What were the main considerations behind Finland’s development of a world-class education system?

The roots of our current education system date back to the 1960s when it became clear that the country needed better-educated citizens if it wanted to catch up to its western neighbors in prosperity. The twin imperative for education reform was thus both social and economic. The welfare state ideal required that people have equal opportunities and access to basic services, such as education. Economic imperative shifted the focus from industrial skills to knowledge-based skills already seen as a condition for sustained economic progress in Finland.

It is necessary to note upfront that Finland never intended to be a world leader in education. That would not have been an inspiring and engaging vision the country needed to reform its inequitable and traditional educational system to drive necessary economic and social change. The goal was to secure equal educational opportunities for all Finnish children until the end of compulsory schooling at the age of 16, to expand access to further education after compulsory school, and to introduce new curricula that aim at development of the whole child.

To implement this reform in the 1970s, the Finnish educators realized that only a highly educated teaching force would be able to cope with all the challenges that the new school would bring. The key decision was to make teaching a high-status profession by mandating that all teachers earn master’s degrees and do so in substantial programs integrating content, theory, and practice. Primary school teacher education thereby became part of academic education, and students were expected to master scientific knowledge and research methodology as in any other field of higher education.

Soon, teachers began to gain respect. And the popularity of teaching, especially in primary schools, increased. Two decades into this reform, teaching had become the most favored profession among Finnish high school graduates. If teaching had not become such a desired career among
Finnish youth, the history of Finnish education would be written very differently.

Why do you think “The Finnish Way” has grabbed so much attention within the education reform circles, particularly in the U.S.?

“The Finnish Way” of educational change is unique internationally in many ways. Some observers in the United States state that their current education reform policies are not only different from the Finnish policies, but they are orthogonal to them. During the last decade, American schools have been steered by the No Child Left Behind legislation and the Race to the Top program that both adopt similar drivers of educational change. These include externally mandated teaching standards with aligned student testing, stronger accountability for teachers and principals, increasing choice for parents, tightening competition between schools, and seeing technology as a best instructional solution to improvement. These drivers of whole-system improvement in the U.S. present a piecemeal reform strategy that is steered from the top to the bottom and therefore often remains distant to the practitioners in schools.

Many U.S. educators and leaders are looking at the Finnish Way of education reform because it has proved to work over the years and is fundamentally different to what the U.S. educational reformers believe to be the key to better schools. It is interesting that many of the high-performing education systems in the world today rely on similar drivers of change to those employed in Finland. Singapore, Korea, Shanghai, and Canada’s province of Alberta all assume that only by engaging teachers in educational reforms, investing in social capital development within the teaching profession, enhancing equity of education, and improving school leadership will student learning improve. The Finnish education system has progressed steadily since the 1980s because we prepare teachers to improve their students’ learning as well as their own work in collaboration with their colleagues. Indeed, it is interesting that none of the best education systems today has designed their education policies according to the drivers that dominate the U.S. education reform movement today.

Your new book Finnish Lessons is about what other countries can learn from educational change in Finland. What are the major lessons?

Surprisingly, educational change in Finland has been studied more by foreigners than by the Finns themselves. Analysis by Andy Hargreaves, Linda Darling-Hammond, Sam Abrams, and several international journalists have helped us to understand the nature of whole system reform in Finland. Rather than simply listing the obvious elements of educational success in Finland – good teachers, inspiring curricula, and sustainable leadership – I would look for these major lessons beyond those factors of change. Let me mention three of them here.

I think the first lesson that Finland offers to other educational reformers is that whole-system reform can be successful only if it is inspiring to all involved and thereby energizes people to work together for intended change. I often use the thinking of Martin Luther King as an example of an inspiring dream that moves people. Dr. King’s dream was not that his country would have a five-percent annual economic growth rate. That would not have inspired many people. Similarly, making a country number one in PISA rankings does not excite too many educators. The Finnish Dream since the 1960s has been to provide a good public school for every child in the country. This goal inspired many and was a source of energy that was needed to push through necessary political and educational changes.
It was powerful enough to bring different people and political groups to join forces for fulfillment of this dream. The Finnish Dream looks like the vision of John F. Kennedy in 1961: to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. It was challenging, required hard work and political consensus, but in the end, rewarded the entire nation through its outcomes.

