CSE CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC EDUCATION
Leading educational thinking and practice

Facts and myths about Finnish schools

Pasi Sahlberg

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Introduction

We live in the post-truth age. Although there are different opinions whether that is an accurate expression of our time, the truth is that it has become much more difficult to cope with the fine line between facts and fiction. This has been so in politics much longer than in science.

Education has always been a terrain of different values, beliefs and traditions. For centuries theorists and practitioners have debated among themselves how to educate children; what are the best ways to teach students in school; and how our brains work. Progress made in human sciences have made some of these debates redundant, but at the same time new topics have emerged, about which people have different opinions. It is a battle between myths and facts. Following are examples of a couple of prevalent contemporary fallacies in education.

Two fallacies with unintended consequences

FALLACY #1

The first fallacy is that 'the most important single factor in improving the quality of education is teachers'

This belief is what some former school system leaders in the USA (Michele Rhee in Washington, DC, and Joel Klein (Klein, 2014) in New York City) used as a basic driver of their school reform. If this was not a fallacy, then the power of a school would indeed be stronger than all out-of-school factors, including children's family background, in changing the lives of children through school education. In other words, all children would learn what they should, if only there were good enough teachers in all schools. This has often led to a conclusion that what governments need to do is to identify poorly performing teachers, find ways to remove them from schools, and attract smarter people to replace them. However, there are two points of evidence that show this is a wrong way.

Simply believing that 'the most important single factor in improving quality of education is teachers' undermines the power of other in-school factors in improving student learning and thereby quality of education.

First, since the Coleman Report in 1966, several studies have confirmed that a significant part of variance in student achievement is in out-of-school factors such as parents' education and occupations, peer influence, and student's individual characteristics characteristics (Coleman et al, 1966). Half a century later, research on what explains students' measured performance in school concludes that about 10 to 20 per cent of the variance in measured student achievement lies among classrooms – ie, teachers and teaching – and a similar amount within schools – ie, school climate, facilities and leadership. In other words, up to two-thirds of what explains student achievement is beyond the control of schools – ie, children's family background, community and motivation to learn.

Second, over thirty years of systematic research on school effectiveness and school improvement reveals a number of characteristics that are typical of more effective schools (Teddlie, 2010). Although school effectiveness research has mixed findings, most scholars agree that effective leadership is among the most important characteristics of effective schools, equally important as effective teaching. Effective leadership includes

- leader qualities, such as being firm and purposeful;
- having shared vision and goals;
- promoting teamwork and collegiality; and
- frequent personal monitoring and feedback.

Several other characteristics of more effective schools include features that are also linked to the culture of the school and leadership. These include

- maintaining focus on learning;
- producing a positive school climate;
- setting high expectations for all;
- developing staff skills; and
- involving parents.

In other words, school leadership matters as much as teachers.

Simply believing that 'the most important single factor in improving quality of education is teachers' undermines the power of other in-school factors in improving student learning and thereby quality of education. Finland and other

high-performing education systems have taken this more seriously than most of the rest. Not only are school principals systematically prepared to lead their schools and understand school improvement, but they also must be experienced educators and teachers, so that they have first-hand understanding of the teaching profession and how to make the best out of it. In successful education systems, non-educators would not be allowed to lead schools, regardless of their management merits elsewhere.

FALLACY #2
The second fallacy is that 'the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers'

This statement became known in education policies through the influential McKinsey & Company report titled 'How the world's best performing school systems come out on top' (Barber and Mourshed, 2007). The same argument appears afterwards in many other influential policy documents, for example in the World Bank's project documents (World Bank, 2013) and in OECD's PISA reports (OECD, 2016). Although these reports take a broader view on enhancing the status of teachers, by paying them better and selecting them more carefully to initial teacher education programs, the impact of this statement is that the quality of an education systems is simply the sum of its individuals' efforts – in other words, the efforts of its teachers.

