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Finnish Patience

Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland? Pasi Sahlberg. New York: Teachers College Press, 2011. 168 pp., \$34.95 (paper). ISBN: 9780807752579.

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While these lessons hold great promise, they call for patience. . . . Reforming schools is a complex and slow process. To rush the process is to ruin it. (p. 3)

Americans are both attracted to and concerned by the educational successes of other nations. On the one hand, we admire success and want to emulate it: Japanese lessons study; Japanese deep discussion; Hungarian mathematics; and almost anything Asian in terms of mathematics or science. At the same time we express this admiration, we also express our fear that these other countries will shame us by their performances and outdo us in the international marketplace. This duality tends to express itself in the way we attempt to emulate practices we see as successful. When we seek to emulate the educational practices of other countries, we do so selectively—for example, we routinely ignore class size, or the use of cram schools. In most Asian countries, the class sizes are far larger than those in the United States and parents routinely pay for after-school schools, but we ignore these features in our efforts to gain success. And now we have the success of Finland with an approach to educational improvement that is completely different from the path we have been following. We should consider thoughtfully what lessons we might want to learn from Finland.

The story of Finnish educational success as told by Sahlberg in the slim volume

Finnish Lessons is remarkable. The very simplified version of the story is that Finnish students have performed at the top in international science comparisons (PISA) for three successive waves of examination starting at the end of the 1990s. Finland has accomplished this success with a relatively short school day and year, with no program of accountability or frequent national standardized testing, and with a focus on personal development and equality. Given that Finland was in a shambles at the end of World War II and that it had no solid prior history of universal, egalitarian education, the turnaround is impressive. Indeed, even within Finland, there was considerable opposition to the reforms so much so that they might have been repealed had not the unexpected international successes occurred.

Finnish Lessons is composed of an introduction and five short chapters. The introduction presents one layer of a multilayered argument, namely, that we can all learn from one another as we attempt to improve universal education. The first chapter lays out an abbreviated history of Finnish educational development from around the 1970s to the present. The chapter emphasizes the national level of cooperation and the structural changes that were adopted in the system, primarily *peruskoulu*. The second chapter, The Finnish Paradox, highlights the educational attainments in light of the differences between the Finnish approach and the U.S. or Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM) approach. The attainments are presented as having taken place with less cost, time, and testing than those of GERM and with a very strong emphasis on equity. This is another layer of the argument. The third chapter deals with the quality and importance of the teaching force; to me, this is the most significant chapter in the book. The fourth chapter explores the political

context, the competitive welfare state, of Finland more closely. This is a third layer of argument. The volume concludes with a vision of the future of education in Finland. Sahlberg has chosen to present many of his arguments in graphical form (see, e.g., figures 1.5, 2.8, 3.2, and 4.1) in which he lays out performance along one dimension and some other characteristic such as time, expenditure, or income spread along another. It is a deceptively simple presentation that is used to convincing effect in support of the layers of argument. The arguments are: we can learn from one another, there is a different way of implementing reform, and the social political context of Finland is instrumental.

Sahlberg notes, and my experience confirms, that the common U.S. reaction to the Finnish success is the following: Finland is small, Finland is homogeneous, Finland is rich, or at least not wracked with pockets of extreme poverty; therefore, the Finnish experience is not replicable. Yes, Finland is small; it is about the size of Minnesota or Massachusetts, but slightly bigger than Norway and Puerto Rico (to identify two states, a country and a territory). Finland is homogeneous compared to the United States as a whole but not compared to individual states such as Minnesota or countries such as Japan or Korea. Nor is it as homogeneous as is commonly believed; it has a rapidly growing immigrant population. It is as heterogeneous as Norway. Finland has a very high standard of living and a very reasonable income level but not as high as Norway. Norway is important to consider because it represents a possible counter to the initial U.S. reaction to the Finnish success. Norway is a Nordic, homogeneous, small, well-financed country that has followed a different path than that of Finland and has had different results. Even if the two countries had the same results across the board, we would still have an important proof of concept in Finland.