Second, some observers have concluded that the secret of Finnish educational success is its well-trained teachers. Yes, it is true that teachers and leaders have higher academic education in Finland than in many other countries. But, that alone is not the way to whole-system change. What is significant in the Finnish approach is that it has focused on improving the professional knowledge and skills of teachers and leaders as a collective group, not only as individuals, which is the common practice in many current reform programs elsewhere. Finnish teachers learn to work together with other teachers. Finnish education system development has systematically focused on improving schools as human organizations. This includes leadership development that is, according to external reviewers, aimed at enhancing shared and distributed models of leadership. In brief, Finnish educational change is driven by building social capital within the system in concert with individual professional growth.

Third, I think the Finnish example of successful transformation of an education system shows other countries what could be the wrong drivers in educational change that Michael Fullan has recently written about. In my book I talk about the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM) that has been much less successful than what Finland, Singapore, or Japan has been able to accomplish with almost the opposite solutions. The best-performing educational systems all have built their change strategies on systemic approaches that rely on collective professional and institutional (or social capital) development, enhanced teaching and learning, and better equity in education. Countries that have been infected by this so-called GERM drive their education reforms by piecemeal changes, accountability, individual capacity building, and technology as keys to turning around unsatisfactory school systems. Fullan has argued that “there is no way that... nationwide goals will be met with the strategies being used” in the ongoing education reform in the U.S. “The Finnish Way” suggests that these are simply wrong drivers for whole-system reforms.

The 2011 AERA theme was “Inciting the Social Imagination: Education Research for the Public Good.” How can research enable us to develop innovative educational changes in our public education system?

This is an important question. First of all, as I see it, educational research and data are often used in a selective manner in policy-making and education reform designs. PISA data are often used to shame and blame public education systems but not in educational change architecture to overcome the designated problems. For example, in the U.S., some education reformers use PISA rankings to make their point that the U.S. public school system is failing but then offer solutions that go against the evidence available in these same studies that show how successful countries have reformed their education systems.

It shows only a little imagination and even less understanding to continue to adopt outdated business models as solutions to education reforms in our public school systems. I had a chance recently to hear the Nobel economist Paul Krugman make the case that most of the market-based ideas in our school systems, like standardization or pay-per-results, are not used in modern businesses anymore to improve productivity. I think we need to rethink a couple of things.
First, we do not necessarily need new schools like charter schools to develop innovative educational changes in our school systems. What we need is more flexibility, enhanced leadership, and more trust in schools and teachers to find ways to make learning inspiring and productive for all.

Then, we should make better use of all those pedagogical innovations that have been developed during the last half a century. I think the real problem is that in education we tend to develop innovation after innovation without really solving the problem of implementation. We know enough about powerful teaching, effective schools, and insightful leadership to make our public school systems work better. Most of this knowledge has been produced, ironically, by U.S. educational researchers from John Dewey forward. Finland has been a successful laboratory of large-scale implementation of these great American educational innovations.

What do you see as one of or the most pressing issue related to educational change today?

Global benchmarking of education systems has radically changed the geography of educational change in the world. Ten years ago, the epicenter of high educational performance and innovation was the Anglo-Saxon part of the world. Now several Asian countries, Canada, and Finland are in the limelight. It is not a great surprise then that most OECD countries today state in their education strategies their aim to be among the top five education nations in the future. This standardization of global race for excellence and its consequences to practice is the most pressing issue of educational change today. The race to the top of the global education rankings inevitably leads to governing education by numbers rather than human values. It creates education strategies that typically focus on raising the bar and narrowing the achievement gaps. Then, (1) clear targets are set for student performance, (2) standardized tests measure students’ and teachers’ performance, (3) achievements are rewarded and often sanctioned, and (4) teacher and school rankings are made public. This has no doubt increased competition, standardized solutions, and market-based models to achieve these goals. At the same time, educational research and news reports show the unintended consequences of this trend: narrowing curricula, increased teaching to tests, demoralized teachers, widespread correction of students’ bubble sheets in Atlanta and D.C. and teacher-authorized cheating across Indonesia. All of this does serious damage to already struggling education systems.

This is an important issue related to educational change because it assumes that the talent development in our modern innovation societies is about improving academic performance and basic skills as we have done in the past. It is ironic, actually, that education reformers call for more parental choice but students’ achievements would be judged using the same academic standardized criteria without any choice for students themselves. I do not see room for much innovation in that. Therefore, I do not think that this would increase flexibility, risk-taking, and creativity in schools that are the key conditions for making schools places where each young individual could explore and discover their own talents.
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