By doing this, authorities assume that teachers work independently from one another and that one teacher's efforts do not affect the work and effectiveness of the others. However, most schools today – in Australia, Finland and elsewhere – work as teams, where the outcome of teachers' work is a joint effort of the whole school and, often, more than the sum of its parts. This fallacy therefore undermines the impact of teamwork, or social capital, which is common practice in many successful schools today.

Also, as was the case with the earlier fallacy, this one has been adopted in a number of national education policy documents and reform agendas today. As a result, these education reforms often put higher priority on investing in human capital improvements, at the expense of social capital development. Michael Fullan (2011) calls this a wrong driver in reforming schools.

There is emerging evidence from research around the world about the power of collaboration and social capital in school improvement. For example, *Professional Capital* (2012), an award-winning book by Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan, and *Teaching in Context* (2017) by Esther Quintero, provide good evidence of how social capital has more power to influence school quality than human capital.

The role of an individual teacher in a school is like a player in a football team: all teachers are vital but the collegial culture of and teachers' professional judgement in the school is even more important for the quality of the school. Team sports offer numerous examples of teams that have performed beyond expectations because of leadership, commitment and spirit. The quality of a team can exceed the quality of its players, through teamplay, mutual help and leadership. So can an education system.

Myths about Finnish schools

Interest in international borrowing and lending of educational ideas has sometimes led to many other wrong conclusions regarding the power of imported solutions from one country to another (Waldow, 2017). This is particularly true when policymakers have tried to figure out the secrets of the most successful education systems in OECD's PISA assessments and other international studies. These ideas about what are thought to be right drivers of high educational performance in some countries can be inefficient, or even harmful, when transported to other contexts without understanding their real nature.

This paper is intended to help bust some of the most common myths about Finnish schools. It warns against naïve transfer of education policies from Finland to Australia, or to any other country that does not have social, economic and cultural circumstances similar to Finland's.

Finnish children have school days that are shorter, there are no standardised tests before the end of senior secondary school, and children start primary much older than children in most other countries.

MYTH #1
No homework

Many people who saw Michael Moore's film *Where to Invade Next* (2015) probably remember that, according to that documentary, the biggest lesson from the Finnish schools, which was clearly stated by the then-Minister of Education, was: 'No Homework'. This was in line with some other media coverage about Finnish schools, reporting that school children in Finland rarely have any homework from school, and that teachers and students do not need to worry about standardised tests that would disturb teaching and learning (*Wall Street Journal*, 2008). Many people also have concluded, correctly, that Finnish children have school days that are shorter, there are no standardised tests before the end of senior secondary school, and children start primary much older than children in most other countries. No wonder so many people around the world think there must be something miraculous in Finnish education! What else could explain the success of schools where there is an absence of practically all of those necessary ingredients of schooling – which most other countries have been struggling to get right?

The fact is that homework does exist in Finnish schools, but it often serves a very different purpose than it would in some other countries. In Australia primary school students often sit long hours doing their homework at home, just to learn perseverance and to tolerate the pains of hard work. In Finland homework is always linked to something that is essential to learn in school.

It is true that many primary schools in Finland have minimal or no homework at all in most days. According to the OECD data, lower secondary school students in Finland, according to their own reporting, spend about half of the time their peers in Australia on weekly homework (OECD, 2013; and also see 2019). There is no comparable data about how much students in senior secondary schools spend time studying outside their school hours. Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that many students in Finland, in Australia and in many other countries, suffer from high pressure, caused by school-leaving examinations and the time needed to get ready for these all-important exams.

The overall conclusion is that Finnish schools assign homework for their students, less in primary schools and much more in senior secondary schools. Anyone who believes that Finnish students could achieve relatively high scores in PISA tests without any homework from school is making a major mistake. What these same people should do instead is to take a closer look at how learning independently at home can be a critically important element of success in school.

MYTH #2
Finland is scrapping curriculum subjects

In 2015 the United Kingdom's newspaper *The Independent* reported that Finland was going to replace the teaching of traditional school subjects – such as mathematics, history, and science – with broader, cross-cutting 'topics', as part of a major education reform that was launched in August 2016 (Garner, 2015). This was reported as breaking news around the world: that the world's leading school system would be reforming its schools by removing subjects from the curriculum. Some policymakers wondered whether that was the new trend to follow?