Finland has a complex past that includes governance by two of the Northern super powers, Sweden and Russia. For six centuries, starting in 1200, Finland was under Swedish rule, and this included the use of the Swedish language in government and most educational efforts. And for the century after that, it was under Russian rule, also including a certain amount of Russification. In both cases, its national identity, language, and historical voice was under serious threat. A coherent emergence of national identity and preservation has its roots in the latter half of the 19th century. (Musically think of Sibelius's Finlandia and Norwegian Grieg's Peer Gynt.) More recently, Finland's struggle, after the Russian revolution to become a recognized and self-sufficient nation, was plagued by a devastating civil war. During World War II, Finland also engaged in multiple armed confrontations with the Soviet Union and one with Nazi Germany. The civil war, less than 100 years ago, was fought along political, regional, and occupational lines—with the northern rural areas in conflict with the more southern urban ones. It was by all accounts devastating and bitter. This is a country that could have been a modern failed nation-state torn between competing powers; instead, it found a way through its internal and international divisions.

The educational attainments of Finland need to be appreciated in light of this history. Norway also started on the long path to educational improvement after the devastation of World War II and German occupation; it suffered no civil war and it found North Sea oil. Educationally it chose to follow the U.S. and U.K. models with respect to time in school and student assessment, a version of GERM. The educational results for Norway are similar to those of the United States and the United Kingdom. I take this to mean that Finnish success is not only due to homogeneity, small population, or per capita wealth but to a patient, sustained, thoughtful effort to meet the unique needs of its population with a unique set of solutions.

Pasi Sahlberg is a significant figure in both Finnish and European education, holding important leadership positions in both, and he has written a comprehensive and clear account of the success. He also has strong beliefs as to why that success occurred. Sahlberg attributes the success to

the following factors. First, an extensive, well-informed planning process led to the structural changes of the schools, *peruskoulu* (basic/school). Second, a commitment to development and retention led to a superb teaching force. Third, a respectful collaboration between all parties—national political leaders, industry, unions, parents, and school councils—ensured success. Sahlberg also places considerable emphasis on the overall political stance in Finland and its role in the educational progress.

Peruskoulu replaced a system of 3 years of grammar school (ages 7-10) followed by divisions of academic tracks and trade tracks. *Peruskoulu* provides 9 years of comprehensive schooling that starts at age 7; this is followed by an upper general school or an upper vocational school (roughly the last 2 years of U.S. high school), which in turn is followed by university, vocational college, or work (Sahlberg, 2011, pp. 20, 22). In essence, the structural change was a move away from the 19th- and early 20th-century European policy of selectivity to a more egalitarian effort, and one that was controlled in implementation at the local level. According to Sahlberg, the move was supported and designed by a collection of people from educational administrators, politicians, and business people to teaching unions and community representatives. It was both top-down and bottom-up in design and implementation. The curriculum was also changed and a national curriculum was gradually phased in from the mid-1960s. All schools were using the national curriculum and *Peruskoulu* by 1979, and all tracking or ability grouping was ended by 1985 (private fee-based schools slowly disappeared as well). There are no high-stakes exams (other than the end of high school matriculation exam) and teachers are not targets of accountability, nor are schools publicly compared by student rankings.

The first part of the reform work required a 25-year vision and implementation. It would be 15 more years before the fruits would be borne—40 years of consistent, focused effort. Ideas and values about education had to change, too, over this period; a belief in universal capacity and a value of reducing the spread between higher- and lower-performing schools guided many actions. To quote Erkki Aho (director general of the National Board of

Education 1973-1991), “Equality, efficiency, and solidarity . . . merged into a consensus that enriched each other” (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 24). The Finnish effort was both pragmatic and idealistic.

