational needs in support of the decision-making process. This vast process finds its full expression through a shared vision of education for the future. Turning, therefore, to an international community of

educators, it is necessary to underline that today, more than before, we must provide quality, fair and inclusive education, and learning opportunities for all [34]. Education is a public good and an indispensable prerequisite for obtaining personal fulfilment, peace, sustainable development, gender equality and responsible citizenship, Moreover, as a catalyst for development, it is a key point to combat inequality and reduce poverty [35]. In Finland, access to high-quality education is the essential premise for accelerating the achievement of other sustainable development goals, as sustainable development begins with education. In this scenario, knowledge, information, and education play a crucial role. In the same 2030 Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) dedicates a strategic role to "Education for sustainable development". Creating a culture of sustainability means training new generations and those professionals who can find concrete paths and solutions for fairer, just, and resilient societies and a more sustainable planet. The inequalities and differences, which have always accompanied the history of humanity, have now reached critical and conflicting levels in many cases, both within individual states and on a planetary scale, linking economic and political trauma with cultural and social issues [13]. It is necessary to develop agreements which enable decision-makers to develop effective policies. The active involvement of the local population, who these measures are directly intended for, is fundamental and there is a strong need to adopt an integrated approach that considers the multiple factors of a system [14]. In the context of European territorial cohesion policies, more and more space is being dedicated to a topical issue linked to the Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA) methodologies relating to policy choices. The world of geographic-economic research is engaged at the European level in the definition of methodologies and indicators capable of providing evidence, an indispensable element for the crossover between science and politics [15] (pp. 22–23). In defining cohesion policies, it is possible to provide the policy maker with tools for assessing the ability to affect a precise territorial specificity [36]. "Our success in finding solutions to the interlinked problems we face hinges on our ability to anticipate, prevent and prepare for major risks to come. This puts a revitalized, comprehensive, and overarching prevention agenda front and centre in all that we do. We need more innovation, more inclusion, and more foresight, investing in the global public goods that sustain us all" [37] (p. 65). Therefore, being prepared by educating young people to prevent these risks is an essential element for better management of global common good and global public goods and this must also be carried out through an education system which is increasingly oriented towards inclusion and sustainability. Education for sustainable development allows students to build skills of thought and action within the framework of sustainability and is outlined as an interconnected part of the mission of the Finnish school system. As a place of learning, life and work, school represents the concrete and active field of experimentation for sustainable development. To this end, it is necessary to encourage the acquisition of an overview of the complexity of issues related to sustainable development by offering a learning path that follows the structure of the 2030 Agenda [38].

A Window to Europe

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs adopted by all United Nations (UN) member states in 2015 represent a global affirmation of values that are at the heart of the EU. In the challenge towards 2030, Denmark, Sweden and Finland seem to be the nations which are closest to the achievement of the 17 Goals, while Bulgaria, Romania, and Cyprus rank at the bottom of the 27 EU member countries [20]. Italy with an SDG Index score of 70.6, well below the European average (72.0), holds 19th position (Figure 1) [20] as reflected in the Report prepared in 2022 by the Institute for European Environmental Policy of Brussels.

The Green Deal put an investment plan in place for a sustainable Europe with greater efforts in education, research, and development. The Secretary General of the UN, António Guterres, in the Our Common Agenda report [39], called for strengthening actions for the 2030 Agenda and SDGs together with other commitments made on the climate and human rights to build the common good. Recently, through the National Recovery and Resilience

Plan (PNRR), Italy has accelerated sustainable development by moving towards the green revolution and ecological transition [40]. Overall, as shown in Figure 2 prepared by the Institute for European Environmental Policy of Brussels, Italy still lags behind on some goals: Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth), Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production), Goal 13 (combating climate change) and Goal 14 (life under water), but it is showing gradual improvement in its performance on Goal 3 (health and well-being) and Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation). In contrast, Finland has achieved most of the goals and is implementing targeted policies to achieve Goal 13 (promote action, at all levels, to combat climate change) and Goal 17 (strengthen means of implementation and renew the global partnership for sustainable development) [41].

The European Green Deal, a cornerstone for future European policies and implementation of the SDGs, must implement a strategy to green the energy system; to strengthen the circular economy by improving collection and reducing waste generation; and to promote sustainable land use. Countries that exceed the SDG index also exceed the "leave no one behind" index, as sustainable development and reducing inequality are mutually reinforcing goals. At the international level, during COP26 in Glasgow, the need was stressed that ambitious climate commitments and actions must be accompanied by strong social policies and international solidarity to support vulnerable countries and populations. "Finland tops the 2021 SDG Index for European countries (and worldwide), as it was less affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than most other EU countries. It is followed by two countries also from Northern Europe—Sweden and Denmark. Yet, as with the rest of Europe, these countries face significant challenges in achieving SDG targets in the areas of sustainable diets and agriculture, climate, and biodiversity, partly due to international spillovers—such as deforestation—embodied into trade" [42]. Continued accelerations in change reveal the internal fragilities and instabilities in a system that is delicate and complex in its connections, thus, without a shared vision and precise agreements in the international community, a more harmonious, sustainable, and equitable multipolar arrangement will not be realized [43].

