

Dr. Mary Wegner
ED650 – Program Planning, Implementation and Evaluation
Reflective Paper on Finnish Educational System

“The key success factor in Finland’s development of a successful knowledge economy with good governance and a respected education system has been its ability to reach broad consensus on most major issues concerning future directions for Finland as a nation”
(Sahlberg, 2015, p. 49).

Autonomy, respect, universally supported, future focused, evolving, personalized, free, productive critical thinkers, and continual improvement are a few descriptors that come to mind when I think about the Finnish educational system. I don’t often find myself wishing I had been born in a different country and a decade later; however, as I learned more about the Finnish educational system, I found myself wondering what I could have accomplished in life if I would have had the benefit of learning in the Finnish educational system since in the 1970s. Please don’t misunderstand and think that I am not happy with my life and my life’s experiences that have helped to make me who I am today; however, if I would have been able to start my adult life with self-confidence and passion instead of having to learn that along the way, then I could have been even more connected to others, even more self-determined, and even more of a contributor than I have been. I wondered what it would be like to live in a country where virtually all citizens understand what is really important in life, and have the means to live a productive and fulfilled existence... and I got very excited.

I wondered if the excitement I am feeling about living in a society that “gets it” is something that Finnish people feel, and if the Finnish were truly happy. My wondering lead me to a 2010 Newsweek *Best Countries* study that identified Finland as the #1 place to live if you wanted, “the very best opportunity to live a healthy, safe, reasonably prosperous, and upwardly mobile life” (Foroohar, 2010, 2nd paragraph). The Newsweek study examined 100 countries from the lens of education, health, quality of life, economic competitiveness, and political environment. The United States ranked 11th in Newsweek’s happiness study. I also learned that the Gallup World Poll and the Organization for Economic Co-Operation

and Development (OECD) offers a *Better Life Index* that is updated annually. The *Better Life Index* is an interactive webpage tool that allows users to, “compare well-being across countries according to the importance you give to 11 topics: community, education, environment, civic engagement, health, housing, income, jobs, life satisfaction, safety and work - life balance” (OECD, n.d., Executive Summary, Better Life Index). When considering all of the 11 factors, Finland ranks in the top sector along with other countries including Australia, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States; however, when you rank solely on education Finland ranks clearly the highest of all countries, and when you rank solely on life satisfaction, Finland again ranks in the top sector along with Denmark, Iceland, Israel, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, and Switzerland. Finland also ranks in the top sector when solely considering the factors of community, environment, and safety. Finland does not rank in the highest sector in a number of categories including housing, income, jobs, civic engagement, health, and work-life balance; however, it appears that Finnish people *are* indeed happy.

This paper is designed to summarize my significant learning about the Finnish educational system. I will examine the Finnish educational system from the vantage points of strengths, challenges, and potential positive impact on education in the United States.

Strengths of the Finnish Educational System

One of the strengths of the Finnish educational system that stood out to me was the informed nature of their educational policies. When the Finnish wanted to climb out of an economic hole, they looked to education as a solution, and it worked. They took a systemic, long-range plan approach, and built an educational program that was thoughtful, insightful, and integrated into other aspects of Finnish life. “Education policies are necessarily intertwined with other social policies, and with the overall political culture of a nation” (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 49). Not only did the Finnish approach to educational policy help to create a world-defining educational system, but the approach also helped to get the country out of the economic challenges they were experiencing at the time and the approach helped to create a society that values education and education professionals while ensuring student success. The policies created showed a genuine desire to improve the country’s

future, and a realization that the solution rested in the youth and the educational system, which allowed for a focus on individual students instead of country status or ranking.

Another strength of the Finnish educational system is their focus on vocational education as a valid and respected option in the public schools. According to the Center on International Education Benchmarking (n.d.), about half (47%) of the students in the Finnish educational system choose the vocational track for their upper secondary school. Students who choose the vocational track can still attend college, and there is a significant on-the-job component to the schooling process. As a result of offering choice to students along with many avenues to specialize and make different choices, Finland benefits from having a very high graduation rate. All of this validates the career portion of a *College and Career* public school focus in a way that the United States seems incapable of achieving.