Here is what really happened. The new basic school (Year 1 to 9) National Core Curriculum (NCC) approved by the authorities in 2014 and formally launched in 2016 (National Board of Education, 2016), required that, for all children, the school year will include periods during which they look at broader topics, such as climate change, the European cultures and languages, or solving energy challenges in their community. This would bring in multidisciplinary projects to all schools as a mandatory requirement.

It is important to underline two fundamental peculiarities of the Finnish education system in order to get it right.

First, school education governance is highly decentralised, giving Finland's 311 local governments, or municipalities, a significant amount of freedom to arrange teaching and learning in schools, in response to local circumstances. Finnish government issues legislation, contributes to local funding of schools, and provides a guiding framework for what schools should teach and how.

Second, the NCC 2014 for basic schools is a loose common framework that steers curriculum planning at the level of the municipalities and their schools (National Board of Education, 2016). It leaves local education authorities and schools free to find the best ways to offer strong instruction and support for all children to learn. Therefore, practices vary from school to school and are often customised to local needs and situations.

NCC 2014 is an official document that sets the overall goals of schooling, describes the principles of teaching and learning, and provides the guidelines for special education, wellbeing, support services, and student assessment in schools. The concept of 'phenomenon-based' teaching – a move away from teaching individual subjects and towards interdisciplinary topics – will have a central place in the new NCC 2014.

The term **phenomenon-based teachin**g is similar to problem-based learning and project-based teaching, which have been used in schools all over the world for a long time. It is not a Finnish innovation as people think. Integration of subjects

and a holistic approach to teaching and learning are not new in Finland either. Since the 1980s, Finnish schools have experimented with this approach, and it has been part of the pedagogical culture of Finnish schools since then. This new reform will bring more changes to Finnish lower secondary school subject teachers, who have traditionally worked more on their own subjects rather than together with their peers teaching other subjects.

What began to change in 2016, when NCC 2014 rolled out in Finnish schools, was that basic schools for students aged 7–16 years must have at least one extended period of multidisciplinary, problem-based teaching and learning in their curricula each school year. The length of this period can be determined by schools or agreed upon by local education authorities. Helsinki, the nation's capital and largest local school system, has decided to require at least two such periods each year, which must include all subjects and all students in every school in the city.

Educators in Finland think that schools should teach what young people need in their lives rather than try to bring national test scores back to where they were.

Some schools in Helsinki have already arranged teaching in a cross-disciplinary way; other schools will have two or more periods of a few weeks each dedicated to integrated teaching and learning. In most basic schools in other parts of Finland, students will probably have one 'project' where they study some of their traditional subjects in a holistic manner. Dr Peter Johnson, director of education in the mid-size Finnish city of Kokkola, predicted via Twitter that

> *the end result of this reform will be 300 local variations of the NCC 2014 and 90 per cent of them look a lot like the current situation.*

There are many who find it difficult to understand why Finland's education authorities now insist that all schools must spend more time on integration and problem-based teaching, when Finnish students' test scores have been declining in the most recent PISA tests (OECD, 2016). The answer is simple. Educators in Finland think that schools should teach what young people need in their lives rather than try to bring national test scores back to where they were. The problem in Finnish schools is not that the PISA scores are getting worse but that too many young people think that what they learn in school is disconnected from the real world, and that they have only a little influence in what they study and are supposed to learn in school.

Many people in Finland, among them lots of young people, argue that Finnish youth need more integrated knowledge and skills about real-world issues. Based on the experience of schools that have long used an integrated, problem-based approach, this approach enhances teacher collaboration in schools and makes learning more meaningful to students.

What most stories about Finland's current education reform have failed to cover is the most surprising aspect of the reforms. NCC 2014 states that schools must involve students in the planning of problem-based study periods and that they must have an active role in assessing what they have learned from them. Some teachers in Finland see the NCC reforms as a threat and the wrong way to improve teaching and learning in schools.