7. The Finnish Educational System

Starting from observation carried out in the field in the institutes of every order and degree in the city of Oulu, it was seen that the international dimension of education and the attention paid to policies and practices in use have steadily grown in recent years, making knowledge of European education systems, as with that of Finland, an undisputed and essential element for scholars of educational practices and for the teacher training [44]. In recent decades, the importance of this has grown, demonstrated by the periodic survey of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) internationally promoted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) which every three years measures the skills of fifteen-year-old students of the participating countries. Finland has a unitary government structure, in which decentralization is the cornerstone of organizational functioning, articulated in a system of institutional bodies present at central and peripheral level. Education policy is jointly defined by Parliament and the government and includes ten-year objectives and key projects. Among the objectives is that of modernizing learning environments, implementing digitalization and new pedagogical approaches, reducing drop-out rates, and improving the quality and effectiveness of research and innovation [45]. The Ministry of Education and Culture has the task of legislating on the main decisions, including the allocation of financial resources and the planning of interventions, both specified in the Strategic Government Programme. The main bodies include the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) which monitors the delivery of preschool, basic and upper secondary education, as well as adult education and apprenticeship policies. It is a national agency charged with carrying out several important functions aimed at achieving the expected results, previously agreed with the competent Ministry. In particular, it monitors content development, educational methods and practices and the achievement of objectives; sets the core of the curricula of the different degrees of

education; coordinates the services and methods of communication between the various sectors; produces information and data in reference to educational needs and designs support and orientation activities [46]. Local authorities are responsible for organizing early childhood education and care, pre-primary education and basic education at the local level and are also partially responsible for providing funding. Their job is to offer all students of compulsory school age, including those with mental or physical disabilities, the opportunity to learn according to their abilities. Almost all schools providing basic education are managed by local authorities. Services also include free school meals, school health care, dental care, as well as student care services, including psychological support [47]. Basic education begins in the year in which the pupil turns seven for a period of nine years. The assignment of the school is made, especially in small cities, by local authorities in relation to the structure nearest to the pupil's home. Basic education is carried out within a single structure without any division between primary and lower secondary education. In addition, the courses are taught by the same teacher for most of the school subjects in the first six classes, instead delegating some subjects in the last three years to specialists. The school year is 190 days, starting in mid-August and ending in early June, five days per week with several hours of lessons per week ranging from a minimum of 19 to a maximum of 30 h based on the number of optional subjects. Daily and weekly hours vary from school to school and the decision on extra holidays is also decided independently by each institution. Figure 3, compiled in 2018 by the Ministry of Education and Culture, Finnish National Agency of Education, highlights the structure of the Finnish school system and especially emphasizes that basic education begins in the year the pupil turns seven for a nine-year time span (Figure 3), school assignment is carried out, especially in small towns, by local authorities in relation to the nearest facility.

