

The Finnish Paradox

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This post is by Pasi Sahlberg.

Since the release of the first OECD PISA results in December 2001, Finland has become the mecca of education pilgrimage. Some visitors wish to discover the secrets of Finland's high scores in reading, mathematics, and science. Others hope to find out how great teachers are prepared or what successful schools look like. There are also those who want to take a first-hand look at education's "ultimate slacker," as Fareed Zakaria described Finland on his CNN news program.

When I ask these visitors what is the most important takeaway of the Finnish education system, a frequent answer is widespread trust exhibited by Finns in their schools. They also wonder how only a few Finns seem to be worried about whether teachers do what they are expected. What becomes obvious in school visits is not often found in visitors' own communities: Finnish parents seem to think that if there are schools that do not perform according to expectations, local authorities will find ways to help them get better.

In the global perspective, the Finnish education system seems to be a paradox. When much of the rest of the world is implementing more oversight of schools to assure teachers meet specific goals, lengthening the school day, toughening academic standards, and increasing homework, Finnish children continue to enjoy a relatively short school day, a broad curriculum, and a light homework load. In addition, Finnish children do not attend private tutoring sessions or spend any time preparing for standardized tests, as so many of their peers around the world must.

Perhaps the most surprising part of the Finnish educational philosophy is the central role of play in children's lives, both in and out of school. Formal learning doesn't start before the first grade when children are seven years old. Before that, children spend their time in play to develop a sense of independence and responsibility, and to learn about themselves and others. In the early years of elementary education, children furthermore learn to read and do math through various forms of play, music, and drama. The old adage of "less is more" is carried out every day in Finnish schools, as I describe in the ***Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn From Educational Change in Finland*** (<http://store.tcpress.com/0807752576.shtml>).

In many other countries, formal schooling is replacing informal play in children's lives earlier than before. Standardized tests are introduced already in early learning programs to make sure children progress to be ready for school. But that hasn't happened in Finland. The Finns regard play as not just a break from academic work but as a skill like any skill that one hones through experience. Much as the Swedish psychologist Anders Ericsson has famously concluded--that mastery of any complex skill requires 10,000 hours of practice--Finnish education authorities consider play a skill that necessitates sufficient time over many years to develop. As children spend more and more time at play, they sharpen their capacity to imagine, improvise, and collaborate. If Ericsson is right, it takes ten years for children to achieve such heightened ability to use their minds to create new ideas.

Outside of school, Finnish society lays the foundation for proper educational development. Child wellbeing, happiness, and political empowerment of women are some of the conditions that help Finland's school system work well. Finland is also a leading nation in economic competitiveness, good governance, scientific inquiry, and technological innovation, all in turn generating a climate of constant learning.

Finland's success is a result of finding its own way of change rather than doing more of the same. This is particularly true in enhancing educational quality and equity. Some foreign observers claim that Finnish educational success results from the country's smallness, cultural homogeneity, and wealth. Those thinking this way often fail to distinguish the Finnish way from the global education reform movement (or GERM) that sees competition, standardization, frequent testing, and privatization as the most effective drivers of change.

This doesn't mean that the Finnish model can be transplanted in other countries. It rather suggests that there is a lot to learn from the paradoxes, policies, and common sense behind an education system that nine of ten Finnish taxpayers approve today. For the Finns, that is the most important accomplishment, not the top tier on international exams.

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