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## Learning from Finland: A book review

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### Abstract

A review of Pasi Sahlberg's (2015) *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edn.).

### Keywords

comparative education, PISA, Finland, teaching, school systems

### Author Statement

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## Learning from Finland

A review of Pasi Sahlberg's (2015) *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edn.).

Pasi Sahlberg tells a story of the Finnish Minister of Education visiting her Swedish Counterpart in the 1990s. The story goes that the Swedish politician boasted that Sweden's aim was to have the world's best education system. The Finnish education minister is said to have replied that Finland's goal was more modest. "For us," she said, "It is enough to be ahead of Sweden" (p. 54).

No doubt the story is spiced with residual feeling from the centuries of Swedish rule of Finland but the point remains that Finland did not set out to design the world's best education system. Finland did not conceive of a "Race to the Top". It happened because of a Finnish concentration on delivering quality education for their own young people, rather than setting a goal to be number one. There has, however, been an invasion of education researchers beating a path to Finland trying to find out why the country has done so well on a variety of measures of educational achievement. Chief among these measures are repeated number one rankings on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests of the Organization for Economic Development (OECD) that compare performances of young people at several different ages on standardized tests of reading literacy, mathematics and science. In 2001, Finland was ranked number one in all three domains and this ranking proved to be no fluke when it was repeated several times over the next decade.

It was not always this way. Sahlberg traces a complex path of developments in Finnish education over several decades to

reach this ranking. He points out that in 1952, when Helsinki hosted the summer Olympic Games, 90% of Finns had completed seven to nine years of basic education and a university degree was regarded as an "exceptional attainment" (p. 99). In the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) studies that preceded the PISA studies, Finland from the 1960s to the 1980s was only an average performer. The groundwork for the rise of Finnish education, says Sahlberg, was established in the 1980s and 1990s and came to fruition in the new decades of the twenty-first century.

That is all very nice for the citizens of Finland, but the question that the rest of the world is interested in (or should be) is, "What might be learned from Finland that might benefit education in other parts of the world?" The answers offered by Pasi Sahlberg are complex and lack sufficient, systematic research confirmation, but there are some strong indicators that bear further scrutiny, particularly when they are duplicated by other countries that score highly on the same measures.

The strongest critique Sahlberg makes of educational trends in many parts of the world is reserved for what he refers to as the GERM agenda. GERM stands for Global Education Reform Movement and Pasi Sahlberg mocks it as a failed agenda drawn from "often outdated and bad management models from the corporate world" (p. 142). Its key ideas will not sound unfamiliar: "competition between schools; standardization of teaching and learning; punitive test-based accountability; ill-informed performance-based pay; and data-driven accountability" (p. 142). This is the agenda that has captured the "market" (another poor analogy for education) in the USA,

Britain, Germany, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and many other countries, while those countries that have resisted this model turn out to be those that have performed better on the international comparison tests: some Canadian provinces, Singapore, South Korea and, of course, Finland. He points out, however, that Finland was tempted to follow a similar pathway and was fortunately diverted from doing so by the surprising PISA results that came out in 2001.

So what does Finland do that is different? One key difference lies in the way teachers are treated. They are not paid significantly more than in the countries that adopted the GERM agenda, but they are accorded much greater respect and are expected to exercise greater professional judgment. The Finnish education system does not have a national curriculum or anything like the Common Core, but teachers are much more heavily involved at the local level in curriculum design. Teachers thus have a much stronger sense of professionalism and experience greater job satisfaction, so much so that they do not have so many teachers leaving teaching after a few years.

The major reforms that took place in Finland in the 1980s led to the beginning of what are known as the "*peruskoulu*" schools. Students attend these comprehensive schools from the age of seven until they are sixteen. Then they can advance to either of two types of schools: a general upper secondary school (leading to university study) or a vocational upper secondary school (leading to a vocational college). Dropout rates are low and are declining. Finland's public schools, particularly the *peruskoulu*, are widely assumed to share similar qualities and there is little concern about sending your students to a "good" school. Neither does the push for greater private schooling or charter schools feature much in Finland (only 2.4% of education

funding comes from private sources, p. 60). Schools have a large degree of autonomy with little central interference. For instance, there is only a modicum of testing and no inspection of teachers.

In Finnish schools, cooperative learning is strongly featured and is studied extensively in teacher education. Sahlberg says that Finland was one of the first countries to implement cooperative learning on a large scale. The Finns have also taken up seriously the work done by leading educational researchers and theorists like Linda Darling-Hammond, Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves, David Berliner, and Bruce Joyce.

In the upper secondary schools, school organization is not based on year level grades (10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> or 12 grades). Students study a range of subjects in eight-week modules and must complete eighteen compulsory subjects as well as others of their own choosing. At the end of their upper secondary schooling students take a Matriculation exam, which enables entry to university. In this exam, rather than multi-choice questions, students are required to write essays on a range of interdisciplinary topics.

