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Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?

reviewed by Connie Goddard — January 26, 2012

Title: Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?
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Between the 1970s and 2000, Finland transformed its schools from “mediocre” to “models of excellence.” Finnish students' performance on the PISA (International Programme for Student Assessment) test in mathematics, science, and reading, as announced in December 2001, indicated that they were in the same league as the academically superior schools of South Korea, Singapore, and Japan. How Finland did this is the subject of *Finnish Lessons*, a brief but densely packed explanation offered by Pasi Sahlberg, once a teacher of mathematics and now director of international cooperation for the country's Ministry of Education and Culture.

As a participant in many of the changes, Sahlberg is understandably enthusiastic about Finland's laudatory accomplishment, and his book -- as well as its subject -- has garnered considerable praise from noted U.S. educators. Its subtitle asks what others can “learn from educational change in Finland.” The simplest answer, as Sahlberg makes clear, runs counter to practices adopted by many Anglo-American countries over the past few decades: Finnish schools have produced high-performing students because teachers feel empowered, they determine curriculum collaboratively, and are accountable (a term Finns avoid) more to local than to national authorities.

As to other lessons, Sahlberg notes the importance of “owning” one’s own methods rather than “renting” them from other nations, though he credits Finland’s Nordic neighbors as well as American educators and institutions – particularly John Dewey and recent work done at Minnesota, Stanford, and Johns Hopkins, plus the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, for helping to point the way.

Attributes of the Finnish system include substantial teacher autonomy, schools that operate like professional learning communities, a focus on cooperative learning and encouraging student creativity, local assessments done mainly by teachers, and a sampling system to determine how schools and the nation are doing as a whole.

Virtues of the Finnish approach include limited variance in academic quality between one school and another, a comprehensive program of special educational services that focuses on prevention rather than remediation, and schools in which almost all students graduate on time from the nine-year compulsory program (in 2008, only 0.2% did not; p. 29). A majority of Finland’s students then go on to secondary programs that prepare them for either a vocational school or university. Entrance to the latter requires a passing mark on the national Matriculation Exam, which is the only "high-stakes" test Finnish students take.

Further, Sahlberg argues, Finnish schools operate cost-effectively and without private funding. He acknowledges that the Finnish system of social and medical services (plus a free, hot lunch each day for all students and teachers) means that Finland's schools face fewer nonacademic challenges than do many U.S. schools. The country’s schools are also confident of broad public support from a largely homogenous (though diversifying) society. In sum: “The Finnish experience shows that consistent focus on equity and cooperation – not choice and competition – can lead to an education system where all children learn well,” as Sahlberg asserts in his introduction (p. 9).

Finnish Lessons abounds with lists and graphs and tables, all of which support Sahlberg's contention that the schools' accomplishments are indeed remarkable. Completion rates for secondary school exceed that of other countries – in 2008, 93% for Finland; 80% for others (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development/OECD figures; p. 29). And less than 10% of students drop out of higher education programs. Other figures note that socioeconomic status has limited effect on how students perform on international tests and that immigrant students do better academically in Finnish than in other European schools (pp. 38 and 69).

Sahlberg notes that the changes that brought about these performance gains took place over a long period of time -- though the basic nine-year compulsory *peruskoulu* was not introduced until 1970, Finland's leaders realized in the 1940s that its non-system of exclusivist, frequently private, and often inefficient schools – a system based on the idea that “everyone could not learn everything” -- would not help the nation move from an agrarian to a manufacturing economy.

So, one national committee after another introduced a variety of changes that brought order to a chaotic set of schools and eventually set some priorities that would determine national education policy. Among them: schools would be governed by local education authorities, not the national government; providing equitability for all rather than elitist education for some was the goal; and all students would study the same curriculum -- "streaming" or tracking would be eliminated. The *peruskoulu* would be a “common school,” one that all students regardless of socioeconomic status, would attend. Further, schools would operate as “small-scale democracies.”

Thus, this was not just an organizational change, but a change in philosophy. Supporting the goal of equity were two other changes: (1)

the special needs of some students would be identified early and addressed in a comprehensive way and (2) career guidance and counseling would be a compulsory part of the curriculum. The latter would be a "bridge between formal education and the world of work" (p. 23).

Essential to all these changes, both philosophical and structural, is the aspect of Finland's lessons that has attracted most attention from U.S. enthusiasts – the nation's teacher education programs that underwent major reforms beginning in 1979. They were transformed from a rather haphazard approach reminiscent of US normal schools to a university-based program that emphasized research-based methods and ongoing professional development. These reforms also led to a change in the kinds of people attracted to teaching – entrance to teacher education programs is highly competitive, and teaching is regarded as an admired profession, on par with being a physician, an architect, or a lawyer.

As its teachers are not only at the core of Finnish schools but the component of the "Finnish advantage" (Sahlberg's term) that prominent U.S. educators would most like to emulate, it is this aspect of *Finnish Lessons* that requires the closest reading. And despite the detail with which Sahlberg focuses on positive aspects of Finland's approach to educating teachers, his coverage of the topic lacks the systematic quality that he and others claim characterize the Finnish system.

