

Sahlberg, P. (2011). *Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* New York, NY: Teachers College Press

How Finland's Education Policies Lead to a World-Class Education System

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Sahlberg used both his personal and academic experience in the development of the book *Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* The author grew up as the son of a teacher couple in Finland. He himself studied to become a teacher. Through his work as a school administrator in Finland and a policy analyst for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Sahlberg gained a comprehensive understanding of education worldwide. His experience also includes serving as the education specialist for the World Bank (in Washington D.C.) as well as for the European Commission (in Torino, Italy). Currently, Sahlberg is working as the Director General of the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation (CIMO) at the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. The international recognition he has earned for his work with educational reforms, training teachers, coaching schools, and advising policy makers, as well as being part of two decades of research, makes Sahlberg the foremost expert for sharing the evolution of education policies in Finland.

The book starts by describing how poor, agrarian, and modestly educated Finland evolved into a “modern knowledge-based society with high-performing education system and world-class innovation environment” (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 13). He describes three distinct stages of economic development after World War II, each of which had a role in transforming education in Finland. The first stage was the transition from an agricultural to an industrialized

society. This transition improved the chances of all Finns for equal opportunity in education. The second stage saw the formation of a comprehensive, publicly funded and managed school system. This new comprehensive nine-year basic school, called *peruskoulu*, was built on the conception that “everyone cannot learn everything” (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 21). Everyone deserves a fair chance for their future: All students would enroll in the same nine-year basic schools, which are governed locally and thus could tailor education to each community's needs. In addition to the new school, technology and technological innovations were supported in both education and the economy. In the third and last stage, the improvement of the quality of this new school was the focus, as well as improvement in higher education, which included the upper secondary school as well as university sectors.

This new *peruskoulu* forced the development of other aspects of education. First, teachers had to rethink their teaching approaches as classes now consisted of students coming from different backgrounds with varying aspirations in life. Also, every school had to have specially trained personnel on staff able to support students with special needs. Moreover, due to the fact that students would now stay in the same school until the completion of their basic education, career counselors were systematically incorporated into the curriculum. Finally, teachers who had formed their practices in the previous system's more specialized schools, such as grammar or civic

schools, had to rethink those practices in order to manage students with more diverse abilities and interests. As a consequence of the three reforms, more students graduated from these schools, and more sought an upper secondary education in both the academic and the vocational tracks.

Sahlberg (2011) then describes the unconventional choices, often referred to as the Finnish Paradoxes, that brought Finnish public education to the top of the international rankings of educational performance. The first he calls “teach less, learn more.” Finnish teachers teach on average four lessons a day, which leaves them with enough time to concentrate on assessing their students’ achievement and overall progress, preparing and developing their own school curricula, offering remedial support to students, and attending to professional development. Students have shorter school days (for ages 12-14, about 5,500 hours annually compared to the OECD average of about 6,600 hours annually) as well as minimal homework. Finnish teachers are not convinced that more homework leads to better learning. Instead, they have found that extracurricular activities add to students’ overall growth. The second paradox is that less testing leads to more learning. The author remarks that testing should be part of education but that it should not influence a teacher’s salary or a school’s funding. Instead of implementing standardized tests, Finnish schools employ a three-tiered system of student assessments. In-class assessments are the responsibility of each of the teachers and include diagnostic, formative and summative assessment. Comprehensive evaluations of student progress are disclosed in the form of a report card at the end of each semester. Such a report card notes the behavioral as well as the academic performances of a student, which are a collective judgment of all the student’s teachers. Sample-based tests are implemented nationally every three to

four years to measure students’ learning in a variety of subjects. The subjects on these sample-based tests are chosen by the national authorities depending on what data they feel are needed. Only about 10% of the age-cohort (for instance, 6th- and 9th-grade students) participates voluntarily in these assessments. The third paradox promises more equity through growing diversity. Since the beginning of the *peruskoulu*, Finland has paid attention to social justice and early intervention to help those students with special needs, both academically and socially. This has led to an active relationship between education and, for instance, the health and social services.

Such major changes in the school system have led to changes in the training and working conditions of Finnish teachers. In Finland, the teaching profession is highly regarded in society and thus entry into the profession is very demanding and competitive (Sahlberg, 2011). Aspiring teachers have to earn at least a master’s degree, spend more than 600 hours in teacher-training schools, and produce a research-based master’s thesis. Finnish teachers enjoy professional autonomy. They are responsible for local curriculum development, and they work as part of a professional learning community with their colleagues to analyze and improve local curricula and student achievement. Time for exercising these responsibilities comes from the reduced teaching load: They teach on average four lessons a day compared to an average of six daily lessons for American teachers.