There are parents who believe that not all children are ready to take a lead in their own learning. Then there are those

teachers who think that breaking down the dominance of traditional subjects and isolation of teaching is an opportunity to create more fundamental change in schools. How this grand reform in Finland will succeed in meeting its goals remains to be seen.

If it is true that politicians and education authorities in Finland do not expect schools to raise PISA scores back to where they once were, how have they reacted to the downturn in the country's place in global education rankings? The response to a downhill trend in test scores in some countries would be to allocate more time and resources to teaching the subjects that are tested and in which scores have fallen. In some other countries, education ministers and other education leaders have elevated the importance of international tests, including PISA, by insisting that schools taking part in these tests must take them seriously and do their very best. There are, as we have seen, many ways to do that.

Finland, however, has taken none of these steps. Indeed, doing well in PISA has never been a target in Finnish policies. Instead, education policies now focus on enhancing arts, music, and physical education for all students in every school. Since 2016, all schools have been required to include at least 60 minutes of physical activity for all children every day.

In any case, teaching subjects will continue in one way or another in most of Finland's basic schools for now.

MYTH #3
Only the best and the brightest to teach

When my niece was finishing her final year in school, more than anything else she wanted to become a primary school teacher. Despite her genuine interest in teaching, she failed to get into the initial teacher education program at the University of Helsinki. She was smart, played piano and danced; she was good with people. In brief, she was among the

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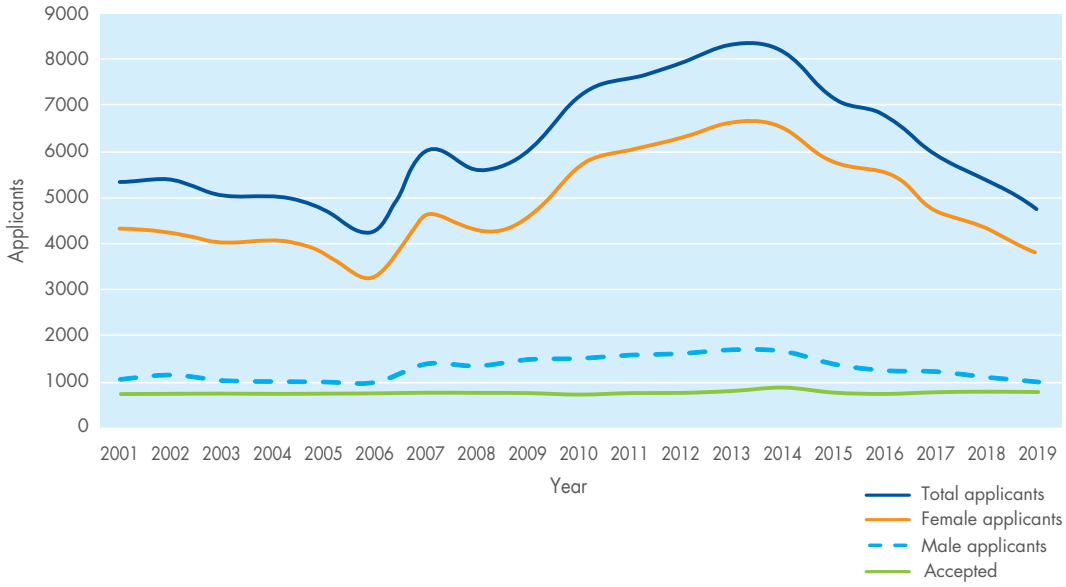
Figure 1. Total applicants and accepted students to Finland's primary school teacher education programs, 2001–2019



best and the brightest in her school. That disappointment – and the perception that she was not good enough to fulfil her dream and become a teacher – broke her heart. Most people in other countries would not understand why.

This is not the end of the story, however. She was not the only one with high grades from school but no success in making the mark required in the entrance test for teacher education. Finnish universities regularly turn away super smart applicants, forcing them to try again or to study something else.

In 2014, over 2,300 applicants competed for the 120 available study slots... One quarter of the accepted students came from the top 20 per cent academic talent and another quarter came from the bottom half!