The Finnish National Education Agency establishes the national curriculum for basic education, defining the objectives, the main contents for each subject and the principles of assessment of pupils and those who follow education for special needs [46]. The basic national curriculum is renewed every 10 years and the first curriculum for comprehensive institutions, published in Finland in 1970, consisted of two parts: in the first, educational objectives were defined, while the second included specific objectives and contents for each subject. Greater stimuli were offered to support the development of students' personalities through the introduction of ethical, social, and aesthetic objectives [48]. In the 1980s, a process of change occurred within Finnish schools and in 1985 the second version of the framework curriculum was published—a framework that gave municipalities and schools decision-making power regarding the organization of lessons based on different local contexts, implementing the learning objectives and evaluation within the curriculum of each discipline [49]. For the first time, environmental education became one of the fundamental objectives of the education system, both for the development of its national identity and as a prerequisite for internationalization [50]. The concept of learning has moved towards more constructive ideas, in the direction of a collaborative process between students and teachers, abandoning the traditional idea of education centred on the teacher and instead encouraging knowledge based on critical thinking, problem solving and learning ability [51]. "In the 1994 curriculum even more freedom was given to each school to create their own curricula based on a very general national framework. Innovations in new technologies, changes in economic and working life and the rise of international interaction were among the issues identified in the core curriculum. Also included was the need to clarify core values, which included the promotion of sustainable development; the significance of cultural identity, multicultural perspectives, and internationalization; the promotion of physical, mental, and social well-being; and the importance of citizenship education [52,53] (p. 8). The present version of the curriculum was published in 2004. It defines learning as an individual yet communal process in which knowledge and skills are constructed through collaboration between learners, who are seen as active agents in the process" [48] (p. 93).
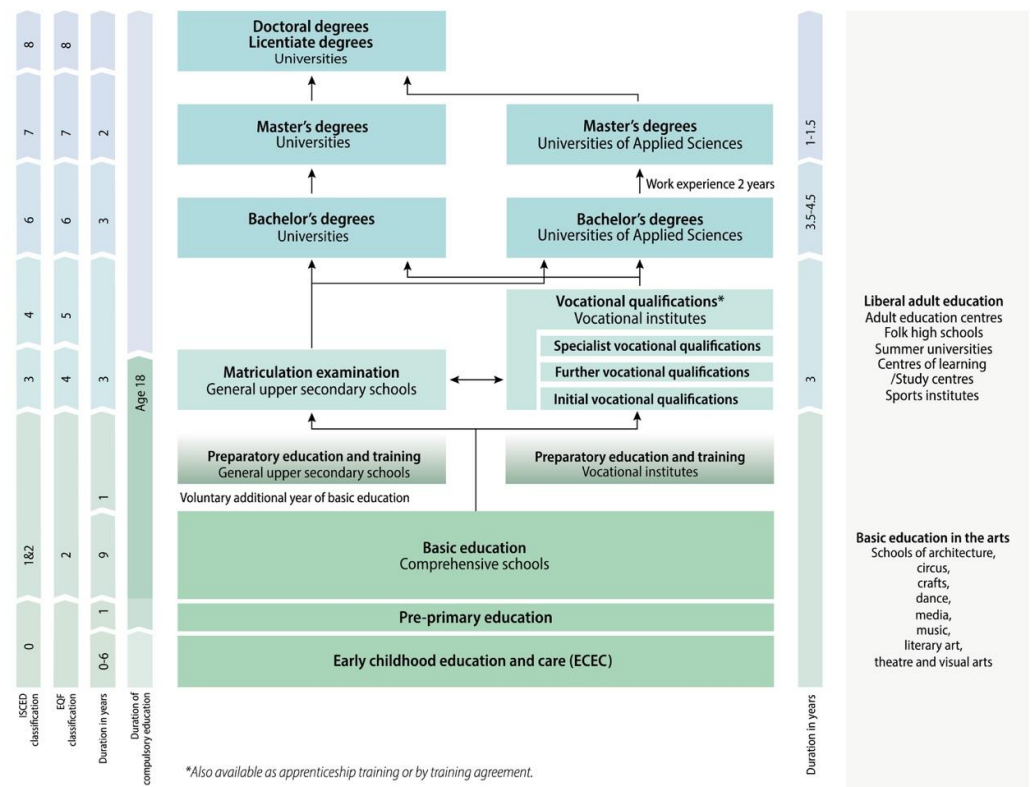
EDUCATION SYSTEM IN FINLAND

Doctoral degrees
Licentiate degrees
Universities

Master's degrees
Universities

Master's degrees
Universities of Applied Sciences

Work experience 2 years

Bachelor's degrees
Universities

Bachelor's degrees
Universities of Applied Sciences

Vocational qualifications*
Vocational institutes

Specialist vocational qualifications

Further vocational qualifications

Matriculation examination
General upper secondary schools

Initial vocational qualifications

Liberal adult education
Adult education centres
Folk high schools
Summer universities
Centres of learning
/Study centres
Sports institutes

Preparatory education and training
General upper secondary schools

Preparatory education and training
Vocational institutes

Voluntary additional year of basic education

Basic education
Comprehensive schools

Basic education in the arts
Schools of architecture,
circus,
crafts,
dance,
media,
music,
literary art,
theatre and visual arts

Pre-primary education

Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

ISCED classification: 8, 7, 6, 4, 3, 1&2, 0
EQF classification: 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 2
Duration in years: 2, 3, 3, 1, 9, 1, 0-6
Duration of compulsory education: Age 18
Duration in years: 1-1.5, 3.5-4.5, 3

*Also available as apprenticeship training or by training agreement.

Figure 3. Finnish education in a nutshell. Source: Ministry of Education and Culture, Finnish National Agency of Education graphic, 2018 [46]—Graphic elaboration by the author.

