

Finnish Lessons

2.0

WHAT CAN THE WORLD LEARN FROM
EDUCATIONAL CHANGE IN FINLAND?

SECOND EDITION

PASI SAHLBERG

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The Finnish Dream

A Good School for All

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 hellish pincers, and he is bound to carry out his threat unless he sees us eagerly studying every day.

—Aleksis Kivi, *Seven Brothers*

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 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 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 a world-class innovation environment. Expanding access to education from early childhood education all the way to the highest academic degrees and adult learning 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.

POSTWAR FINLAND

War ranks among the most serious of imaginable crises for any democratic nation. Except for a short period of ceasefire, Finland was at war from December 1939 to the spring of 1945. The cost of war for that young, independent democracy with a population of fewer 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 that the Finns accepted were severe. Finland had to hand over 12% of its territory to the Soviets and had 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 postwar 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 a 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 (Aho, Pitkänen, & Sahlberg, 2006; Dahlman, Routti, & Ylä-Anttila, 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 postwar 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 schools and 3-year high schools. 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 schools. This change made it possible to respond to the public's growing interest in education by opening new private schools, as their financial risks were diminished through state funding.

In the early years after Finland's independence, teaching in primary schools was formal, teacher-centered, and focused more on moral than cognitive development. Although pedagogical ideas aimed at social gains and more holistic interpersonal development were known in Finland as early as the 1930s, school education was not greatly influenced by them (Koskeniemi, 1944). Three dominant themes in Finnish national education policy between 1945 and 1970 would come to change this traditional model:

- The structure of the education system would provide access to better and more education for all.
- The form and content of curricula would focus on development of individual, holistic personalities of children.
- Teacher education would be modernized to respond to needs arising from these developments. The future dream of Finland was built on knowledge and skills; thus, education was seen as a foundation for establishing the future (Aho, Pitkänen, & Sahlberg, 2006).

Finland's economic structure in 1950, comparable to Sweden's economy in 1910, was in transition. Key industries were shifting from farming and small business to industrial and technological production. The new political environment in the postwar era had also activated working-class families, who insisted that their children should have opportunities to benefit from extended public education. Consequently, a model for comprehensive schools offering universal access and a unified curriculum, first proposed in the 1920s, was revived and entered education policy discussions soon after the end of World War II. It was clear that to become a recognized member of the community of Western democracies and market economies, Finland needed a better-educated population. This was a vision for the entire nation.

UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION

The first 2 decades after World War II were politically turbulent in Finland. The Communist Party returned to the main stage of daily politics in the first postwar elections in 1944, and identified education as one of its primary strategies for building a Finnish socialist society. In the 1948 elections, three political parties received nearly equal seats in the Finnish national Parliament: the Social Democratic Party (50 seats), the Agrarian Centre Party (49 seats), and the Communist Party (49 seats). The rebuilding of Finland began; political consensus was a precondition for reforms, including renewing the Finnish educational system. The Conservative Party increased its popularity in the 1950s and became a fourth political force to be reckoned with in Finnish parliamentary negotiations. The political education committees played particularly important roles as the groundwork for comprehensive basic schooling for all Finnish students was laid, and the vision finally realized in 1970.

Three politically oriented education committees are particularly worth mentioning. First, in June 1945, the government established the Primary School Curriculum Committee. The secretary of that committee was Matti Koskenniemi (1908–2001), who had, a few years earlier, written a seminal book on primary school didactics (Koskenniemi, 1944). Through his contributions, perspectives on curriculum in Finland shifted from focusing on syllabi (the German term *lehrplan*) to describing educational objectives, process of education, and evaluation. These reforms were the first to modernize the Finnish curriculum by international standards, and they still resonate in contemporary curriculum thinking.

There are several reasons why this committee holds a central place in the history of Finnish education. First, the members devoted special attention to formulating new objectives for education, thereby deviating from German tradition in Finnish education. The committee put forth the idea that school should aim at educating young people to realize themselves as holistic individuals, possessing intrinsic motivation for further education. The content of education that would lead to this general aim was grouped into five thematic, cross-curricular areas, which later became a model for the Comprehensive School Curriculum Committee in 1970.

Second, curriculum reform was grounded in empirical studies conducted in 300 field schools involving 1,000 teachers. In this way, research became part of education policymaking. Third, and as a corollary of the previous two reasons, the quality of the

committee's work was regarded as exceptionally high. The Final Memorandum of the committee, published in 1952, has merit in its systematic formulation of educational objectives, broad child-centered perspective, modernized presentation and richness of educational content, and emphasis on the primacy of social cohesion as one important goal in education. Significant milestones in the postwar history of Finland were realized in 1952: hosting the Summer Olympics in Helsinki, the coronation of Miss Finland Armi Kuusela as the first-ever Miss Universe, and completion of heavy reparations to the Soviet Union. It is appropriate, also, to include in Finland's 1952 milestones the new, internationally comparable curriculum for Finland's primary school system, which paved the way to educational success some half a century later.

A second committee of significance, the Education System Committee, launched its work in 1946 to establish regulations for compulsory education and a common framework of principles for determining how different parts of the education system should be interlinked. The committee included representatives of all of the leading political parties of that time and was chaired by the National Board of Education's director general, Yrjö Ruutu, ally of the Finnish Communist Party. Less than 2 years after commencing its work, this committee proposed that the foundation of the Finnish educational system should be an 8-year compulsory basic school that would be common to all children regardless of their socioeconomic situation. The committee advised that this school system ought to avoid tracking more able students to "academic" subjects and to "vocational" studies those preferring to learn manual skills, as was done in the then-current parallel education system.

However, the committee retained the standard that only those students who had learned foreign languages during basic school would be allowed to enter upper-secondary school or *gymnasium*—which represented the only pathway to higher education. Although the idea of comprehensive school was clearly formulated, it was not acted upon due to bitter criticism from universities and the Grammar School Teachers' Union. However, the committee's proposal stimulated further debate within Finnish society about social justice and equal educational opportunities—tenets that, 2 decades later, would be realized and entrenched as foundations of Finnish education policy.

Development of different sectors of education continued in the 1950s. The baby boom after World War II led to rapid expansion in the number of schools. New laws stipulated that compulsory education was to consist of 6 years of primary school and 2 years of civic school for those who didn't advance further to grammar schools. The new curriculum launched in 1952 began to change work and life in schools. Vocational education became part of the education sector. Finland's dream of common schooling for all was alive, but, in practice, parallel schooling structures remained. Consequently, a third committee of key significance, the School Program Committee, was established in 1956 to unify the Finnish education system and bring coherence to changes in various subsectors of education. The establishment of this committee under the leadership of Reino Henrik Oittinen, director general of the National Board of Education and a Social Democrat, was one further step toward the big dream of Finnish education.

The work of this committee was built on an unprecedented analysis of international education policies. Particularly significant was the committee's observation that Nordic countries shared much in common regarding their education policies at that time.