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Reviewed by ANJA FRANKO

*“What is worthy of note is that Finland has been able to upgrade human capital by transforming its education system from mediocre to one of the best international performers in a relatively short period of time.” (Pasi Sahlberg: Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?)*

Many policy makers in different countries nowadays wonder how they can improve their education system in order to make it more efficient, especially when it comes to student achievements. A lot of useful reflections are offered by Pasi Sahlberg in his latest book *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* The title itself implies that this book is not just about boasting; on the contrary, it is obvious that the text includes more than one piece of advice for those who are willing to take it. The author leads us through the history of education in Finland, explaining who and what contributed to its development, how the changes were made and what is yet to be done in order to continue living ‘the Finnish dream’.

As a response to rapid changes in the economy, and to unequal educational opportunities, education reform in Finland commenced with the formation of the new *peruskoulu* – the Finnish word for nine-year comprehensive basic education – which was introduced in 1972. However, this did not attract much public interest until the beginning of the present century, when everything changed.

During the first PISA research in 2000, experts did not expect particularly high performance from Finnish students. Thus when as the results came out even the Finns were surprised, let alone other nations. Finnish 15-year-olds outperformed the majority of students from other participating countries – members of the OECD and partner countries/economies (43 countries took part in this research) – especially in reading, where they took first place. The results of the tests in science and mathematics were also promising, with third and fourth places respectively. In 2003, they even improved on the 2000 results, being ranked first in all three tests. All of these results ultimately convinced everybody that Finland had come up with a plan for the renovation of the school

system that was worth examining more closely. Sahlberg's book is one such examination.

### **Who is this book written for?**

According to the author, the book is for people from different countries all over the world who are taking part in the education system at different levels. Readers who would find it especially useful are probably those who are in positions with the power to change things, for example principals or employees of the Ministry of Education. It is also suitable for teachers, as it is written like a kind of a story, making it a pleasure to read.

Sahlberg himself calls it a "teacher-centred saga". The book is perhaps even more important for people outside the education system – those who form the living conditions in today's societies. As the author explains, Finland could never have achieved such exceptional results without creating the proper circumstances first. This means putting equity above all other values – as he emphasises repeatedly – and making as many adjustments as possible for each individual. In short, one should read this book in order to understand that improvement similar to that made by Finland is not the outcome of a few ideas incorporated in the education system, but is a long term process that requires the modernisation of the everyday social environment and a preparedness for collaboration.

### **Pasi Sahlberg's point of view**

One of the many advantages of this book is that Pasi Sahlberg does not just describe Finland's education system from afar, but lives and breathes it. He has a great deal of experience in teaching, so he understands the functioning of the school from inside. Even more importantly, he took an active part in planning the educational reforms, so he is familiar with the details that he has decided to explain to a circle of readers. Thus the book is especially interesting because it is written from an 'insider's' point of view.

Reading the book one can observe that certain theses are being consistently and convincingly developed. Sahlberg's 'Finnish Lessons' start with some general information about Finland's education system, enabling the reader to become familiar with the subject. After elucidating the topic, the author starts explaining what it took to bring this Nordic state to such a high level in terms of knowledge achievements. He offers us a summary of important past events, but he does not engage in too many details. Instead, he interprets reforms and changes that have influenced the Finnish school system, enabling it to become what it is today. He focuses more on the fields that are well-formed and distinct

from other countries and therefore worthy of special attention.

Pasi Sahlberg tries to present the path that Finland chose to take. His point of view is fresh and gives the impression that it is the objective result of research.

Through experience, Finns have discovered the importance of research when it comes to education. The author of this book is, of course, no exception. In order to present his statements and make things intelligible, he uses a considerable number of various diagrammatic representations and tables. These are easily understood, properly marked and really enlightening for the reader in terms of content. The data are mostly from the OECD PISA database, the TIMSS database and Finnish statistics, and are thus reliable and verifiable.

The author did not overlook the importance of good book structure. The text is divided into segments presented in a logical sequence, enabling the reader to find the information he or she is looking for. Where necessary, parts of chapters are numbered or marked in alphabetical order so that important items stand out. Subtitles are carefully chosen. The language is clear, convincing and suitable for multiple groups of readers.

Pasi Sahlberg is certainly not infatuated with the idea that the Finnish education system is perfect and needs no further remodelling in the future. He does not let anything compromise his judgment – he sees both the positive and the negative. In his opinion, there is always something to be done in order to make progress. The worst thing we can do is rest on present success. As he mentions several times, we must not forget that some of the ideas were borrowed from other nations and then complemented and designed in specific way. Moreover, he is not proposing that any other country ought to follow Finland's concepts, instead clearly stating that we can, and should, all learn from each other. Rather than persuading people to adopt the Finnish way of thinking when making reforms, he encourages others to come up with something new and different that would work for them. There is no single answer to the question: "How can we improve the education system?" and Sahlberg's book is based on this conviction. The author offers some pointers to those who are starting to work on education reforms but he wants them to come up with their own ideas, taking the particularities of their own nation into consideration. He suggests that when doing so they have to keep in mind that the renovation of the whole society is needed, as mentioned above.

Reflecting on unsuccessful education reforms, Sahlberg does not forget to present reasons why certain reform plans were not good, examining what was to blame for their failure to serve their original purpose. He is very realistic and does not rely only on his own opinion but rather considers eloquent proof.

He also compares the “Global Educational Reform Movement” with Finnish education policies, and presents what “others” were doing differently and why Finns were much more successful. This comparison is made in a table where one can easily draw a distinction between better and worse.

Moving on, readers might find the summary of important ideas presented in the last chapter useful. On the other hand, some readers might get the feeling that the author tends slightly to repeat himself, considering these ideas have been rather thoroughly interpreted in previous chapters. However, he is well aware of the fact that creating a good education system is not the same as preserving and maintaining such a system. So in this part of the text he not only writes about Finland’s previous strategies but also presents some of the concerns that might put their education system in jeopardy if not tackled properly. Furthermore, he offers four interesting solutions that may be useful in renovating the existing school system. He believes such renovation is inevitable for Finland in order to remain the shining example that others want to follow.

### **In conclusion...**

The whole book is a pleasure to read and reminds us how it is not always good to follow someone else’s example. Sometimes we need to go our own way, even though it may be hard at the beginning – the results will repay the trouble. Pasi Sahlberg presents the Finnish way towards success and welfare, which is unique and thus even more interesting. He sends out a message of hope: it is possible to make changes for the better even though the circumstances are not ideal.

One thing remains certain: Finland is known to the public as a country with a highly efficient education system and everyone is aware that this cannot be just a coincidence or sheer luck. After reading Sahlberg’s book, it is obvious that the reforms and changes that led to the present situation were well considered and properly introduced. They required (as, of course, they still do) suitable conditions and consistent realisation.