This combination of increased local control of the *peruskoulu* and increased teacher responsibility for curriculum and assessment allows considerable flexibility for customizing teaching and learning on a local basis (Sahlberg, 2011). This has allowed for a sharper focus on creativity and problem solving, an encouragement of risk-taking by

both teachers and students, and shared responsibility and trust among teachers, students and parents. As a part of the Finnish commitment to equalize opportunity in a knowledge-based economy, the country makes it a point that all students receive free school materials, lunch, and other social support services, so that every child has the same opportunity for success.

In charting its path to the top, Finland borrowed ideas from other countries, adapted their practices, and in the process passed them by (Sahlberg, 2011). Now that Finland has nobody to follow, how will it sustain its high educational performance, and what aspects of Finnish practice can be seen as a practical model for other nations to follow? Sahlberg (2011) outlines four challenges for the Finnish education system in the twenty-first century. Modern communications technology is one such challenge: Students will increasingly learn from Internet resources, and come to school with different levels of knowledge and varying interests. The school, in response, will need to provide more customized learning plans for individuals. Because of the influence of the Internet, lessons will not have to be bound to the classroom: Students will have more time to work on subject-integrated projects and activities. As this in turn will mean students spend less time together in social settings, it will be important to provide more training for students in how to work together “with people who are very different from themselves” and how to “cope in complex social networks” (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 142). Last but not least, keeping students engaged and supporting them in being creative will be more important than ever, because students may tend to think of school as unessential if it appears to them that they can learn everything they need from the Internet.

What really stands out in this book is the tale of Finland’s educational reform process, set in its particular Finnish context—

including historical, economic, and social factors—told in an engaging but critical way, as only an expert insider could tell it. According to Sahlberg (2011), “this book brings hope to all those worried about whether improving their educational systems is at all possible” and it “provides food for thought to those who look for ways to adjust education policies to the realities of economic recovery” (p. 3). That is exactly what happened to me: The book did more than just bring me hope, it offered a revelation. I believe that it can be an inspiration for others as well. This book could provide an important focal point for discussion and further research in graduate education programs internationally that deal with issues of school structure and curriculum control. It illustrates in detail that educational change does not happen overnight; it takes continuous and systematic work as well as a lot of patience—it took Finland thirty years to get to the top. It conveys very well that education is based in a culture, so that educational policies cannot simply be taken from one country and applied in another without looking at the underlying cultural forces that shape and sustain those policies. For instance, Finland has a homogeneous population, both culturally and ethically, as compared for example to the United States. In addition, Finland is about the size of Maryland or Connecticut; local education reforms in the United States might need to evolve at the state level first before they can take shape nationwide. Nevertheless, this book serves as a lens through which readers can see that education is dependent on a country’s social, employment, and economic sectors, and thus cannot improve unless these sectors interact with each other synergistically, with one goal in mind—to improve education for all.

Given that Finland reached the top by following others, I was eager to see what the author had in mind for Finland’s future. The

manner in which he suggested meeting the four challenges ahead (outlined above) is intended to “create a community of learners that provides the conditions that allow all young people to discover their talent” (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 140), which is, he says, Finland’s “Big Dream” (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 140) for the future. To my disappointment, he failed to elaborate on the implications these suggestions would have for teacher education. For instance, he suggested having individual customized learning plans instead of “standardized curriculum for all” (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 141). But if this suggestion were to be implemented in the future, how would the responsibilities of the teachers change? Will they only work with appointed individuals? How will teacher education accommodate these possible policy changes? These and many more questions were left unanswered.

Another weakness for the non-Finnish reader is his first chapter, which tries to give an insight into the origin of Finland’s school reform. The writing here does not do the rest of the book justice. Between the difficulties of navigating the historical specifics, and its overreliance on statistical citations, it may turn readers away from what follows. The narrative also bogs down somewhat in chapter four, in which the author spends too much time discussing the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM). I can understand Sahlberg’s (2011) point that

educational policies can deviate from those promoted internationally yet still be successful, but I wonder if he could have made the point less laboriously. I was irritated, after absorbing the elaborate details on GERM, to find that Finland did not take part in it, but instead developed their own Finnish Way. It was, however, helpful to see GERM compared to the Finnish Way in tabular form: It made for a nice summary of the direct differences.

In his final chapter, Sahlberg mentioned gender equality as one of the crucial attributes that contributed to Finland’s status as a nation at the top but he falls short in explaining how it plays such an important role. It was only through the links he provided to both a website dedicated to new developments in Finnish education (www.finnishlessons.com), and his own website (www.pasisahlberg.com)—which includes links to interviews, conference papers, articles as well as to his own blog—that I was able to obtain the information for which I was looking.

All in all, I would definitely recommend this book to anyone interested in educational reforms. It helps shine a light on the potential that a well thought-through education reform can have for a nation, when carried through with patience and trust—attributes that conspicuously fail to characterize the attempted reform programs of some other prominent nations.

Reference

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