Components of the Finnish approach, beyond the fact that teaching attracts some of the country's most talented young people, are that all teacher preparation takes place in one of eight Finnish universities. And, as with primary and secondary schools, students are not charged tuition. For another, all Finnish teachers must have a master's degree (preschool teachers need have only a bachelor's degree). Further, practice teaching – or field experience – seems to be well-integrated into the curriculum, at least for those preparing to teach in the comprehensive (*peruskoulu*) schools. Completing the full program – including the master's degree – takes from five to seven years (which suggests there may be some part-time students, though this is not mentioned). And the Finnish teachers union (OJA or Trade Union of Education in Finland), which represents 95% of all teachers from kindergarten to university lecturers, appears to be involved in determining the curriculum, too.

However, beyond touting the system's virtues, *Finnish Lessons* is distressingly vague on some of the specifics. There are five categories of teachers in Finland (roughly equivalent to our kindergarten, elementary, secondary, and special education categories, plus a vocational category that might be roughly equivalent to community college teachers), but Sahlberg seems to be discussing only two – what he calls "primary school teachers" (multi-subject teachers for *peruskoulu* grades one to six) and "subject teachers" (*peruskoulu* teachers in grades seven to nine plus those who teach grades 10 to 12 in the "upper-secondary" schools). Fine, these categories probably constitute the majority of Finland's teachers. However, the differentiations made between preparations for the two categories are vague at best. This, too, might not much matter, but careful reading suggests no overall scheme for describing either category. For example: is the master's degree in pedagogy or in a subject matter? How does the curriculum differ for the various kinds of teachers? Who teaches these courses? What are the eight universities and how similar are their curricula?

Further, the text includes terms such as "professional competencies," "pedagogical thinking skills," and "subject didactics" (see page 79 in particular) without explaining what they mean. Reliance on such jargon is sure to frustrate the critics of teacher preparation in the United States, who ought to be part of the audience for *Finnish Lessons.* (A note: Sahlberg apparently wrote this book in English, which he handles like a native, but an editor attuned to domestic critics might have pushed for more specifics here and elsewhere.)

That Finnish teacher education is "research-based" has been widely praised here, but the only explanation of what that means appears in boxed comments by a professor of education (p. 84). Who generates this research? Has it all been done in Finland? Are students assigned journal articles rather than readings in textbooks? And what happens with the research that education students are required to do, some of it in conjunction with schools?

Also missing from the discussion about teacher education is any mention of the certification process. Teachers are apparently hired by municipalities, and Sahlberg admits that induction – a major issue here a few years ago -- is limited. Ongoing professional development there seems no more systematic, or valued, than it is here, though Sahlberg admits that the Ministry of Education is trying to change this. Finnish teachers spend fewer hours in class than do teachers in the United States and other OECD countries, but are required to spend at least two hours a week in planning with colleagues. If they don't have other duties, they are free to leave school. Do we assume that all their preparation takes place out of school, and would this not hamper collaboration and shared curriculum making? In another place, Sahlberg notes that teachers are paid on the basis of how many lessons they teach and seems to suggest that teachers' non-classroom time is limited; this is hard to believe, given their expectations and accomplishments. (Sahlberg also notes that Finnish students spend less time at school and do less homework than students in other OECD countries, European and East Asian lands with well-developed economies. This, too, begs further explanation.)

Other specifics that would help place Finland's accomplishments in a more solid context are the number of years teachers spend on the job, average class size (the book notes that most Finnish schools have fewer than 500 students), the "burn-out" phenomenon, and whether or not Finnish teachers (most of whom are women) can leave for a few years and then return.

The book's last two chapters discuss how Finnish schools complement the nation's idea of itself as a "competitive welfare state" and consider how the schools are facing the future. Sahlberg notes that in the 1990s some of the nation's own business people were concerned that an emphasis on equitability conflicted with the idea of the excellence needed to advance Finland's economy – but that was before the PISA results were announced in 2001. Today, some Finnish teachers worry that, in order to keep performance at a high level, there will be pressure to "teach to the test." And some educators are struggling to define a new goal, while noting that full integration of a rising number of immigrants is presenting a challenge.

Overall, *Finnish Lessons* provides valuable evidence that investing in teachers and instruction -- rather than in tests and inspections -- can bring about admirable, even excellent, results. But despite the many virtues of the system it describes, the book seems written for its fans rather than for potential critics. Alas, it is not likely to persuade advocates of privatization, corporate-style management, and test-based accountability that Finland does indeed offer an example of a better way. But to those who would point out that Finland is a small and

cohesive country, Sahlberg counters that many U.S. states are about the same size. Further, the Canadian province of Alberta is apparently revamping aspects of its schools based somewhat on Finland's lessons.

And, as Sahlberg notes on the last page, the late Seymour Sarason pointed out over a decade ago that Finnish schools "are very close to what John Dewey had in mind." The idea that common schools, supported and maintained by the public at large, are essential to a democracy -- as well as small-scale democracies themselves -- are hardly ideas that the United States would be renting from others. Dewey and his colleagues articulated them a century ago, emphasizing connections between schoolwork and adult occupations. Perhaps some lessons from Finland can help us get back to those we taught the rest of the world, before our latest crop of autocratic managers totally focus attention away from the virtues that built the American public school system.

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