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Teachers as Leaders in Finland

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A high bar for entering teacher preparation programs and teachers and students who are empowered to do their best—no wonder the Finnish education system is so high performing.

During the last decade, Finland has become a target of international education pilgrimage. Thousands of educators and policymakers have visited Finnish schools and observed in classrooms to figure out why this small Nordic nation is leading the Western world in many education rankings.

Through my work in Finland's government, I've had an opportunity to meet many of these foreign visitors. I frequently ask them what they'll tell their families and friends about the Finnish education system. Many mention trust in teachers and the high social status of being a teacher, which has made teaching one of the most desired career choices among young Finns.

Experts argue that a well-educated teaching force is a necessary condition for good performance in all education systems. Also, teaching that is based on collaboration rather than isolation, autonomy rather than top-down authority, and professional responsibility rather than bureaucratic accountability reflects professional practice more than mere implementation of prescribed procedures does. Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley (2011) found that all high-performing school systems—such as those in Alberta and Ontario, Canada, and in Singapore—value these features of teachers' work. This is also true in Finland.

Teacher Leadership in Action

To get fresh insight into what teaching in Finnish schools looks like, I visited Aurora Primary School in Espoo, a city in the Helsinki metropolitan area. My conversations with teachers there quickly revealed the ethos of their work. The teachers perceived themselves as professionals who have both the obligation and the responsibility to plan, implement, and evaluate the outcomes of their work. I saw several teams of teachers working on curriculum, discussing individualized support for pupils with special needs, and developing activities for mathematics lessons. The school principal told me that teamwork is a fundamental principle throughout the school, from the teachers' lounge to the classroom, and that lone riders have no role in this school.

Many visitors to Finland are surprised that they can't find any highly interactive and engaged "power teaching" or stopwatch drilling of core knowledge and skills. In fact, what they find is quite the opposite. Most schools have a rather relaxed atmosphere and informal relationships between teachers and pupils.

Teacher collaboration is possible because a teacher's teaching load is lighter than in the United States. In primary schools, teachers teach four or five 45-minute lessons daily; in junior high school, five or six. Further, every 45-minute

lesson is followed by a 15-minute recess that students normally spend outdoors. That's a time when many teachers catch their breath in the teachers' lounge or meet with colleagues.

"I expect all the teachers in our school to think of themselves as pedagogical leaders," said Martti Hellström, the principal of Aurora Primary School. All teachers are actively engaged in designing the school curriculum and setting the learning goals for their pupils. It's also up to teachers to assess how well their pupils achieve the learning goals because there are no external standardized tests in Finland. When asked about his role as the leader of the school, Hellström replied that he was "like the leader of an orchestra. I try to get the best out of each and every person in our school." Although *teacher leadership* is not a commonly used term in Finland, most teachers have a sense of leadership as members of a professional learning community in their schools.

The Best of the Best

Every spring, thousands of high school graduates compete for approximately 700 spots in primary school teacher education programs in Finnish universities. Only about 1 in 10 applicants is accepted to these five-year master's degree programs. One reason for their popularity is that these degrees are competitive academic qualifications in the Finnish labor market. For example, Finland's minister of finance has a primary school teacher degree. Further, because of the absence of external inspections, standardized testing, and the accountability that often comes with such testing, teachers in Finnish schools are free to exercise what they've learned during their initial teacher education. Professional autonomy is an important factor in why "the best and the brightest" in Finland so often have teaching as their number-one career option.

Teachers in Finland enjoy what they do. In a recent national job satisfaction survey, teachers were the most satisfied professional group of all, followed by agricultural workers, electricians, and public sector civil servants (EPSI, 2012). The teachers reported that the most important aspect of their work was the freedom to express themselves and the feeling that they were able to influence children's lives. Indeed, according to research in progress at the University of Jyväskylä on teacher job satisfaction and working conditions, many Finnish teachers would consider leaving teaching if the government were to limit their professional freedom and autonomy, for instance by introducing external school inspections or standardized testing to control more of teachers' work.

In Finnish schools, leadership is closely tied to teaching. All school principals are teachers, and they must be qualified to teach in the school they lead. Actually, in addition to their leadership role, most principals in Finland also choose to teach. This helps establish trust-based professional relationships and communication between the teachers and principal. Many principals see themselves as part of the pedagogical staff rather than as administrators, and most belong to the same union that the teachers do. Distributed leadership, like that at Aurora Primary School, is a common strategy in many Finnish schools.

Leading—Not Leaving

The master's degree is the basic academic requirement for permanent employment in a school. To receive this degree, primary school teachers major in education (or special needs education) and minor in another subject taught at their school, such as mathematics, literacy, or physical education. Junior high school and high school teachers major in the field they will teach and minor in another subject, such as mathematics, physics, or chemistry. To teach in kindergarten, a bachelor's degree is required.