8. The Italian Education System

As for the Italian education system, we can highlight the governance and organization of a complex system that aims to train European citizens who have a strong link with their territory, and its environmental, cultural, and global heritage. The education system in Italy is based on the principles of subsidiarity and autonomy of the institutions [54]. The State has exclusive legislative provisions regarding the general organization of the education system and, above all, on the rules related to school staff, qualitative and financial resources. At a national level, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of University and Research are responsible for the general administration of education for the relevant sectors. At a regional level, the Regional School Offices have joint responsibility with the State for some sectors: school calendar, distribution of schools in the area, protection of education law and exclusive legislation in the organization of education and professional training [55]. At a local level, the authorities offer various services: maintenance of the premises, collaboration between different schools, and the transport of pupils. Each school has a high degree of autonomy: it defines curricula, expands the teaching offer, organizes the teaching (school hours and groups of pupils), and every three years each institution elaborates the "Three-year Plan of the Training Offer" [56]. The Italian education system is a public state system, but schools organized by private entities are also present throughout the national territory: "paritarie schools" (equivalent to state schools and recognized by the Ministry of Education) and private schools (which cannot issue any qualifications). The state finances all state schools, while paritarie schools only receive contributions based on criteria established by the ministry centrally. Home education is provided for in the Italian education system for students who have certain health or family conditions. Education is free and open to all: Italian citizens and foreign minors from the EU and third countries; the principle of inclusion applies to pupils with disabilities, social, and economic disadvantages, through

the personalization of targeted educational programs [57]. Figure 4, (prepared by the Ministry of Education and Merit and supplemented with the legend specially prepared by the author), shows the educational structure of the Italian system at the state level. It consists of kindergarten for students from 3 to 5 years old (not compulsory), the first cycle of education (primary and middle school), and second cycle of education (secondary school). Education is compulsory for 10 years, from ages 6 to 16 years. It is made up of the first cycle of education (primary school from 6 to 10 years of age which lasts 5 years and 3 years of middle school starting at 11 years of age) and the second cycle (secondary school, which begins at the age of 14 and to which students who have passed the State exam at the end of middle school are admitted). In the second cycle, the secondary school offers general programs (Lyceum) or professional (technical), the course of study lasts five years and students who pass the final exam receive their high school diploma and can access the university system [58]. For adults who have not graduated from high school, the education system offers educational opportunities to enrich general knowledge and promotes professional mobility through Provincial Adult Education Centres (CPEA).
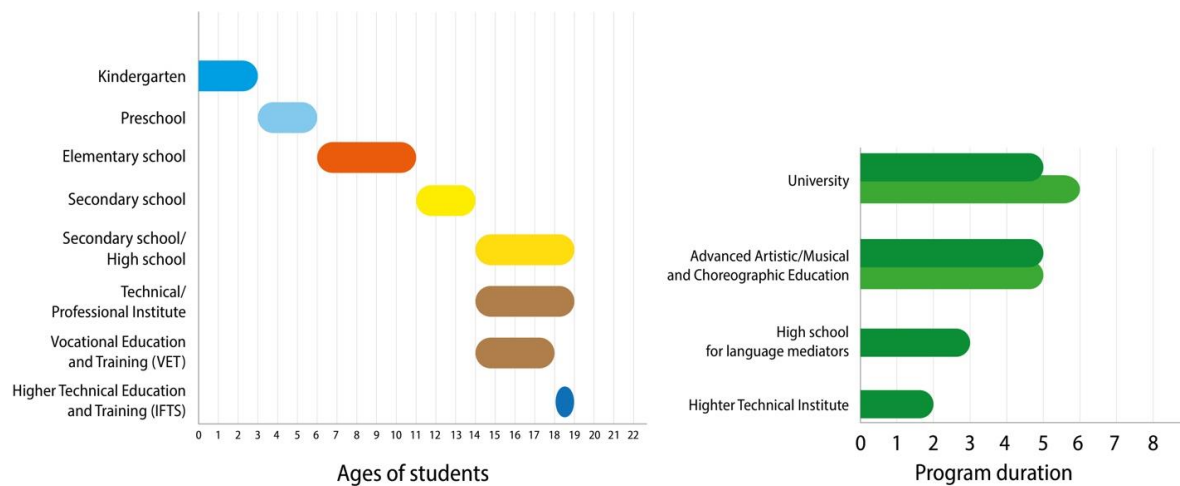
Figure 4. Italian Education System. Source: Ministry of Education and Merit [59]—Graphic elaboration by the author. The colors highlight the transition to the next course of study.

