

Preface

After the release of the results of PISA in 2001, the world suddenly noticed the amazing success of Finland, which topped the international charts in reading, mathematics, and science. The world then wanted to know what accounted for the improvement in education in this small European nation. Until now, one book, Pasi Sahlberg's *Finnish Lessons*, told the story of the historical and political transformation of the Finnish school system.

However, we now have Eduardo Andere's insightful account of what was happening inside Finnish classrooms. Andere has spent the past decade traveling the world in search of the best school system, what he has called "the Shangri-la" of education. He visited 18 high-performing nations and studied what they were doing. After careful review, he chose Finland as the best example of schooling for the twenty-first century. Finland has not only high test scores on PISA but is also one of the world's most equitable school systems. It has aimed to make every school a good school and to avoid the extremes of affluence and poverty that are so often reflected in schools.

Andere spent time in schools and classrooms, trying to understand and report the perspectives of principals and teachers. He is not as interested in describing the formal system and policies as he is in understanding what makes it tick, as seen and experienced by practitioners. This gives his book a unique value.

Like Sahlberg, Andere recognizes that a key feature of education in Finland can be summed up in three words: Trust in teachers. This means that highly trained and qualified teachers are the decision makers in their schools. There is no bureaucratic monitoring, no need for standardized tests to assess students or to hold teachers "accountable." Teachers are responsible, and the government does not need to use external testing to measure their quality.

This feature—trust in teachers—creates a teachers' culture. One teacher said to Andere, "We have a good attitude, respect our teaching work and take it seriously. We are passionate about teaching." In other words, teacher professionalism and teacher autonomy go together, not just as words, but as reality.

The Finnish government has determined to make all schools good schools. Parents can choose the school their child attends knowing that it will be a good school. The Finnish government has also dedicated itself to making their schools beautiful.

Some of the best architects have designed schools, and Finns are proud of their beautiful schools. Schools are often recognized as the most prominent buildings in villages, towns, and cities. This reflects the high cultural priority that Finns attach to schooling their children well.

Learning is student-centered. Children in the early years are not prepared to take tests; play is emphasized in preschool and in the earliest grades, not academic learning. Cooperative learning is emphasized even in high school.

Also notable is what Finland does not have, in contrast to the USA and some other nations: There are no vouchers, Virtually no publicly-funded private schools, and no “Teach for Finland.” There is no competition among schools for test scores because students do not take standardized tests.

As one often finds in every nation, the schools reflect the cultural values of the society. In Finland, according to principals and teachers, school and home together emphasize sociability, honesty, trust, and kindness. Finnish schools want their students to feel secure as learners and not to feel the artificial stress induced by standardized testing.

As Eduardo Andere reports in this book, they seem to have reached their goals. Their students perform well on international tests, where there are no stakes attached, even though they never encounter such tests in their daily school life. Finland indeed offers an attractive model for the world of the twenty-first century: Not dog-eat-dog competition and survival of the fittest, but a school system where the needs of developing children are recognized and addressed by well-prepared teachers and principals.

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Diane Ravitch

Preface and Acknowledgements: What I Learned and Whom I Learned It from

Jouni Välijärvi, prestigious professor and researcher at the University of Jyväskylä, is the person who opened the doors of Finland for the first time back in March 2004. Jouni responded to my requests for support in order to locate high performing schools all around Finland. Now I know that trust is a great value of the Finnish culture, and Jouni, after reading my first proposal, trusted me. In addition, Jouni organized detailed agendas for my frequent visits to schools. With Jouni, I learned about the dichotomy of life for Finnish people where on weekdays they live in modern houses or apartment buildings and on weekends or vacation they travel to their bucolic Summer cottages with minimum modern facilities and both lots of forests and lakes and nature around them. Finnish people have a very poetic and respectful relationship with nature and the environment.

Maarit Rossi, not only opened the doors of her school and the secrets of the Finnish school education but also invited me, on different occasions, to her dream house on the shores of a calm sea in Southern Finland. Maarit and her husband Jukka Rossi, have been my hosts and today, are close friends. With them, in numerous times, we have shared stories of education and life. At the shore by her house, we fished, walked on a frozen sea, and were witnesses to the magnificent sunsets of Finland. Maarit Rossi is co-author of a nine-book series for teaching and learning mathematics at the lower secondary level. When I saw her work several years ago, I told her “this is a PISA-like approach”. She then decided to take their work to the Web under the name of Paths to Math.

