Review of the book: Pasi Sahlberg (2011) Finnish Lessons. What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?

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Abstract. Today's Finnish education started 1968 with a radical reform, when a new comprehensive system of education was introduced, to comprise nine grades, from the age 7 to 15. Since 2000, after the first PISA results, interest in Finnish education started and still, to some extent, continues. Taken all PISA rounds (2000, 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2012), Finland is still among the best 5% of world's educational systems. There are basically three important features, which make Finland an interesting case: high results are combined with high equity, and no high-stakes testing in the basic education. Sahlberg identifies four strategic principles, well accepted in Finland: quarantee equal opportunities to good public education for all; strengthen professionalism of and trust in teachers; steer educational change through enriched information about the process of schooling and smart assessment policies; facilitate network-based school improvement collaboration between schools and non-governmental associations and groups. He also predicts that four themes of change would emerge: development of a personal road map for learning; less classroom-based teaching; development of interpersonal skills and problem solving; engagement and creativity as pointers of success.
Keywords: basic education, education reforms, Finnish educational system, PISA, personal road map for learning, high-stakes testing.

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Dr. Pasi Sahlberg is a Visiting Professor of Practice at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education with a long career as a civil servant in Finland and an educational expert at the World Bank and the EU. He is also a teacher of mathematics (and, indeed, he taught my daughter some time ago). He maintains a very nice home page, where he frequently comments (mostly wisely) on educational issues: Pasi.Salhberg.com.

Finnish Lessons is a very popular book in which Sahlberg presents generalized conclusions from his own studies, many of them published in two high-impact journals: *Journal of Educational Change*,

and *Journal of Educational Policy*. The new edition, *Finnish Lessons 2.0,* will be available in January 2015.

Today's Finnish education system started in 1968 with a radical reform, when a new comprehensive system of education that comprised nine grades (from the ages of 7 to 15) was implemented [Aho, Pitkänen, Sahlberg, 2006]. Aho, Pitkänen and Sahlberg's book, *Policy development and reform principles of basic and secondary education in Finland since* 1968, is an important landmark in discussing and interpreting the present Finnish educational system for international readers. Finns have been surprisingly slow in changing the core elements of the system. Two issues are relevant and need to be considered simultaneously. One is that the outcomes of the Finnish systems turned out to be good from an international perspective, and another is that Finland never introduced high-stakes public assessment of basic education, even if the international landscape, at least on the level of policy and politics, favored league tables and other forms of public assessment.

In 2000, after the first *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) results were published, interest in Finnish education peaked and to some extent still continues. In all previous PISA rounds (2000, 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2012), Finland's education system consistently ranked among the top 5 per cent in the world. There are three important features that make Finland an interesting case (see also [Kupiainen, Hautamäki, Karjalainen, 2009]): high results are combined with high equity, and no high-stakes testing is used in basic education. The Finnish PISA results (up to 2009) are summarized by Sahlberg: high level and high equity. My colleagues and I [Hautamäki et al., 2008] analyzed the 2006 PISA results with the same outcome: very high results in reading, science, and mathematical literacy, and low levels of variation between schools. The same holds true for Nordic countries for several PISA rounds [Hautamäki et al., 2009]. In all PISA rounds there are several high-performing countries besides Finland, including Australia, Canada, China (Hongkong, Shanghai), New Zealand, South Korea, Belgium, Holland, and Switzerland (this is not a full list, but it is relevant to show that there are several good, and diverse, educational systems in the world).

Pasi Sahlberg describes Finland as a leading anti-GERM country. GERM refers to the global educational reform movement. Sahlberg describes GERM in his portal as follows:

> GERM has emerged since the 1980s and has increasingly become adopted as educational reform orthodoxy within many education systems throughout the world, including in the U.S., England, Australia and some transition countries. Tellingly, GERM is often promoted through the interests of international development agencies and private enterprises through their interventions in national education reforms and policy formulation (PasiSahlberg.com) .

Sahlberg concludes, “Lessons from Finland help you to kill 99,9% of GERMs”. Sahlberg presents five features of GERM: standardization of education, focus on core subjects, the search for low-risk ways to reach learning goals, the use of corporate management models, and test-based accountability policies. Again, from his website:

> None of these elements of GERM have been adopted in Finland in the ways that they have within education policies of many other nations, for instance, in the United States and England. This, of course, does not imply that education standards, focus on basic knowledge and skills, or accountability should be avoided in seeking better educational performance. Nor does it suggest that these ideas were completely absent in education development in Finland. But, perhaps, it does imply that a good education system can be created using alternative approaches and policies orthogonal to those commonly found and promoted in global education policy markets. This is why I wrote *Finnish Lessons* (PasiSahlberg.com) .

Finnish Lessons is divided into five parts and outlines his solution to the question of how to describe an educational system. This description could be done differently, but at the moment I do not know any generally accepted way to provide a universal solution to comparative studies in education, which is here at stake. *Education at a Glance* (OECD*)* is one attempt, but it is very descriptive and ahistorical. It seems, however, that socio-historical descriptions are needed for systemic comparisons of educational systems (as proposed by Archer, Meyer, Luhmann, and others). *Finnish Lessons* is one attempt (as is [Aho et al., 2006]).