The National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System (INVALSI) is responsible for the National Evaluation System (SNV) which ensures the quality of the education and training system from primary school to the second year of secondary school (Art.51 of Legislative Decree 5/2012 converted into Law n.35/2012). The evaluation of educational institutions consists of four phases: self-assessment; external evaluation; improvement actions and public reporting of successful results. The external evaluation also concerns students' learning: on 3 December 2019, in Paris, the OECD—PISA presented a report on the results achieved. Fifteen-year-old students from many countries, including Asia, Africa, and Latin America took part in the evaluation program to assess their acquisition of knowledge and skills—in reading, mathematics, and science. Italy did not achieve very satisfactory results in literacy, mathematics, and sciences. It attained 476 points in reading (11 points lower than the OECD average), 487 points in mathematics (two points below the OECD average) and 468 points in science (much below the OECD average) [60]. The school system is in distress with problems due to the preparation of students, the social context, and teacher training. Therefore, there is a glaring need to research strategies that can positively impact the entire education system.

Educational Systems Compared: Finland and Italy

The Finnish school system provides a virtuous role model to refer to for reviving the Italian school system. The two educational systems were not very different from each other until the early seventies of the last century, but from 1972 the Finnish school

system began to reform the whole system by referring to the Scandinavian "two-tiered" educational model (nine years of single basic school and three years upper secondary education). In the 1980s, after a five-year transition period and a phase of gradual extension of the reform, the improvement in results began. The merit of the change in the Finnish education system is attributable to three very important elements: personalized learning; quality of teachers, with continuous training and a targeted assessment of professionalism; and organization of autonomous, flexible schools with their own financial reporting [48]. The Finnish system is among the most virtuous models, and therefore the comparison between the two educational systems is fundamental for an examination of their individual elements. Regarding PISA surveys, in Finland the sample of the fifteen-year reference is homogeneous, while in Italy it comes from different class groups; the organization of the classes in the two reference systems is completely different. In Italy, the course of study takes place within the class. In Finland, however, the group is composed and decomposed according to the individual disciplines, with greater flexibility and with smaller numbers of students present in the individual classrooms. Partial inclusion is carried out in Finnish schools, as students with disabilities are enrolled in special schools and sometimes in some common activities. However, in Italy there is complete inclusion from the first grade, proving to be a cutting-edge education system with regard to special educational needs. The Finnish school aims at the student's conscious autonomy, who independently chooses his or her curriculum, as the protagonist of his or her growth path. However, in Italy this process is not possible, as there is a very rigid and centrally organized structure. The choice of teachers in Finland takes place independently by each individual institution, according to real needs, who periodically evaluates the work of the teacher, a fundamental principle for a quality system. In Italy, instead, the recruitment of teachers is carried out centrally and, after the first year of evaluation, the teachers are no longer subject to any type of evaluation. The curricular path is based on different elements and, in Finland, there are continuous checks based on the true developmental and training needs of the student to make him a conscious and autonomous citizen. Instead, in Italy the curriculum is based on knowledge linked to individual disciplines without the possibility of choice by the individual student [61]. Considering all of these elements, there are important differences between the two systems, but the Italian system can incorporate certain elements of the Finnish model by focusing on key points to improve some aspects such as: targeted selection of teachers, monitoring and evaluation, continuous training, and greater autonomy of schools. These elements represent the fundamental principles for building a quality school that looks to the future to train citizens who are increasingly aware and engaged as participants in civic life. The PNRR launched by the government in 2021 represents an opportunity for Italian schools to grow on a training and cultural level, to implement the use of teaching methods increasingly aimed at real needs, using new technologies that favour discovery and develop the curiosity and skills of the individual student [62]. Today's school is the ideal place to activate educational projects on both the environment and sustainability to develop global citizenship. The interdisciplinary dimension and the possibility of building targeted cognitive paths based on the 2030 Agenda are decisive aspects to support the training path of young people towards the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. It is a matter of building a path of cultural and emotional exploration, for conscious growth based on sustainability, related to environmental protection and "common home" care, starting from the Finnish model [54].

9. The OECD/PISA Survey and Finnish Educational Success

To demonstrate the validity of what has been examined so far in the European panorama, the survey methodology focused on the OECD-PISA surveys, which constitute the most widespread international analysis in the field of education and are administered to students from more than 80 countries, including Italy. The main objective is to ascertain that students have developed problem solving and lifelong learning skills before the end of compulsory schooling. In particular, the PISA assessment is based on student reading

