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Introduction: Yes, We Can (Learn from One Another)

During the next 10 years about 1.2 billion young 15-to-30-year-olds will be entering the job market and with the means now at our disposal about 300 million will get a job. What will we offer these young, about a billion of them? I think this is one of the greatest challenges if we want to achieve peaceful development and hope for these young.

—Martti Ahtisaari
(former President of Finland, 1994–2000,
and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate)

It has become clear everywhere that the schools we have today will not be able to provide opportunities to learn what is necessary in the future. The demand for better quality teaching and learning, and more equitable and efficient education is universal. Indeed, educational systems are facing a twin challenge: how to change schools so that students may learn new types of knowledge and skills required in a unpredictably changing knowledge world, and how to make that new learning possible for all young people regardless of their socioeconomic conditions. To be successful with these challenges is both a moral and economic imperative for our societies and their leaders. It is a moral obligation because each person's well-being and ultimately happiness arises from knowledge, skills, and worldviews that good education provides. It is also an economic imperative because the wealth of nations depends as never before on know-how. The aftermath of the recent global economic crisis is showing how unemployed young people are becoming hopeless to the extent that is bringing governments down. Many of these young people lack relevant education and training that would help them to help themselves.

This book is about Finland and how the Finns transformed their educational system from mediocre in the 1980s to one of the models of excellence today. International indicators show that Finland has one of the most educated citizenries in the world, provides educational opportunities in an egalitarian manner, and makes efficient use of resources. Finnish education has recently attracted attention from

many international scholars. Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) writes extensively about it in her book, *The Flat World and Education*. Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley (2009) chose Finland as an example of a nation that has successfully transformed its education system in their book, *The Fourth Way*. A chapter on Finnish education has become an integral part of any international handbook or volume that reports contemporary thinking and practice in the field. International development agencies, consulting firms, and media houses refer to Finland as a good model and “a witness” of successful transformation of public education.¹ Monographs on Finnish school and teachers have been published in China, Korea, Japan, France, Slovenia, and Germany, just to mention a few countries. This book is a comprehensive description of educational change in Finland written by a native Finn from an international perspective.

In leading the way toward educational reform in Finland in the early 1990s, Dr. Vilho Hirvi, then Director General of the National Board of Education, said that “an educated nation cannot be created by force.” He acknowledged that teachers and students must be heard, and that the way forward called for active collaboration. In Finland, teachers and students were insisting on more flexibility and freedom in deciding how to design instruction, what to study, and when. “We are creating a new culture of education and there is no way back,” Hirvi said to his staff at the National Board of Education. Basic to this new culture has been the cultivation of trust between education authorities and schools. Such trust, as we have witnessed, makes reform that is not only sustainable but also owned by the teachers who implement it.

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

At the beginning of the 1990s, education in Finland was nothing special in international terms. All young Finns attended school regularly, the school network was wide and dense, secondary education was accessible for all Finns, and higher education was an option for an increasing number of upper secondary school graduates. However, the performance of Finnish students on international assessments was close to overall averages, except in reading, where Finnish students did better than most of their peers in other countries. The unexpected and jarring recession of that time period brought Finland to the edge of a financial breakdown. Bold and immediate measures were necessary to fix national fiscal imbalances and revive the foreign trade that disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990. Nokia, the main global industrial brand of Finland, became a critical engine in boosting Finland from the country’s biggest economic dip since World War II. Another Finnish brand, *peruskoulu*, or the 9-year comprehensive basic school, was the other key player in this turnaround of the Finnish economy and society. Interestingly, both Nokia and the Finnish public educational system have their

origins in the same time period in Finnish history: the golden years of building the Finnish national identity in the mid-19th century, as will be described in Chapter 4 of this book.