In fact, Finnish primary school teacher education programs that lead to an advanced, research-based master's degree are so popular among young Finns that until very recently only 1 in 10 applicants has been accepted each year, as shown in Figure 1 (Hammerness et al, 2017). Those lucky ones then study five to six years, do their academic research, and demonstrate in front of an experienced panel that they can independently plan, teach and evaluate what they do in school, before they are allowed to graduate and earn a licence to teach.

Some people believe it is the tough race to become a teacher in Finland that is a key to good teaching and student achievement. Because only 10 per cent of applicants pass the rigorous admission system, the story goes, the secret is to recruit new teachers from the top decile of the available candidate pool. This has led some governments – among them Australia – and organisations to find new ways to attract top students into the teaching profession (Sonnemann and Goss, 2019). Fast-track teacher preparation initiatives such as Teach for America and Teach First have proliferated with the goal of luring high-achieving young university graduates to teach for a few years. Smarter people make better teachers. Or do they?

The key question in busting the myth that Finland has great teachers because it somehow attracts the best and the brightest to teach is this: Who exactly are those admitted to primary school teacher education in Finnish universities?

Let's take a closer look at the distribution of academic profile of the cohort of students who are about to graduate in 2019 at the University of Helsinki. First, however, a few words about how students are selected from a large pool (about 8,300 applicants) of human talent, to the first-year cohort of about 800 students.

The entrance test for primary teacher education has two phases. First, all students must take a paper and pencil test called VAKAVA, which is same for all applicants in the country (see Hammerness et al, 2017 for details). The best performers on that test – three times the number of those admitted – are then invited to the second phase, to take the university's specific aptitude test. At the University of Helsinki, 60 per cent of the 120 students accepted to the program in 2014 were selected based on a combination of their score on the entrance test and their points on the Matriculation Examination (similar to Higher School Certificate in New South Wales) that they have taken to complete their upper-secondary education; 40 per cent of students were awarded a place in the program based solely on their score on the entrance test. In 2014, over 2,300 applicants competed for the 120 available study slots.

Finding out how many of the accepted 120 new students actually were high

achievers in school (or best and brightest), I used the fact that they got an academic score between 1 and 100, based on their Matriculation Examination results. The scholastically best and brightest students – in other words students who did very well in Mother language, Mathematics, Foreign languages, History, Biology, and other subjects of the Matriculation Examination – received 90 points or more.

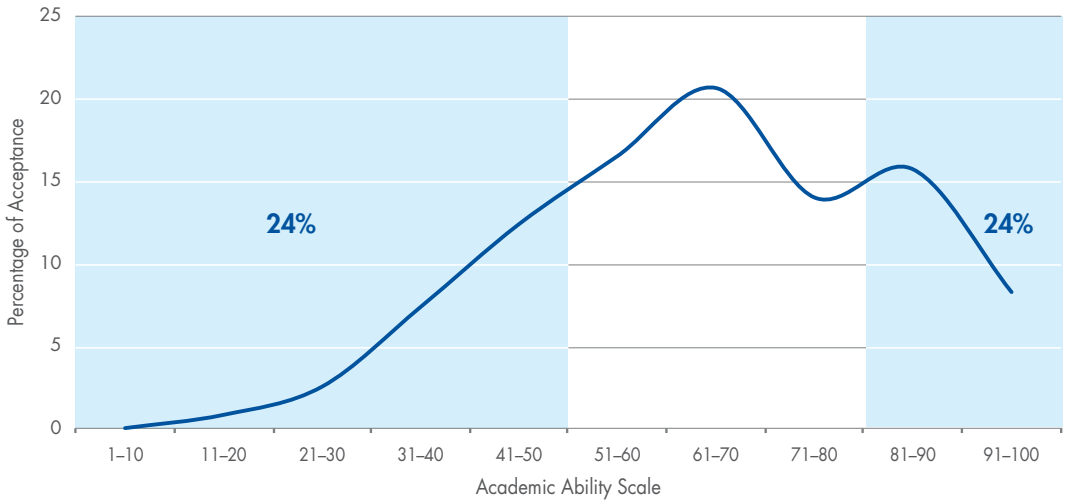
We can now look at the percentages of successful applicants in different deciles of the academic ability scale (Sahlberg, 2018). As shown in Figure 2, only 10 per cent of accepted students are high achievers (or academic elite). One quarter of the accepted students came from the top 20 per cent academic talent and another quarter came from the bottom half! This means that half of the first-year students in primary teacher education program at the University of Helsinki in 2014 came from the 51–80 points range of measured academic ability; in other words, they can be called 'academically average' students.