To become a teacher in Finland, you also have to have a two-year Masters degree, which includes a research component. There are eight universities with teacher education programs and teacher education is in fact more centrally controlled than teaching itself. For instance, there is an exam that all trainee teachers have to take at the end of their first year of study in which they write about six articles that are made available to them a month earlier. Furthermore, entry to these degrees is highly competitive (3200 applicants for 340 positions at the University of Helsinki in 2015, p. 103) and becoming a teacher is socially highly valued, consistently scoring highly on surveys of public respect for various professions. There is no

backdoor entry to teaching, like Teach for America, either. The result is that teaching as a profession attracts and selects talented individuals. To become an administrator in Finnish schools requires further university education and there is no room for administrators who are not professional educators. What is more, teachers who already all have a Masters degree (this includes all of what would be understood in America as elementary and high school teachers, and many early childhood educators too) are eligible to progress on to a PhD degree that focuses on teaching practice and curriculum design.

Nor do Finnish schools spend a lot of energy ridding schools of inferior or under-qualified teachers. Sahlberg argues, after Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (2012) from Canada, that this approach is less effective than trying to improve the teamwork among all teachers so that it is system excellence that is sought rather than individual teacher excellence. Neither is performance pay based on student test scores contemplated.

Sahlberg does not make a big feature of it but he does mention that class sizes in Finland are small. He also describes a different approach to special education than in the USA. There is little reliance on diagnosis and a heavy degree of input in the early years of schooling that is aimed at addressing learning problems for up to a third of students with the aim of not allowing some students to fall behind. The philosophy is that special education should address all kinds of learning difficulties and we all need special education at some point in our lives. Moreover, grade repetition was abolished in the reforms to the school system in the 1980s, because it was seen to be demoralizing for students and not successful at addressing learning difficulties. School counseling is a key part of all levels of schooling and career

guidance programs are compulsory aspects of all *peruskoulu* for two to three hours a week.

Perhaps surprising are some of the features that are not endorsed in the Finnish education system. Finnish students do not get more instructional time than their peers in other countries. According to the Finnish experience, it appears that you do not get better at math just by spending more hours doing it. Sahlberg argues that this is the same for other countries that perform well on the PISA studies. Finnish fifteen-year olds, according to OECD data, also spend less time on homework than do their peers in many other countries. Moreover, Finnish children do not start formal schooling until they are seven years old, although they do have government funded pre-school education for all (attended by 98% of six-year-olds)(p. 68). It seems then that the differences in Finnish education lie in the quality of the learning, rather than in the quantity of hours spent learning.

Several other aspects of Finnish society that are indicators of educational priorities get a mention by Sahlberg also. Child poverty rates are low (5.4% compared to 23.2% in the US, p. 97). Finland has a strong welfare state. It is expected that the government will take responsibility for implementing care for its citizens in health and education. Spending on education increased by 34% from 1995 to 2004, but this was still only 6.1% of GDP. By comparison OECD countries on average increased education spending by 42% during the same period and the US spends 6.9% of GDP on education, Canada 6.8% (pp. 80-81). All parents have parental leave on full salary and there is universal health care. He claims that Finland was the first country to make broadband internet connection a human right. And Finland has a social and economic system that is committed to less inequality than are the USA and the

UK, the two countries with the highest inequality coefficients in the world. Sahlberg here cites Wilkinson and Pickett's (2009) book, *The Spirit Level*, which documents inequality internationally and repeats their epidemiological data which shows that reducing income inequality leads to fewer educational, health and social problems of most kinds. The reverse is also the case – more inequality correlates with more health, and social problems. Sahlberg also claims that Finland has high levels of investment in research and development. Interestingly, however, he suggests that much of the educational research that has influenced teaching practice in Finland originates in American universities. He marvels that it is not taken up in American practice as much as it is by the Finns. By contrast, Sahlberg laments that there is not enough Finnish research in education.

In Finland, Sahlberg points out, there is more suspicion in education circles than among politicians about the adequacy of what PISA measures. Its measures of what students learn has a very narrow focus and he cautions against making a fetish of aiming for high scores on this

measure. As Sahlberg comments, “PISA is a good servant but a bad master” (p. 80).

Sahlberg reserves his most caustic remarks for the GERM “reforms”. He calls the forms of accountability promoted by these efforts as “toxic”. And he is proud of the Finnish system of education for showing the world a different way of doing it. He summarizes this difference at the end of the book as based on creative curricula rather than standards, autonomous teachers rather than de-skilled teachers, courageous leadership rather than corporate-style management, and collaboration with and among teachers, rather than confrontation and competition. There are many other details that Sahlberg mentions in what is necessarily a complex account. The resulting picture that the book offers is, not just a description of what happens in Finland, but an account of what good education in many places might be. There is clarity in the voice that Sahlberg uses and, agree with it or not, he has things to say that deserve attention – as in the best quotation from the book, “Teaching is not rocket science: it is much harder than that.” (p. 133.)

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