There are countries around the world where education leaders find their own educational systems in a situation very similar to that of Finland in 1990. The global economic downturn is hitting many schools, universities, and entire education systems hard. Take Ireland, Greece, England, or the United States—student achievement is not anywhere close to what it should be in knowledge-based economies where productivity and innovation are necessary conditions for competitiveness. Students seem to find teaching offered in schools and universities increasingly boring and irrelevant to their needs in a rapidly changing world. The story of educational change in Finland in this book brings hope to all those worried about whether improving their educational systems is at all possible. It also provides food for thought to those who look for ways to adjust education policies to the realities of economic recovery. The lessons from Finland should be refreshing because they depart from the ideas commonly presented in books or journals on educational development. Moreover, these lessons show that systemic improvement is indeed possible if only policies and strategies are designed in smart and sustainable ways.

While these lessons hold great promise, they call for patience. In this age of immediate results, education requires a different mindset. Reforming schools is a complex and slow process. To rush this process is to ruin it. The story of Finland's educational transformation makes this clear. Steps must be grounded in research and implemented in collaboration by academics, policy makers, principals, and teachers.

This book is about how such a process evolved in Finland since World War II. It is the first book written for international readers that tells the story of how Finland created a system praised as much for its equity as for its high quality. Many of the world's great newspapers and broadcast services—the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Times of London*, *Le Monde*, *El Pais*, *National Public Radio*, *NBC*, *Deutsche Welle*, and *BBC*—have covered this Finnish educational miracle. Thousands of official delegations have visited Finnish authorities, schools, and communities to learn about what drives excellence in education. This story, however, has till now not received the book-length treatment necessary for enumerating, linking, and explaining the many players, institutions, and impersonal forces involved.

My approach in this book is both personal and academic. It is personal because of my intimate relationship with education in Finland. I was born in northern Finland and raised in a village primary school, as both of my parents were teachers at that school. Most of my childhood memories are in one way or another linked to school. I had the privilege of looking beyond the secrets of the classroom after everybody else was gone and I found that world rich. It was my home and an enchanted one. It is perhaps no surprise then that I went on to become a teacher. My first position was at a junior high school in Helsinki. I

CHAPTER 1

The Finnish Dream: Equal Educational Opportunities

God mend us! The fact is that we don't even know the first letter of the alphabet, and that knowing how to read is the first duty of every Christian citizen. The power of law, of church law, may force us to it. And you know what kind of contraption the State has watching, eager to snap us up in its jaws if we don't obediently learn to read. The stocks are waiting for us, my brothers, the black stocks; their cruel jaws gaping wide like those of a black bear. The provost has threatened us with those hell his pincers, and he is bound to carry out his threat unless he sees us eagerly studying every day.

—Aleksis Kivi, *Seven Brothers* (1870/2005)

The story of Finland is a story of survival. It is eloquently captured by Aleksis Kivi in the first Finnish novel, *Seven Brothers*, which was first published in 1870. It is a story of orphan brothers who realize that becoming literate is the key to happiness and a good life. Since those days, reading has been an integral part of Finnish culture. Education has served as the main strategy for building a literate society and a nation that is today known by the world for its cultural and technological achievements. Therefore, *Seven Brothers* belongs to the list of core texts in most Finnish schools today.

Being a relatively small nation situated between much larger powers of the East and the West has taught Finns to accept existing realities and take chances with available opportunities. Diplomacy, cooperation, problem-solving, and seeking consensus have thus become hallmarks of contemporary Finnish culture. These traits all play an important part also in building an educational system that has enjoyed global attention due to its equitable distribution of good teaching and learning throughout the nation.

This chapter describes how Finland has progressed from being a poor, agrarian, and only modestly educated nation to a modern knowledge-based society with a high-performing education system and world-class innovation environment. Expanding education according to the principle that good education should be accessible to all Finnish children, from early childhood education all the way to the highest academic degrees, has been a long-term ideal in Finnish society. This

chapter first provides a historic and political context for realization of this Finnish Dream. It then describes the evolution of the unified comprehensive basic school, or *peruskoulu* as it is called in Finnish, and some principles of upper secondary education that are an important part of Finnish educational success.¹ Present structures and policies of the Finnish education system are briefly outlined at the end of the chapter.

