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Review of Pasi Sahlberg's *Finnish Lessons – third edition* published by Teachers' College Press, Columbia in 2021.

***(This review by Áine Hyland was submitted for publication to the NAPD Journal "Leader"* in August 2024).**

I am delighted to review the third edition of Pasi Sahlberg's much-read book, *Finnish Lessons,* albeit belatedly. I am a great admirer of Pasi Sahlberg's work and I was pleased to note that another hero of mine, Howard Gardner, has written the foreword to the book. This edition, written almost four years ago and published in 2021, is much more than a re-print of earlier editions of *Finnish Lessons*. It is a significantly expanded analysis of the Finnish education system, especially its origins and history, and includes an update and critique of Finnish educational developments in the past decade as well as raising some issues about its future.

Sahlberg emphasizes that the book is not intended to convince the reader that Finland has, or ever had, the best education system in the world. He acknowledges that the educational performance of Finnish students is not what it was when the first edition was published in 2011, that equity of education has declined, and that fewer young people read for pleasure in Finland. He also points out that student test scores in literacy and numeracy offer too narrow a view to determine the overall success or failure of an education system. Commenting on the number of education policy-makers from other countries who have visited Finland in the last decades to learn how Finnish education has been so successful, Sahlberg warns that what seems to work in one country won't necessarily work somewhere else. There is no "one-size-fits-all" in education.

Sahlberg is critical of countries which have adopted the characteristics of what he refers to as GERM – the global education reform movement. He describes the common features of GERM in chapter 4, summarising them as increased competition; standardisation; focus on core subjects; test-based accountability and school choice. Some of the striking contrasts between Finnish education and the GERM movement are summarised in the foreword by Howard Gardner. In Finland

- Teaching is a highly valued profession and teacher salaries are on a par with other professionals.
- Teachers remain in the classroom – they don't rush for higher administrative positions and higher pay.
- Teachers think of themselves as researchers and keep up with the findings in the literature.
- Play is actively encouraged, especially among young pupils.
- Ethics and moral are not ignored or ceded to religious authorities.
- Student health and wellbeing are a proper concern of teachers.

The importance of the role of teachers and of respecting the teaching profession is emphasised in the book. Finnish teachers at all levels are required to hold a Masters degree (funded by government), and entry to the teaching profession is vied for by high-achieving students. Teacher salaries are commensurate with those of other professions and teachers are treated as professionals. They have considerable autonomy in what and how they teach. While national curriculum guidelines are provided, teachers are free to interpret these in whatever way they think appropriate for their students. There is no inspectorate and no national externally marked examinations at either pre-school, primary or second level.

It is however notable that the performance of Finnish students in OECD Pisa tests has deteriorated since the first edition of Finnish Lessons was published ten years ago. Sahlberg suggests several reasons for this. First, the Finnish economy was hit hard in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial recession and as a result, funding for education was reduced in many local authority areas. This led to an increase in class size, a reduction in opportunities for teachers to avail of professional development, and a reduction in support services such as classroom assistants. Secondly, a new policy of special education led to pupils with additional needs being taught in mainstream classes without the support that they might previously have had in smaller special classes or special schools. In addition, the number of newcomers in the country without knowledge of the Finnish language increased significantly in the decade. And finally, Sahlberg points to the increased time spent by young people on media and digital technology taking away from reading, physical activity and sleep with detrimental impact on academic pursuits.

While accepting that no country should blindly follow the lead of Finland in its educational policies, this book contains many valuable pointers for policy-makers in this country. Ireland is fortunate that the profession of teaching continues to be highly regarded by the public at large and that the academic level of those applying for places in initial teacher education programmes is among the highest in the world. But while teachers' salaries have traditionally been relatively high in Ireland, their value has been eroded by the increased cost of living, and especially of accommodation, in particular in cities. This has led to teachers being unable to afford to accept teaching posts with a consequent shortage of teachers in some parts of the country. As a result, many newly qualified teachers are emigrating to countries where they will be better paid. A professional two-year postgraduate master's degree in education was introduced a decade ago but government funding was not made available for those wishing to avail of this programme. Since the cost is prohibitive for many students, this has further contributed to a shortage of teachers in some subject areas.

Similarly, introducing a model of curriculum and syllabus design that provides only broad outlines of what teachers are required to teach and students to learn, while at the same time maintaining inspection at all levels and externally assessed national examinations at second level makes little sense. If student learning is to be assessed by an external national examination, in the interests of equity, specific details of the subject syllabi and the modes and techniques of assessment must be provided. Education policy makers in Ireland need to

make up their mind – do they wish to give teachers autonomy in what and how they teach, or do they wish to retain externally marked examinations at the end of both junior and senior cycle? If the latter, then subject syllabi must be clear and unambiguous, as they are in other jurisdictions with externally assessed examinations.

Pasi Sahlberg's book *Finnish Lessons: Third Edition* should be compulsory reading for education policymakers and school leaders everywhere. They would also be well advised to read Sahlberg's 2018 book *FinnishED Leadership* (published in the Corwin Impact Leadership series) which suggests four big, inexpensive ideas to transform education. In a nutshell, the four ideas are

1. Regular recess and physical exercise are crucial for substantial learning.
2. Small data can often be more effective than big data for achieving big changes.
3. Enhancing equity is an essential component of improving quality of educational outcomes.
4. Adhering to myths about Finnish education can divert from the path to school improvement.

And so while there are many lessons to be learned from *Finnish Lessons: Third Edition,* perhaps the most important one for any country is not to slavishly adopted the practices that worked in Finnish education.

Review by Áine Hyland

4th August 2024.