A focus on good learning and teaching instead of external assessment results is another strength of the Finnish educational system. “Educational policies designed to raise student achievement in Finland have put a strong accent on teaching and learning by encouraging schools to craft optimal learning environments and establish instructional content that will help students reach the general goals of schooling” (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 49). This is not to say that Finnish teachers don’t use formative and summative assessment data to inform instruction. Rather, teachers are encouraged to personalize instruction and gather constant feedback about their student’s progress. According to the Center on International Education Benchmarking (n.d.), when teachers are not instructing students, they focus their time to improve their practice and individualize instruction.

A related strength of the Finnish educational system is that the Matriculation Examination includes questions designed to better understand student’s thought processes, which is consistent with the philosophical underpinnings of their educational system. Specifically, the Matriculation Examination asks students to reflect on social issues and politically sensitive topics in order to see if the student’s possess the ability to employ critical thinking skills thus indicating that they are ready for advanced study. I honor the fact that Finland sees the value of having a citizenry that is able to employ critical thinking skills.

Finally, Finland's desire to be truly student-centered is a strength of the educational program, and perhaps should have been the first strength I noted. "Traditional school organization based on presentation-recitation models of instruction, age grouping, fixed teaching schedules, and the dominance of classroom-based seatwork has been gradually transformed to provide more flexible, open, and interaction-rich learning environments, where an active role for students comes first" (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 33). This student-centered approach is also shown in their personalization of the learning process. Bravo!

Challenges of the Finnish Educational System

As noted by Sahlberg (2015), there is a disconnect between teacher education and being a practicing educator. Specifically, Sahlberg describes this challenge as follows:

During their studies, students develop their impressions of what school life from a teacher's viewpoint may be like. However, graduates do not necessarily acquire experience participating in a community of educators, assuming full responsibility for a classroom of students, or interacting with parents. All these considerations are part of the curriculum, but many licensed graduates discover that there is a chasm between lecture-hall idealism and school reality (p. 119).

This challenge seems especially noteworthy given the student-centered approach a practicing educator is expected to employ in his/her classroom work with students coupled with the learning trajectory that is established for students to transition from their school to career. Obviously, the educational system understands what good education looks like, and it seems more than a little surprising that new teachers are able to jump the chasm described by Sahlberg. That being said, new teachers in Finland do stay in the profession. "Very few primary school teachers leave their work during the first five years, and attrition is much less common than in other countries. An official estimate suggests that only 10 percent to 15 percent of teachers leave the profession during the course of their career" (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 16). Perhaps it is the on-going collaboration amongst teachers designed to improve practice in the classroom that makes a difference in helping new teachers navigate from university to classroom, or perhaps it is an induction/mentoring system that is more widespread than Sahlberg believed it to be, or perhaps it is the autonomy and respect given to teachers that helps close the chasm and keep teachers.

Another challenge of the Finnish educational system is that the entire system seems lost in its own success. They had a plan that started in the 1970s, which has evolved over time through the process of continually searching for and integrating best practices discovered by others and keeping a long-term focus on the value of student success both in school and after graduation. The plan from the 1970s has clearly been accomplished, but where does Finland go next? Collins' wrote about moving from Good to Great, but what model exists to help grow and evolve a system that needs to move from Superb to Superlative? It does not appear that Finland itself does much research to contribute to the body of literature around best practices in education, and Finland is so far above most other countries they may find they have no research on which to base their own improvements. It will be interesting to see how education evolves in Finland, and what we can learn from them over time.

Finally, a related challenge of the Finnish educational system is that they are leading by example; however, very little appears to be available in the literature about the Finnish educational system except what Sahlberg himself has been sharing. There is a need to get the message out to the rest of the world about the Finnish system. Currently, the world has many questions and there are many unknowns. Complex challenges deserve complex answers, and there is no silver bullet another country can just pick up and port from Finland; however, there is a reason that Finnish students succeed and Finnish citizens are happy. It would be good to have more successful and happy citizens throughout the world!