performance, mathematics, and science, as the skills achieved with the study of these subjects are fundamental to face adult life, but it also assesses life satisfaction, relations with comrades, with teachers and parents and how students spend their time outside school [23]. PISA results allow schools, education systems, and governments to identify aspects to be improved in their educational programmes to train more competent citizens and serves to compare the performance of students and learning contexts of different countries [21]. One of the most important factors that have emerged thanks to PISA is that academic achievements and student well-being are not alternative factors. Countries such as Finland, Holland, and Switzerland demonstrate that they know how to combine good learning outcomes with a high degree of pupil satisfaction. The tests have been held every three years, starting from 2000, and each survey focuses on one of the three areas subject to measurement. The 2018 edition, in addition to trends relating to science and mathematics, had the evaluation of reading—also referred to as reading literacy—as its main objective with particular attention to understanding, use and reflection on written texts. Regarding the 2022 edition, postponed for a year due to the health emergency, the focus will be based on mathematics and the children will also be tested on a new discipline, namely creative thinking. For the 2025 edition, it has already been established that attention will be focused on science and the skills of learning in a digital world and will also be monitored (INVALSI in Italy). "Reports of Finnish students' excellent performance in international assessments have increased worldwide interest in Finland's education system [22,63,64]. This has in turn resulted in the launch of several education programmes for export [65] and even 'PISA tourism', as numerous professionals from Ministries of Education, universities and schools have visited Finland to learn how such success was achieved" [48].

9.1. The Determinants of Educational Success

Andreas Schleicher, head of the OECD statistics analysis division, reiterates that Finland's educational success depends on some factors: schools and individual teachers are responsible for the results achieved with students; their families and local communities are involved in the life of the school and its guidelines; programmes are not based on meticulous and plethoric curricula, but on clear learning objectives, which are constantly checked. He emphasizes the importance of giving more autonomy, more responsibility, and more membership of the school to families and local communities [23]. In Finland, PISA success is based on some fundamental principles to guarantee global education:

- Equal opportunities for all pupils;
- Competent and autonomous teachers in the teaching action;
- Student counselling and targeted education for special educational needs;
- Promoting the evaluation of schools and students;
- Relevance of the role of education in society;
- Flexibility of the school system based on trust;
- Cooperation and planning of active learning aimed at the student's needs [66].

Schleicher during the ADi 2019 international seminar (Teachers and School Management Association), in his speech, "World Class: how to build a school system for the 21st century", indicated the six main factors of school systems with high yields:

(1) Make education a priority;
(2) Believe that all students can learn;
(3) Have high expectations;
(4) Implement quality teaching;
(5) Align incentives;
(6) Strengthen leadership at all levels.

He also pointed out that Finland has only a 5% difference in performance between schools, as all institutions are successful. This is due to the fact that the education system is based on strong synergy: principals in Finland work both in their school and with colleagues from other schools to solve problems together not only for their institution but

those present in its territory [23]. The study confirms that in Finland, education is financed by public tax revenues to guarantee equal education opportunities for the entire population regardless of social or ethical origin, gender or place of residence. Public funding is mainly provided by the state (30%) and local authorities, such as municipalities (70%).

9.2. Upper Secondary Education and Access to the World of Work

Vocational Education and Training providers (VET) decide on the use of all of the funds granted. Therefore, in upper secondary education the operating costs per student vary from €6488 for all apprenticeships (companies cover most of the costs) to €27,956 for institutions that deal with children with special needs. With a modification of the law on the financing of the education and culture offer (532/2017) that entered into force in early 2018, a single funding system for upper secondary vocational education and training was established. It continues vocational education and training, apprenticeship training, and training in the labour market with 50% of the basic funding relating to the number of students; 35% related to performance based on the number of completed qualifications, with the aim of directing courses of study towards real market demands; while 15% of the funding is based on students' access to work, on continuing education and feedback, both by students and by the job market, encouraging training institutions to create a training offer in fields where labour is needed, ensuring that education is of high quality and corresponds to the needs of working life. Moreover, a relatively small amount of strategic funds will be made available (decided by Parliament) with the aim of supporting development and actions that are important from the point of view of education policy, used, e.g., for national VET development projects, competitions and the creation of networks between training bodies (such as mergers) [67]. The new financing system will be introduced gradually and should be fully operational in 2022, as shown in the chart prepared by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) (Figure 5) [68].
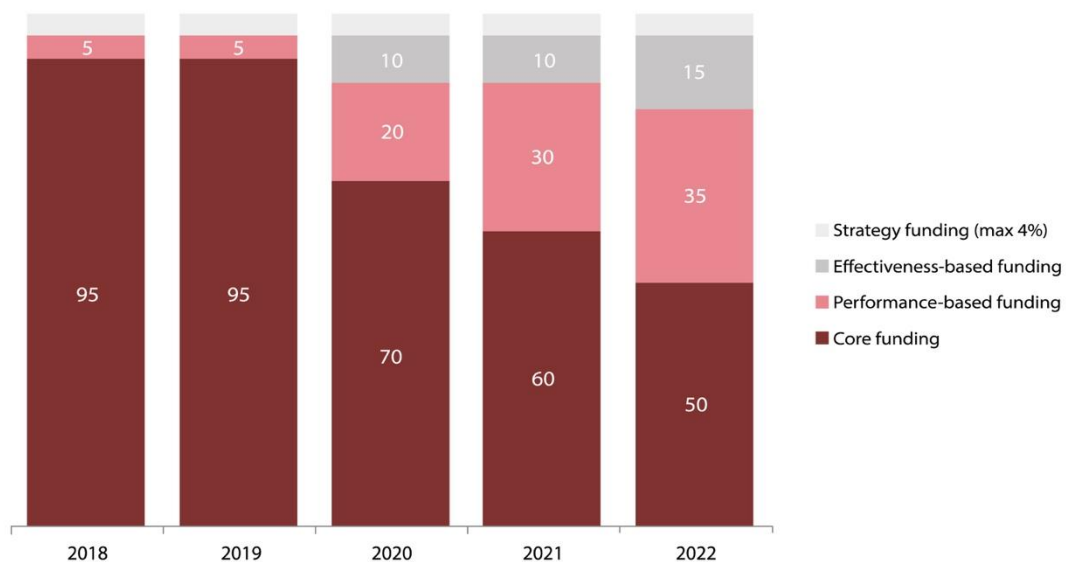
Figure 5. National expenditure commitment for vocational training in Finland. Source: Ministry of Education and Culture (Cedefop) [68,69]—Graphic elaboration by the author.