In the beginning, Finns dreamed of equal educational opportunities. The 1968 system is the true version, but its roots can be traced to 1948, when a committee (lead by Yrjö Ruutu) proposed a comprehensive system. My grandfather was a member of the committee, representing the Workers’ Educational Association, and I was born also in 1948. The educational law was passed 1968, and the new system started to function in Lappland (in northern Finland) in 1972 and reached Helsinki in 1977. This means that the first generation of students with a full 9 years of study in the new comprehensive system graduated in 1986 at the latest, and the first PISA generation (which was studied in 2000) was born in 1985 and was educated in a fully-functional comprehensive system, which was following same national core standards with local adaptations.

“Less is more” is the second chapter in the story as told by Sahlberg. According to the author, there are three paradoxes: 1. Teach less, learn more; 2. Test less, learn more; and 3. Achieve more equity through growing diversity. The first is true, in my mind—teachers tend to teach too much and try to follow their own goals without

really observing the acquisition processes, which are surprisingly slow. The second paradox is relatively easy to accept but needs to be qualified. Finnish students are heavily tested during lessons, but these tests are formative, and we do not have summative, public, nationally organized, standardized high-stakes testing in our comprehensive education system. This is not without problems, but the disadvantages of test-based accountability policies have been exaggerated. The third one is, in my mind, not true—Finland is experiencing real problems adapting to the educational needs of immigrants. The words are nice, but they are not yet fully true. The words are, however, true in relation to Finnish special education, which has been growing in numbers and importance since the introduction of basic education. Today, about 15 per cent of teachers in basic education are special teachers providing support to students and other teachers.

Teachers are the true advantage of Finnish education, not only according to Sahlberg, but also according to generally accepted opinion in Finland (Chapter 3). Teacher education takes place in the faculties of education of full universities and leads to a master's degree in educational sciences [Jakku-Sihvonen, Niemi, 2006]. Even if this claim is generally accepted, it is more than difficult to prove the case of supposed superiority. This may not be even necessary, because it is more important for the nation that teachers are university-educated and generally respected. We need more comparative studies of teacher education in order to learn from different systems of educating teachers.

The competitive welfare state is the subject of the book's fourth and most problematic chapter. Sahlberg's discussion of GERM in this chapter is relevant and least problematic. However, it is still not clear why Finland was able to resist the GERM attack, but the country's very good PISA results since 2000 are definitely one reason. It is also true that social-democratic and agrarian parties, which were the leading social forces in the late 60's for comprehensive education, have been in the government in different combinations and have defended the education system against (relatively weak) proposals for private education and the idea that education is a production system just like any firm. But Sahlberg cites an example which was not even originally very good—Nokia—which is most likely to disappear from *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, just like Nokia disappeared from the phone market. Sahlberg's analysis of the Finnish innovation system as an outcome of the Finnish educational system and in interaction with the Nordic welfare system needs to be complemented with, for example, Reijo Miettinen's book *Innovation, human capabilities and democracy: Towards an enabling welfare state* [2013]. The interrelations of state, education, and economy are very important for self-understanding and in preparing the necessary adjust-

ments and reforms in any educational system. Indeed, I do agree with Sahlberg's major point that welfare, equality, and competitiveness are all interwoven. All nations do need a deeper understanding of the roles of welfare, economic and social equality for economic prosperity, and mediated thru educational models and ideas.

"Is the Future Finnish?"—this is the topic for the last chapter. The most general answer must be negative if the question is meant to refer to the whole globe, but could be, and hopefully is, positive if rephrased to ask whether Finland can continue to fight against GERM and keep with the great ideas of the Finnish Basic Education, Education for All. Sahlberg identifies four strategic principles that are well-accepted in Finland:

1. Guarantee equal opportunities to good public education for all; 2. Strengthen professionalism of and trust in teachers; 3. Steer educational change through enriched information about the process of schooling and smart assessment policies; 4. Facilitate network-based school improvement collaboration between schools and non-governmental associations and groups. He also predicts that four themes of change will emerge: 1. Development of a personal road map for learning; 2. Less classroom-based teaching; 3. Development of interpersonal skills and problem solving; 4. Engagement and creativity as pointers of success.

These principles and tendencies are indeed visible in Finnish educational studies [Sabel et al., 2011] analyses the need for individualized educational "services" and presents the hypothesis that Finnish special education is a good example. The Finnish support system [Thuneberg et al., 2014] has been recently renewed to accommodate new phenomena, which will, most likely, need more personalized road maps, but can be realized within the comprehensive educational system. In addition, the needed engagement with learning from the point of view of the 21st century key competencies are discussed with empirical evidence in Finland [Hautamäki, Kupiainen, 2014; Wustenberg, Stadler, Hautamäki, Greiff, 2014].

However, Finland is also facing a new postmodern and globalized world that will also require changes and reforms in education. Sahlberg's *Finnish Lessons* is a relevant milestone in the discussion of limits and prospects of educational reforms. My personal impression is that we need to learn from the history of different education systems, as presented by Pasi Sahlberg in his book, papers, and blogs, and to adopt a mental framework that is open for change, even if it is slow.

Richard Elmore, who also comes from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, uses a useful phrase in one of his books: "I used to think… and now I think…" I hope that you now think differently of *Finnish Lessons*.

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