Applied Summary Including Four Elements of Potential Positive Impact on Public Education in the United States

After reading about, researching, and examining the system of education in Finland, I have identified a few potential positive impacts that could help us in the United States:

1. **Universal belief that transformation is a process:** Finland went through an articulated process to improve their educational system. It was intentional, research-based, and universally adopted over the span of generations. For example, Sahlberg (2015) shared that in the 1980s Finland focused on re-thinking the foundations of teaching and learning, the 1990s focused on collaboration and self-regulated change,

and from 2000 on the education reform focused on administrators and efficiency. Given that the reforms began in the 1970s, this progression spans nearly a 50 years where the entire country stayed focused on its goal. In the United States, we seem unable to wait beyond a sound byte before we move on to the next focus or need. Meaningful transformation takes time and patience, and we would benefit from learning this lesson.

2. **Focus on the whole child and the developmental process:** “Since the 1970s, education in Finland had had as strong a focus on music, arts, crafts, social studies, and life skills as there was on reading, mathematics and science” (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 47). Focusing on students instead of an outside assessment seems to help ensure that the focus of the system actually stays on students and their developmental process. Kindergarten in Finland is still the *Garden for Kinders* it once was in the United States, where the focus is on turn-taking habits, play-based learning that brings out the joy in learning, language and communication skills, enhancing a child’s well-being, and increasing individual autonomy and responsibility over time (Sahlberg, 2015). NCLB coupled with the on-going attacks to public education have served to strip away many of the elective classes that keep students in school and that most importantly provide the context to the content learning. In the United States we tend to rely on co-curricular activities to provide connection; however, co-curricular activities leave out some students and fosters a spirit of competition instead of collaboration. We have much to learn from Finland where they focus on ensuring equity of opportunity to all students.
3. **Balance:** The Finnish transformation revolved around teacher input, whereas educators are virtually left out of the transformation process in the United States. Case in point, the reauthorization of ESEA where citizens, including teachers, could provide feedback; however, educators did not make the policies that were adopted. “The Finnish Way is a professional and democratic path to improvement that grows from the bottom, steers from the top, and provides support and pressure from the sides” (p. 153). After the intended/unintended consequences associated with NCLB, educators are understandably worried about what is buried deep within the new ESSA legislation.

4. **National consensus for the common good:** The Finnish Parliament passed comprehensive school reform in 1963 and put politics aside for the sake of moving the country forward. As discussed previously, the policies that were adopted have continued to be the focus for nearly half a century, and the benefits are growing exponentially over time. This isn't the experience in United States. Enough said.

In summary, Finnish children are regarded as a precious natural resource, where equity and equal access to options guide the educational system from policies to interaction with students. Once a teacher for students who need special education supports always a teacher for students who need special education supports, and it was music to my ears to hear that in Finland it is expected that all students will need some educational supports at times in their school career, which limits the need for a student to be labeled or isolated. I appreciated the opportunity to reflect more about the Finnish educational system through the process of writing this analysis paper, and I hope that Finnish students know how lucky they are. Did I mention that education at all levels (pre-school to university) is free!

References

- Center on International Education Benchmarking. (n.d.). Finland. Retrieved from <http://www.ncee.org/programs-affiliates/>
- Foroohar, R. (2010, August 16). The best countries in the world. World. Retrieved from <http://www.newsweek.com/>
- OECD (n.d.). What's the Better Life Index? About. Retrieved from <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/>
- Sahlberg, P. (2011). Developing effective teachers and school leaders: The case of Finland. In Darling-Hammond, L. and Rothman, R. (Eds.), *Teacher and leader effectiveness in high-performing education systems* (pp. 13-22). Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education and Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.
- Sahlberg, P. (2015). *Finnish lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press: New York, NY.