Irmeli Halinen, an official at the National Education Council of Finland, and despite her busy work schedule, has awarded several interviews and has also facilitated me access to schools and readings about education policy and success. Irmeli, as it happened with Jouni and Maarit, clarified constant doubts and answered many questions. With Irmeli, I learned that Finnish authorities have a big respect for autonomy of municipalities, principals, and teachers in the daily life of schools. I also learned about the philosophy behind the famous Finnish curriculums and their most recent reforms and additions.

Hannele Niemi, distinguished professor and researcher of the University of Helsinki also has been a guide and mentor in my constant inquiries on education in Finland. With her, I sustained several interviews in Helsinki and exchanged comments on the school education of her beautiful country. Her husband Seppo Niemi and

former school rehtori, kindly read and commented on a much earlier Spanish written manuscript of school education in Finland; my gratitude to Seppo for his time and suggestions. With Hannele and Seppo, I learned that there is not only social integration in schools, but also in neighborhoods. On her beautiful home surroundings Hannele and Seppo pointed out that many people from different professional or work backgrounds, live on the same block, most of them built by hand from scratch by the owners. Hannele and Seppo built their homey house with their own hands. Here, I learned the importance of a comprehensive school education where children from a very early age take wood and metal workshop classes in the school and are surrounded by a family learning environment where parents and older siblings are frequently building houses, rooms, and furniture or fixing electricity and water installations.

Elisa Heimovaara of the University of Jyväskylä awarded me two long interviews and provided me with lots of reading materials, both statistical and bibliographic, that allowed me to get a deeper understanding of education in Finland, and more specifically about the famous process for the selection and training of teachers. Elisa also elaborated some agendas of visits with various experts, principals, and teachers linked with the prestigious University of Jyväskylä. I learned with Elisa about the transition towards a certification and compatibility in higher education studies in Europe, the so-called “Bologna Process”. In essence the initial training of teachers remained the same but the program is now clearly divided in two sections: undergraduate and graduate. Teachers-to-be are carefully selected on a very demanding admission process and then are highly trained in theory and practice for nearly 5 years of full-time university studies.

My gratitude also goes to Paula Alatalo, a young and energetic principal of a comprehensive school and chief of the municipal education services, at the time, in the municipality of Enontekiö. She opened up her school for a full day of meetings, observations, and interviews. Since my visit, she has remained in communication with me to clarify doubts and improve my knowledge of education in northern Finland and Lapland. From Paula Alatalo and her family, I learned that Finnish people stay working for many years after retirement. Her father-in-law, a 75-year-old man, and former teacher, is not only a luthier of exquisite violins and cellos, but also a proud owner of a huge forest where he can cut four or five pine trees in less than one hour, carry them on a snow motorcycle, and pile them as logs to use at home or sell in the market. Both he and his son, a luthier too, have built their own house. Here, I also learned, as with many other Finnish friends, that the sauna tradition is a cultural habit in their daily life.

Martti Hellström, director and educational and pedagogical leader, has met with me on three occasions in three different full-day visits to his famous Aurora Koulu. From Martti Hellström, I learned the total commitment and motivation of Finnish teachers and principals who make of their education career a life project. Martti has facilitated materials and concepts to deepen my understanding of creative learning and school and classroom learning environments, as a means to nurture the students’ cognitive and emotional skills. With their special school curriculum and timetabling, Aurora taught me the meaning of school and teacher autonomy in Finland.

Leena Sipponen is the rehtori of a wonderful and very modern school. She, her assistant principal Pirjo Holm, and many teachers, have given me access to the school at three different times, for observation, interviews, and picture taking, including of course, lunch, as happened with most of the schools I have visited in Finland. Aurinkolahti is an impressive school. It is for students with a special interest in technology. Here, I learned how teachers work in professional learning communities for a variety of school projects. They merge technology, art, and design in very innovative ways. The school is nestled by a community park and a complex of apartment buildings that blend the school and the neighborhood into a single compound.