Foreign observers of the Finnish school system often conclude that it's the academic advanced degree that makes teachers and the school system so effective in Finland. That's not necessarily so. Researchers examined the effect of teacher credentialing on student achievement in North Carolina and found that having a graduate degree has little effect on student achievement (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007).

There is, however, a difference between the graduate degree in teaching in Finland and that in most other countries, including the United States. Primary school teachers in Finland study education *for at least five years* as their major academic subject, and they're required to write a thesis that meets the same academic standards as in any other field of study in Finnish research universities. In other words, all primary school teachers have their first university degree in education. The extended length of study enables them to gain more in-depth understanding of child development, pedagogical content, curriculum, assessment, school improvement, and leadership than teachers in many other countries have.

This approach obviates the standardization and prescription characteristic of other school systems around the world. In general, schools in Finland have a lot of autonomy to design teaching programs, create school schedules, set their own learning standards, and assess pupils' progress because teachers are so well versed in these matters. Instead of having expectations imposed on them without any consideration of context, schools have internalized their own high expectations.

Although the five-year program for primary teachers is strictly in education, it's just as rigorous as the pathways for junior and high school teachers. The entrance examination to all these universities is the same, and once admitted, the prospective teachers must meet high academic standards.

No alternative pathways into the teaching profession exist, such as online teacher education programs; Teach for

America (in the United States); or Teach First (in Europe). Because of the tight control of quality at the entry into teaching, teacher effectiveness and how to measure it have remained irrelevant in Finland. It's difficult to become a teacher in Finland without a high level of general knowledge, good social skills, and clear moral purpose.

How Teacher Education Prepares Teachers—And Leaders

Four aspects of teacher education in Finland distinguish it from teacher education in the rest of the world and enable Finland's teachers to be leaders in their profession.

First, a rigorous graduate degree and at least five years of full-time study serve as the foundation of the teaching profession in Finland. Teachers are highly respected as professionals because their basic education and training compare with that of other professionals—doctors, lawyers, architects, and engineers.

Second, the academic graduate degree is based on research. Teacher education in Finland systematically integrates scientific education knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and practice to enable teachers to enhance their pedagogical thinking, evidence-based decision making, and engagement in the professional community of educators (Sahlberg, 2011). Finnish teachers' knowledge of research is integral to the decisions they make in the classroom.

Third, teacher education has its own department in Finnish universities, giving it equal status with all other departments. It's also treated the same way as other departments in reviews and evaluations of Finland's universities. This guarantees that students have access to a rigorous academic environment.

Fourth, all universities that prepare teachers in Finland have a clinical training school similar to the university teaching hospitals that are part of medical education. Students do their practical training in these schools under faculty who have advanced credentials in education. Students normally spend about 10–15 percent of their study time observing and practicing teaching.

Two Crucial Finnish Lessons

Education reformers often argue that the way to improve schools is simply to have better teachers. Finnish experience suggests that real life is more complicated than that. Drawing from what Finland and other high-performing school systems have done to get the most out of their schools, two conditions must exist regarding teachers.

First, teachers and students must teach and learn in an environment that empowers them to do their best. When teachers have more control over curriculum design, teaching methods, and student assessment, they are more inspired to teach than when they are pressured to deliver prescribed programs and must submit to external standardized tests that determine progress. Similarly, when students are encouraged to find their own ways of learning without fear of failure, most will study and learn more than when they're driven to achieve the same standards under the pressure of regular testing.

I've argued elsewhere (2013) that if education policies prevent teachers and students from doing what they think is necessary for good outcomes, even the best teachers will not be able to make significant improvements in these systems. Competition among schools, prescriptions of teaching and learning, and test-based accountability are the most common toxic aspects of today's school systems. These policies are often the main reason so many teachers leave the profession.

Second, teaching is a complex profession that requires advanced academic education. Current trends in many parts of the world suggest just the opposite: If you're smart, the thinking goes, you can teach; with clear guidelines and specific standards in hand, almost anyone can teach. In the United Kingdom, for example, retired soldiers are being converted into teachers to address the teacher shortage. In some other countries, teachers are licensed to teach through online courses and have limited involvement in real classroom life or work in schools. These practices run counter to what we see in Finland.

A Healthy System

Teaching will become a more popular career choice among young people if the basic qualification to become a teacher is elevated to a master's degree on a par with other esteemed professions. Professional leadership will only flourish among teachers if they have the autonomy to influence what and how they teach and to determine how well their students are performing. Achieving these essential elements requires a scientific approach to teacher education, in which curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, school improvement, professional development, and systematic clinical practice play an integral part.

Many visitors to Finland wonder why the Finnish education system hasn't been infected by market-based reform ideas. My response is simple: Teachers in Finland are prepared to resist these ideas because of their advanced academic education and the collaborative nature of their profession, just as medical doctors would reject any suggested cure for a disease if it were not based on reliable experiments and research. Not only are better educated teachers more effective in the classroom—they're also better equipped to keep their education systems healthy and free from toxic reform ideas that are harmful to both teachers and children.

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