10. An "Ecological Path" from Finland to Improve Education for Sustainable Development

The global dimension of environmental problems constitutes a fundamental element in the generational cultural turning point. This approach has led to renewed thinking, which looks to sustainable development as an opportunity to tackle environmental problems and fosters a profound renewal of daily life actions that protect the well-being of the natural ecosystem in its entirety. The intersection of all of the elements that emerged in the study has allowed for the development of an effective methodology in approaching sustainability issues. The Finnish school system is based on sustainable development and is implemented through the participatory sharing of policies and actions aimed at achieving it. During the job shadowing field activity, at the city of Oulu, the results achieved through the "ECORoad" project emerged, carried out within the Erasmus KA2 program (2016–2018), implemented in four Finnish primary schools, supported in turn, by an organization of experts for sustainable development. Each institute had previously worked to achieve sustainability objectives, but, through this international project, the next steps were identified to create a better Education for Sustainable Development school (ESD). The "ECORoad" project was based on the structure of an ESD school using the Saloranta model (2017), which states that "when ESD is embedded in a school culture it promotes and enables students to learn about all of the different dimensions of sustainable development. School experiences affect the environmentally responsible and pro-social behaviour of pupils and guide them towards a more sustainable way of living" [9]. The questionnaires designed to support the project were produced on the model created in 2005 by Schoen starting from four key dimensions:

(1) Professional orientation;
(2) Organizational structure (leadership and management);
(3) Teaching and learning;
(4) Student-centred focus [70].

In relation to the four reference points, the institutions involved have administered some questionnaires to monitor the starting point of school culture in relation to ESD. The project provided an "ecological road" divided into four paths:

(1) Ecological daily life;
(2) Outdoor education;
(3) Living to learn, learning to live;
(4) Health and wellbeing.

Each school developed the individual pathways in a circular manner by offering a series of school experiences to develop socially responsible behaviour. In addition to the 'Roadmap' (Figure 6) [71], participating schools and the specialist organizations shared their experiences at the local level and, through their own networks, at a national and international level" [9].

Each school has created a training programme for teachers based on the international pedagogical training framework to expand skills on the topic of sustainable development. The students were involved in a first phase with self-assessment and subsequently with participation in surveys and a final evaluation, so that their ideas and opinions could be fully shared. The project gave students the opportunity to be involved in targeted activities through international exchanges on specific ESD related issues. The principles of sustainable education have been included in the curricula and daily activities as fundamental values of the education system with the adoption of a sustainable lifestyle. According to Van Poeck and Loones, "Education for Sustainable Development is learning to think about and work towards a liveable world, now and in the future, for ourselves and for others, here and elsewhere on the planet" [9]. "Every moment we make choices, each choice determines the impact we have on the planet. As sustainable schools we believe that we can learn together to make sustainable choices for the planet" [72]. From direct observation of the schools' achievements, the "EcoRoad" project is a new "road" to be taken to provide

pupils with knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes and promote a sustainable lifestyle through concrete action:

(1) Taking care of oneself;
(2) Taking care of each other;
(3) Taking care of the environment (far and near).

"To be an ESD school, all school stakeholders must share the school's values and ethos. The key values to promote sustainable development are universalism and benevolence" [71,73]. Therefore, sustainability education must be based on four dimensions: ecological, economic, social, and cultural with different approaches to the "environment". We often speak of an ecological environment understood only as "nature". On the other hand, it represents one of the many dimensions that should be an integral part of the teaching of geography, thus highlighting the multifaceted character of sustainability and the versatility of the geographical discipline [74] (p. 10).