Arja Alaraudanjoki gave me access to the Finnish school farthest to the north beyond the arctic circle and very near to the Barents Sea and Arctic Ocean. Until early 2013, we kept in touch for clarifications and explanations of deep Sami-culture schooling. Sadly, she died with her husband on a snow-motorcycle accident early this year. She was not only the principal of her school and of other nearby schools, but also chief of education services in the municipality of Utsjoki. She frequently updated me with news about the beautiful landscape of this remote part of Suomi. Here, I learned the concept of equality of education in Finland. No matter how far one is from the large metropolitan cities, how rural, small or isolated the school is, the high quality of the teachers and principals and the education services and facilities is very homogeneous. The Finnish have a very solid ground with high standards of educational services and a supportive local community. This creates, besides the school-learning environment, an encompassing sociocultural learning environment.

Asko Peuraniemi, director of a school hospital in Rovaniemi, was key along with Maarit for the organization of several agendas of visits to schools in northern Finland. Driving north from Ivalo and Inari, Asko and I shared a spectacular view of the Finnish Tundra. Asko introduced me to Arja from Utsjoki. Back in Rovaniemi where Asko's hospital school is, I learned how the Finnish education system runs a web of school hospitals to cover all areas of the country. I was able to take over a small class of around eight students most of them under a special hospital's or physician's care. Again, education services and quality, similar to any other school in Finland, is provided for all children including the ones under medical attention.

Kirsti Savikko, director of a charming elementary school in Turku, not only organized an agenda of visits to several schools in the city, but also showed me a leadership style where decisions are shared and taken with the school teachers. She managed to get the permission from the local education authorities for me to stay in an apartment for visiting teachers in the compounds of an upper secondary school during my 2009 visit to this beautiful and historic city, the former capital of Finland.

Mika Tuononen is a kind and knowledgeable expert in the Office of Statistics of Finland. Mika not only granted me two extensive interviews in two different visits, but guided me and helped me to get statistical information of diverse nature on education, schools and teachers. I learned about the best ways to get information about Finnish education on the Office's site and through Internet. With his introduction, I was able to talk to two more experts who shared important time series datasets about schools and the economic wellbeing of Finland from the early 1900s.

Thanks also to Tanja Talvensalo, a teacher and preschool and primary education expert who shared with me knowledge of preschool class connection between pupils and their teachers. I was impressed by her point of view of teaching as learning, and the way Finnish preschool teachers understand the value of early education, more in terms of developing social and emotional skills than on the acquisition of formal cognitive knowledge as many schools or education systems around the world insist on doing.

Thanks to Marjut Tenkanen, the principal and Tilly Kajestski a special education teacher and teacher of English who opened me the doors of their magnificent, beautiful and recently built school Hösmärinpuisto Koulu. This is a school for initial, preschool and first and second grades of primary education children. It is an education palace for very young pupils. I have not seen such a beautiful school and display of facilities for the education of such young children in all my visits to schools for young children around the world. Here, I learned the value that Finnish adults place on the education of Finnish small children. Everything, from the teachers' teachings to the premises, the architectural design, the furniture, the open spaces, the naturally lighted hallways and classrooms, and the huge interior patio, are all thought for the little ones, creating a wonderful learning environment or learning cocoon.

Tuomo Lähdeniemi is a business consultant with a special interest in educational authorities and schools. He has a deep knowledge of culture, business, and schools. He knows everyone and knows how to connect the tools of information technology to the daily work of teachers and principals. Kirsty, Tuomo, and Maarit have done an appreciable circle of friendship that has helped me to know the secrets of the beautiful Finnish culture. My gratitude also to Jaana Puranen, Ulla Muraja, and her husband Asko Muralla, who got me interviews in their schools and welcomed me to their wonderful households in Kuusamo and Hetta.

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I have not included all the teachers, principals, students, or experts I have interviewed in my seven visits to Finland; if I did the list would be much longer. However, that is why I have dedicated this book to all the people I interviewed and met. My deep apologies if I missed a specific mention to persons that I should have named. My apologies in advance for involuntary misspellings of personal names and places.

My deep appreciation also go to Walter and Anita Roggeman from Flandes Belgium, who have sheltered me on my way to or from Finland to answer comparative questions between Flanders and Finland, with very different systems of education and teachers training programs and yet high students' performance in both countries. Walter, an experienced principal and education, has patiently answered numerous questions about education in Flanders.

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Creating Learning Environments

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