POST-WAR FINLAND

War poses among the most serious of imaginable crises for any democratic nation. Except for a short period of cease-fire, Finland was at war from December 1939 to spring 1945. The cost of war for that young, independent democracy with a population of less than 4 million was enormous: 90,000 dead and 60,000 permanently injured. In addition, 25,000 were widowed, and 50,000 children were orphaned. A peace treaty with the Soviet Union was signed in Moscow on September 19, 1944, but military campaigns to remove German troops from Finland continued until April 1945. The conditions accepted by the Finns were severe. Finland had to hand over 12% of its territory to the Soviets and to relocate 450,000 people—11% of Finland's total population. The Finnish concessions to the Soviets were estimated to reach 7% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). A peninsula near Helsinki had to be rented to the Soviet army as a military base, political prisoners had to be released, and wartime leaders were judged in war tribunals. Several political associations were prohibited, and the communist party was established as a legal Finnish political entity. These concessions led to such fundamental political, cultural, and economic changes in Finland that some have identified the post-war era as the emergence of a "Second Republic."²

Most important, Finland had fought for its freedom and survived. External threats experienced during and after World War II united Finns, who still felt the wounds of the previous 1918 civil war. The post-World War II era was one of political instability and economic transformation, but it also gave rise to new social ideas and social policies—in particular the idea of equal educational opportunities. It is difficult to understand why education has become one of the trademarks of Finland without examining these post-World War II political and social developments. Even among Finns there are those who argue that the search for key success factors in the Finnish educational system has to extend much earlier than 1970, a year often recognized as an historical milestone in Finnish education for reasons explained later in this chapter.

History is often easier to understand when it is segmented into periods or phases of development, and the recent history of Finland is no exception to this strategy. Although there are many ways to recount Finland's history depending on the purposes and perspectives of its authors, in this case it is helpful to illustrate

congruencies between the development of Finland's education system, and three stages of economic development following World War II:

- enhancing equal opportunities for education by way of transition from a northern agricultural nation to an industrialized society (1945–1970)
- creating a public comprehensive school system by way of a Nordic welfare society with a growing service sector and increasing levels of technology and technological innovation (1965–1990)
- improving the quality of basic education and expanding higher education in keeping with Finland's new identity as a high-tech knowledge-based economy (1985–present) (Sahlberg, 2010a).

The 1950s were already a time of rapid changes to Finland's economic structure, but the 1960s have been characterized as phenomenal by international standards (Routti & Ylä-Anttila, 2006; Aho, Pitkänen, & Sahlberg, 2006). The decade of the 1960s saw Finnish society, in more general terms, relinquish many of its old values, and traditional Finnish institutions began to transform. Public services—especially basic education—were among the most visible sites of change. When the time for decisive change arrived, its speed and thoroughness took many Finns by surprise.

The end of World War II prompted such radical changes to Finnish political, social, and economic structures that immediate changes to education and other social institutions were required. Indeed, education soon became the main vehicle of social and economic transformation in the post-war era. In 1950, educational opportunities in Finland were unequal in the sense that only those living in towns or larger municipalities had access to grammar or middle schools. Most young people left school after 6 or 7 years of formal basic education. Where private grammar schools were available, pupils could apply to enroll in them after 4, 5, or 6 years of state-run basic school, but such opportunities were limited. In 1950, for example, just 27% of 11-year-old Finns enrolled in grammar schools consisting of 5-year middle school and 3-year high-school. An alternative educational path after the compulsory 7 years of basic education was 2 or 3 years of study in one of the so-called *civic schools*, offered by most Finnish municipalities. This basic education could be followed by vocational training and technical education, but only in larger municipalities and towns that housed these institutions.

In 1950, there were 338 grammar schools offering further educational opportunities after the 6-year basic school in Finland (Kiuasmaa, 1982). The Finnish state operated 103 of these schools, and municipalities ran 18. The remaining 217 grammar schools, about two-thirds of the total, were governed by private citizens or associations. The major burden of the rapid expansion of education following basic schooling was absorbed by these private schools. A significant social innovation in 1950 was issuance of legislation that guaranteed state subsidies to private schools, and simultaneously extended the government's control over these