Figure 6. RoadMap. Source: www.ecoroad.weebly.com, accessed on 15 March 2023. Graphic elaboration by the author.

11. Conclusions

In recent years, the international scientific debate on the environment has accelerated significantly, both in Finland and in Italy. Several critical issues have emerged on the actual state of health of the earth which have given rise to some shared lines of action. Geography contributes to making future citizens increasingly aware of the transformation process that characterises places and landscapes, highlighting the relationships that are

established between people and environments and the consequences that result. Geographical survey stimulates and satisfies curiosity in a perspective that allows the individual student to deepen their understanding of many contemporary challenges such as climate change, water management, food security, energy choices, excessive exploitation of natural resources, and urbanization. Considering these important statements, a particular focus is placed on this which, through a field survey, has highlighted the successful elements of the Finnish school system, focusing on the objectives of the 2030 Agenda, in relation to sustainable education for the creation of an ESD school ready to operate according to best practices. This study aims to make a contribution in the educational landscape by offering some insights through the comparison of two school systems: Finnish and Italian, highlighting, in particular, the Finnish model and the actions carried out in the learning journey to achieve an international model to be followed to create a more sustainable school. Moreover, reference is made to the "ECORoad" project which engaged teachers and pupils internationally to protect the health of our planet. Sahlberg has defined three important aspects of the history of Finnish education which have played a fundamental role, starting from the 1970s at an organizational, educational, and training level. *Regarding* the first aspect, Finland organized its school system on the basis of public funds, through local governance based on the real needs of each student; as regards the second aspect, it has been able to make the educational ideas of other countries its own, adapting them to their national contexts, regional and local; finally, teacher training was based on a targeted program, leaving teachers free to decide what to do and the methodology to use [17,75]. In 2010, Finland launched a programme to redesign the country's school leadership development model in 76 educational networks. The main objective was to make schools more responsible for implementing development activities to meet the individual and organizational needs of the school and its staff [51]. The main reasons for the success of the Finnish school system include some preponderant elements. For example:

(1) The idea of providing equal and free education for everyone during the nine-year comprehensive schooling;
(2) Freedom of teachers to plan and execute their teaching without any external control;
(3) Academic teacher education (all Finnish teachers, both in primary and secondary schools, must have a master's degree)" [18] (p. 5).

The ultimate goal of the current government of Finland is to transform Finland into a social society, which is economically and ecologically sustainable by 2030, as Prime Minister Sanna Marin (2020) [76], president of the National Commission for Sustainable Development, stated at the beginning of the report "Voluntary National Review 2020 FINLAND: Report on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". A sustainability assessment has been integrated into the government's annual policy planning, budgeting, and reporting cycle, taking important steps in this direction as early as 2018. The Finnish sustainable development model is based on high-level political leadership with the participation of stakeholders in the decision-making process in a multidisciplinary way with solutions that aim to integrate the three dimensions (economic, social, and environmental) in a coherent way that is based on mutual support. In the same way, the Italian educational system, from an interdisciplinary perspective and within intercultural dialogue, aims to provide the necessary tools to implement a virtuous process that intends to build an inclusive society by 2030 anchored in ecological, social, and economic sustainability. Sustainable development represents one of the most important themes of geographical debates [16]. In his studies, the American geographer Carol Harden reiterated that "to not embrace sustainability, to ignore the future, or, even worse, to intentionally support unsustainable practices connotes unenlightened, greedy, poor management, and bad manners. How could a thinking person or caring society choose to intentionally reduce the resources and opportunities available for future generations?" [77] Starting from this question, we can emphasize that only geographical knowledge and skills can help us understand today's world to think about tomorrow. Geography, a "*disciplina di cerniera*" (a "zipper" subject)—that is, an interdisciplinary field that aims to link various subjects

and methodologies—in the Italian educational system, deals with human interaction with its environment and becomes a powerful means of promoting international education through the contribution of education at all levels to lead new generations to increasingly responsible behaviours with a view to sustainability [78]. The work of scholars who predate our current events reminds us of the great responsibility we have for the environmental disasters that continue to manifest themselves today. Therefore, education at various levels becomes fundamental to train young people to be able to gather the indications that are provided to us, to deconstruct the scaffolding that supports our society and to recover the paradigms of sustainability and equity [79]. An education system is needed that places the student at the centre of attention and promotes education, as in Finland, which is accessible to all and free of charge, that aims to limit school dropout, still a critical point in many areas of the country, and that guarantees environmentally friendly education in its various forms.

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