It is noteworthy that the final selection of students to these initial teacher education programs was not done based on their academic performance but primarily considering other merits, such as communication, teamwork, ability to adapt to new situations, personality and overall 'fit' with the teaching profession.

Therefore, ending up having the initial primary school teacher education student cohort so that it represents a diverse range of academic success and other areas of human talent, clearly shows that it is a myth to believe that only top academic performers are recruited into the teaching profession in Finland. It also raises questions about whether attracting high achievers to teaching really is the best way forward in improving quality of teaching in Australia.

As Figure 1 showed, there has been a notable downturn in application numbers in Finland to initial teacher education, especially in primary teacher education

Figure 2. Distribution of academic profile of students accepted to the University of Helsinki's primary teacher education program in 2014



Source: Sahlberg (2018)

programs. The peak year in terms of total applicants was in 2013, the cohort we examined above, when there were over 8300 applicants nationwide. In 2019, when about 800 new students were admitted by eight research universities to study primary teacher education, this number had dropped more than 40 per cent from that top year. Despite this decline during the last five years, initial teacher education still remains a tough entry for most people in Finland. However, it raises questions about what might be behind this sudden change.

The short answer is: We don't know for sure. There are some speculations, however, and here are some of them.

First, there has been a steady decrease in the age cohorts graduating from Finnish upper secondary schools since past decades. Even when immigration numbers into the country have been growing, there are fewer students in transit from school to higher education in general. These changes probably cannot explain the downward trend in applications, especially when the popularity of primary teacher education has been growing steadily since the beginning of the century.

A second explanation could be that, by 2014, the applicant numbers in initial primary teacher education had become almost abnormally high, given the size of the country. What often happens is that when a nation's economic conditions get worse, the teaching profession becomes more popular. In other words, some of the increases in applicant numbers in the early 2010s may have been due to negative prospects in employment and the economy in Finland, as a consequence of the global financial crisis a few years earlier. It may well be, therefore, that the declining number of applications to initial teacher education since 2014 is simply a return to normal situation.

Third, evidence gathered from schools suggests that, as a result of a tougher economic situation in most of Finland's municipalities, teaching in schools is not always as positive as it used to be. Budget restrictions across the country have increased class sizes, reduced support and classroom assistant personnel, and brought many more students with special educational needs to regular classrooms compared to just a decade ago.

At the same time, in Finland just like in many other countries, the number of children with a wide range of wellbeing issues has skyrocketed during that same timeframe. Recent surveys of teachers' working conditions reveal that although 92 per cent of Finnish teachers think that the positive aspects outweigh the negatives in their work (OECD, 2019), more teachers than before are exhausted in and unhappy with their working conditions. They spend more time helping individual students and less time working with the whole class. As a result, the number of those teachers who have considered leaving the profession has become bigger than in the past.

The fact is that the teaching profession has lost some of its attractiveness among young Finns during recent years. The Finnish media, which are more eager to report bad news in education rather than achievements, have made sure that these negative developments in Finland's education system are shared to the public. No wonder that some of those considering what to do in their lives are thinking twice about becoming teachers!

If Finnish teacher educators thought that teacher quality is positively associated with academic ability, they would have admitted my niece and scores of her peers with superior academic records to become teachers. Indeed, Finnish universities could easily pick the top academic achievers out of the large pool of young talent each year; but they don't. Anyone being a teacher educator long enough knows that teaching talent is hidden across a range of different types of personalities and people. Young athletes, musicians and youth leaders, for example, often have emerging characteristics of being extraordinary teachers without having strong academic records in school. What Finland shows is that rather than recruiting top achievers to teach, it is better to design initial teacher education in a way that will get the best out of young people who have a passion to teach for life.

