

## **Book Review: Finnish Lessons, What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?**

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The book, by Pasi Sahlberg (2011) starts with the thesis of the success of the Finnish education system. The introduction explains some of the reasons for the success story that is going to be presented in the five chapters of the book. Among those reasons are: young people learn well in schools with low performance differences; teaching is a prestigious profession which attracts many young people; Finnish teachers education is most competitive in the world; teachers have professional autonomy; those who join the profession stay in it for a life; before leaving comprehensive schools more than half of the pupils get some kind of educational support. Standard testing, competition, privatization, etc which are common in other countries are not considered in the Finnish school system.

The author provides a historical background of the education system with specific emphasis on the introduction of the comprehensive school reform. Because of its inclusiveness and the principles that all can learn if they get the necessary support, the comprehensive school or peruskoulu reform of the 1960s and 1970s was the foundation for the later success of the Finnish education system.

The book gives a brief background of the Finnish education system and the reforms of the 1960s and 1970s. It further provides the multidimensional reforms of the last three decades which led to the success story of the education system. The three major elements of the educational policies since the early 1970s are given as "...a good publically financed and locally governed basic school for every child" (p.6), Finland's creating "...its own way to build the education system that exist today" (p.7) and a "...systematic development of respectful and interesting working condition for teachers and learners in Finnish schools" (p.7). What happened in the 1990s is described as follows:

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...Although education policy discourse in Finland changed dramatically during the 1990s as a consequence of new public sector management and other neoliberal policies, Finland has remained immune to market-based educational reforms. Instead, education sector development has been built upon values grounded in equity and equitable distribution of resources rather than on competition and choice. Importantly, the Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ), which represented more than 95% of all teachers in Finland, has consistently resisted adopting business management models in the education sector. (p.127)

Sahlberg mentions one major fact that shows privatization could not be a guarantee for success. According to him, from total education expenditure USA gets 33.9%, and Canada gets 25.3% from private sources while the Finnish education system receives only 2.5% of the total education expenditure from private sources. In the international tests Finland outperformed these countries.

The author states the education system in Finland was mediocre in the 1980s while it continuously has improved during the last three decades. One indicator for the positive change or the progress of the education system was the top results in mathematics, science and reading in PISA test in 2001. Finland's top achievement in PISA and other international standard tests is according to the author the result of a long time effort. In the introduction of the book the author summarizes why the Finnish students are performing better than others as follows:

Public education systems are in crisis in many parts of the world. The United States, England, Sweden, Norway, and France, just to mention a few nations, are among those where public education is increasingly challenged because of endemic failure to provide adequate learning opportunities to all children. Tough solutions are not uncommon in these countries: Tightening control over schools, stronger accountability for student performance, firing bad teachers, and closing down troubled schools are part of the recipe to fixing failing education systems. This book does not suggest that tougher competition, more data, abolishing teacher unions, opening more charter schools, or employing corporate-world management models in education systems would bring about a resolution to these crisis-

quite the opposite. The main message of this book is that there is another way to improve education systems. This includes improving the teaching force, limiting student testing to a necessary minimum, placing responsibility and trust before accountability, and handing over school- and district level leadership to education professionals. These are common educational policy themes in some of the high performing countries-Finland among them –in the 2009 International Programme for Student Assessment (PISA) of the OECD (2010b, 2010c). (pp.4-5.)

According to the author there is an open climate in the Finnish schools. This encourages students to be curious and creative. This environment is not limited to some schools, as school performances are more or less similar. A source from 2006 cited in the book provides information that the student performance variation between schools is less than 5%.

Teaching in Finland is considered as top job. Among reasons mentioned for this are the high status of teachers in the Finnish society, the professional autonomy of teachers, "the slightly more than national average salary" (p.77), the high competition to join the teachers education, and the high quality of teachers education. To get a license to teach in Finnish schools there is a requirement to have a three years bachelor's and a two years master's degree.

Teacher education in Finland is considered to be research based. It is said that it is characterized by "...integration of theories, research methodologies and practice..." (p.83) and students are supposed to acquire "...skills of designing, conducting and presenting original research on practical and theoretical aspects of education" (p.83). The quality of the teacher-education is further presented in the book as follows:

A broad-based teacher-education curriculum ensures that newly prepared Finnish teachers possess well-balanced knowledge and skills in both theory and practice. It also implies that prospective teachers develop deep professional insight into education from several perspectives, including educational psychology and sociology, curriculum theory, student assessment, special needs education, and didactics (pedagogical content knowledge) in their selected subject areas. (p.80.)

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After their education, teachers are supposed to have an autonomy in exercising their profession. They have their "professional autonomy...to plan, teach, diagnose, execute and evaluate" (p.76). The autonomy in exercising their profession is one of the reasons given for some teachers staying through their working life in the profession.

One area that gets much attention in the system is the issue of special education. Finding out early those who need special help and providing them with necessary assistance is given a priority. The special education has two different forms, part-time and permanent special education. In the first form the student is included in a regular class while in the second form the student is attending lessons in a special group or class in a regular school or in a separate institution. According to the author as large as half of the student population gets some kind of educational support before they complete their comprehensive school and because of this the effect of being isolated for attending such a class is limited.

Sahlberg in his presentation of what led to the high achievement confirms that there are influences from outside that helped in the reform process:

Work by David Berliner in educational psychology, Linda Darling-Hammond in teacher education, and Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan in educational change have been closely studied and implemented in developing Finnish education since the 1970s. The secret of the successful influence of these educational ideas from the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada is that there was fruitful ground in Finnish school for such pragmatic models of change. (p.35)

While considering some ideas from other countries, he also indicates the resistance to the neoliberal market oriented reforms which were on their way in to the Finnish education sector. Through the positive influences from outside, resistance to unwelcomed trends and successes gained, he indicates what other countries can learn from the Finnish education system. The lessons he mentions are that it is possible to progress from a mediocre to a model education system; that there is another way than "the market-driven education policies" (p.5); there are alternative ways for school reform to tackle contemporary problems in

the education field; and that there is a need for understanding of the interdependence between and vital role the commerce, technology, employment and other public sectors for the success of the education sector. At last he says, "The Finnish way of educational change should be encouraging to those who have found the path of competition, choice, test-based accountability, and performance-based pay to be a dead end..." (p.144).

The author introduces readers with two major critics concerning lessons of Finnish experience to other countries. The first critic is that as Finland is a "rather homogeneous" country it is difficult to consider its experiences in countries with wider diversity. The second point is that the country is "too small" to be considered as a "good model" for reform for countries such as the US (p.8). It is important that he presents to readers such alternative views.

In addition to the critics from others, I would have liked him to include more sources with critical views on the system. As Sahlberg himself is one of the insiders who knows both the strength and weakness of the system, he would have given us the practical and theoretical difficulties the system is facing at present. Another dilemma for me in the book is that the author and other Finnish educationalists are critical to international standard tests but still the author overemphasizes the Finnish achievements on these tests. Instead it would have been interesting if he could have given us some critical comments on these tests.

Except for my minor critical views raised at the earlier paragraph, I found the book educative to read. Those who are interested in education reform and its success in Finland and who are involved in educational research, education policy, teacher education and related fields can gain from this book.