Sahlberg devotes a chapter to the efforts to establish an egalitarian educational situation and then moves on to what he views as another critical element to success: teachers. Teacher education changed over this 40-year period. Today teaching is one of the highest-status professions in Finland and schools of education draw from the top 10% of their applicants. There is virtually no teacher dropout nor turnover because teachers are well respected and well paid. All teachers have research-based master's degrees and no teacher teaches outside of their area of expertise. Most of the upper-grade (seventh on up) teachers have two subject area specialties: physics and mathematics; literature and language, etc. The workday, week, and year is shorter for teachers in Finland than it is for the United States or the United Kingdom but the adjusted per pupil expenditure is quite a bit lower. Sahlberg does not claim that more money will buy better outcomes.

Sahlberg points to three factors that have led to teachers being so good: The most competent people go into teaching as a career because it is seen as a moral and important effort; there is a collaboration between subject matter faculties such as a physics department and schools of education so that the training meshes and is constantly upgraded; teacher education is research oriented in that teachers do research and also that worldwide research is followed and considered. Teachers are trusted by their principals and by the parents of their students, and they consider their work both in pragmatic and moral terms.

In contrast to Finland, the United States has a very long history of educational reform. As early as the 19th century, mathematics educators sought to improve mathematics instruction (Roberts, 2001). But if we consider just the last 45 years starting with President Johnson's Great Society program, we can examine what the U.S. program has been over the same time as the Finnish one. The reform efforts had two very different motivations: equity (Headstart, Follow Through, and “gap” reduction) and keeping up with the competition (Japan, Korea, and China). Even though we have spent millions of dollars

on research and design efforts in both mathematics and science, we have tended to ignore the findings from that work. The findings have suggested that using what we know about learning and teaching from cognitive science, constructivism, and activity theory to design instruction leads to improved student learning and enthusiasm (see meta-analysis by Rakes, Valentine, McGatha, & Ronau, 2010). Instead, we have followed the GERM approach (dividing curriculum into small measurable units, instructional competition among schools and teachers, frequent high stakes exams, public accountability, and longer school days and years) at the Federal level (through three presidents) and the State level (Cooper, Allen, Patall, & Dent, 2010; Holme, Richards, Jimerson, & Cohen, 2010; Patall, Cooper, & Allen, 2010). Educators from very different political and social views have raised loud concerns because this overall approach does not seem to result in improved learning for our students (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2010). The Finnish success suggests an alternative.

Finnish Lessons is an important book and educators need to read it. But readers need to proceed with some caution lest we turn the Finnish experience into yet another educational fad. The claims for success are very solid whereas the warrants are perhaps more equivocal.¹ All of the warrants—excellent teachers who are highly valued, careful long-term planning, focusing on the issue of equity—are credible as possible causes for the success, but there might be other factors that have not been uncovered. Other alternative

explanations such as Finnish homogeneity or size are not unique to Finland and these alternatives can be refuted. They may, however, be necessary if not sufficient conditions. Because Finland does value and conduct research, it is likely that they will help to inform the rest of us which elements are required in which combinations.

Finnish Lessons presents a strong and significant argument to try something other than ever increasing levels of accountability, more control of schools, going after “bad” teachers, more and more testing, treating schools or education systems as if they were corporations, and more micro specification of learning objectives. Some of the lessons we might learn from Finland are the following: first, and foremost, we need to realize there is an alternative to our current path, one well worth exploring; second, we can emphasize both excellence and equity; third, real sustained investment in teaching and teachers should be tried at least at the state level; fourth, we might do well to decouple short-term political action (from presidential proclamations to state boards of education) from the construction of a vision and a set of actions. To construct a vision and design a set of actions, we need the patience and planning that Finland has shown.

NOTE

¹Mea culpa. I have omitted from this review any discussion of the rather inexplicable link that Sahlberg frequently makes between the educational success and the success and importance of Nokia (even having a chapter section called “Finnish Icons: *Persukoula* and Nokia”). Given the problematic situation that Nokia

currently finds itself in, this is perhaps an unfortunate link to have made.

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