A good step forward would be to accept that the academically strongest students are not necessarily the best teachers. Successful education systems are more concerned about finding the **right** people, who will then be properly educated, offering them the **right** advanced initial teacher education programs to become lifelong teachers (Ng, 2017). A smarter and cheaper way would be to fix the initial teacher education systems that young people do not see as an attractive and competitive option to be seriously considered. If the bar to studying law were as low as it is in some initial teacher education programs today, the prestige of lawyers and trust in what they do would go to hell in a handbasket.

So what?

No one denies the importance of the teaching professions. Research studies from around the world show how the quality of teaching contributes to learning outcomes in school (Darling-Hammond et al, 2017). It is therefore understandable that teacher quality is often cited as the most important in-school variable influencing student achievement. However, just having better teachers in schools will not automatically improve students' learning outcomes. Lessons from high-performing school systems, including Finland (Sahlberg, 2015), suggest that we must reconsider how we think about teaching as a profession and what is the role of the school in our society. The following three aspects should be considered.

First, teacher education should be more standardised in terms of entry requirements, role of research and practice, and academic credentials, and at the same time, teaching and learning in school should be less standardised. Singapore, Canada and Finland all set high standards for their teacher preparation programs in academic universities. They do not allow fast-track pathways into teaching or alternative training that would not include studying theories of pedagogy and related clinical practice. All these countries set the priority to have strict quality control before anybody will be allowed to teach.

Second, toxic use of test-based account-ability for schools and teachers should be redesigned. Current practices in many countries, which judge the quality of teachers by counting their students' measured achievement only, is in many

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ways inaccurate and unfair. It is inaccurate because most schools' goals are broader than good performance in a few academic subjects. It is unfair because most of the variation of student achievement in standardised tests can be explained by out-of-school factors. In the education systems that score high in international rankings teachers feel that they are empowered by their leaders and other teachers.

Third, changing teacher policies is not enough to make the teaching profession attractive – other school policies must be changed, too. Experiences from those countries that do well in international rankings suggest that teachers should have autonomy in planning their work, freedom to use teaching methods that they know lead to best results, and authority to influence in assessment of the outcomes of their work. Schools should also be trusted in these key areas of the teaching profession.

Oh, and what happened to my niece? She applied again and succeeded. She graduated recently and will be a teacher for life, like most of her university classmates.

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About the Author

Pasi Sahlberg is Professor of Education Policy at the University of New South Wales, Gonski Institute for Education. A Finnish educator and author, he has worked as a schoolteacher, teacher educator, researcher and policy advisor in Finland and has studied education systems, analysed education policies and advised on education reforms around the world. He has written and spoken widely about these topics. His book *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland* won the 2013 Grawemeyer Award for an idea that has potential to change the world. He is also a recipient of the 2012 Education Award in Finland, the 2014 Robert Owen Award in Scotland, the 2016 Lego Prize, and Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Resident Fellowship in 2017. He is a former senior education specialist at the World Bank, a lead education expert at the European Training Foundation, a director general at Finland's Ministry of Education, and a visiting Professor of Practice at Harvard University. His recent books are *Hard Questions on Global Educational Change* (2017), *Empowered Educators in Finland* and *FinnishED Leadership: Four Big, Inexpensive Ideas to Transform Education* (2018), and *Let the Children Play: How More Play Can Save Our Schools and Help Children Thrive* (2019), with William Doyle.

About the Paper

The author discusses two fallacies that have unintended consequences: that the most important single factor in improving the quality of education is teachers; and that the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers. He then focuses on three myths about Finnish schools – that there is no homework; that Finland is scrapping curriculum subjects; and that only the best and brightest are to teach. He argues that interest in international borrowing and lending of educational ideas has sometimes led to wrong conclusions regarding the power of imported solutions from one country to another, expresses caution in this regard, and concludes with recommendations for future policy making.

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