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Finland Phenomenon

A Paradigm Shift in Educational Practices in an Islamic School

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Abstract

The world has been discussing the Finnish educational system for over a decade now. This paradigm shift in education in Finland has brought about tremendous changes that the world is discussing. To find out how Finland has reached such a high level of student achievement, Principal Mussarut Jabeen, who had long planned to visit Finland, and Dr. Seema Imam, professor at National Louis University, participated in a book study and tour of Finland to experience firsthand their educational system. Members of the book club visited the Department of Education, university teacher education programs, and numerous schools in three cities. This paper discusses an Islamic school's efforts toward a paradigm shift in education. It takes a look at Finland's societal values and their best practices, many of which can be implemented in Islamic schools.

Introduction

What might two lifelong educators share with Islamic schools after a dream-come-true visit and tour of schools in three cities in Finland? It might seem simple, but as we studied the paradigm shift in Finland's schools, we enjoyed the synergy and made connections with our Islamic schools in the US, which are all in the position to create stronger educational environments, try new teaching strategies, invent new programs, and set new goals. Part of the reason for that focus on Islamic schools in the West is our role as board members of the Islamic Schools League of America (ISLA), which at the time of this writing is chaired by Imam. The Finland phenomenon seems to go hand in hand with all that our Islamic schools have been thriving on. Both of the authors have close contact with several national endeavors focused on improvement of Islamic schools, their teachers, and their leaders.

As Muslim school leaders and founders throughout the United States have spent the last two and half to three decades developing the very best schools for their community, we have enjoyed significant success; yet from our travels we realize that the Finland experience fits in quite well.

Teachers in Finland have moved away from traditional teaching practices and embarked on more innovative teaching methodologies.

We realize that most Islamic schools were designed after existing American public schools, a special private school in a community here or there, or even a school from someone's back home. Suffice it to say that Islamic schools are all unique. What do they have in common that one could use to evaluate their success? The truth is, we don't have common evaluation systems; we use standardized tests for the most part, like public schools.

We seek accreditation from mainstream systems like public schools do. So, with that, as a principal and a professor, we hope to convey ideas we gleaned from our participation in a book club and tour to Finland which we embarked on with professors and public school teachers. What we learned is useful in most educational settings.

Impressions of Finland's Education: What We Learned From the School Tours

The tour in Finland was a close-up look at the Finnish educational system, and along with it came the increasing feeling for a needed paradigm shift in Western education, and particularly in Islamic schools. Our up-close look at teaching and learning strategies and their impact on student learning was extremely telling. There was a pleasant and pervasive feeling of respect throughout the schools we visited. We did not see discipline issues, and we even ate lunch in the student lunchroom of a middle school. The students there engaged us in conversations. We interacted with students again in the greenhouse, where middle school students were caring for animals and plants. In both locations, students were on task, pleasant, thoughtful, and most of all, meaningfully engaged without any direct supervision.

Teachers in Finland have moved away from traditional teaching practices and embarked on more innovative teaching methodologies. In Finland, the government's focus is on trusting educators and allowing them to think outside of the box, develop teaching strategies based on the whole-child teaching approach, and move away from strict control. That in and of itself seemed to be key. Children of all ages spend 15 minutes of each hour going outside for fresh air. Teachers also take breaks and disengage. Walker (2017) shares, "Once I started to see a break as a strategy to maximize learning, I stopped feeling guilty" (p.11). Part of the education system is concerned with what students do when they are grown up. It was openly discussed that as students enter their adult life, they have studied in areas that provide them with career opportunities such as culinary arts, hospitality, auto body, auto mechanics, computer science, and more. Students are encouraged to learn about things they have an interest in. Yet, it is important for students to make choices and explore; there is an emphasis on college as well, but there is not an assumption that all students will attend higher education programs. It is also important to note that students are supported in their decisions, and might change their minds and come back to enter the college track if they originally chose a trade track.

We learned a variety of details about the overall educational program as we met with the Ministry of Education. We learned about the focus being on what educators "do" in the classroom. Educators in Finland engage in an interactive education where best practices in the Finnish schools are now moving toward phenomenon-based learning. Success is not a focus of scores on standardized tests. Students there essentially take one standardized test in their

education. We enjoyed looking at the national curriculum framework and envisioning the time allotted to each subject. Students spend less time in school. They start at the age of 7, and their day is shorter. We went to the University of Jyvaskyla and learned about teacher preparation, and spoke to one student teacher. In fact, the teacher education and training programs in Finland are competitive and hard to enter. The number of young college students who are successful in entering an education program are closer to 60 out of 1,000. The importance of teaching was felt in the presentation by a student teacher, as he told us about the wait and the worry about whether or not he would be accepted. Even after being accepted, he would complete more practicum hours in various classrooms, but he was then required to complete a master's degree in a content subject before he could apply to teach.

The reason that we recommend our Islamic schools consider what has happened in Finland is that we believe that Islamic schools are ready to be more deliberate. We do not feel the need for our schools to be copies of Western public schools. Rather Islamic school models should be based on a firm Islamic ideology first; academics are important, but developing practicing Muslims with a sound worldview should also be front and center. In Finland, life skills are paramount; early childhood is the basis all the future education. Students use flexible seating, play-based education is valued, work-life balance is keenly important, and dignity in learning is valued in Finnish society.

We gained new understandings of the Finnish educational system and learned from stories of Finland's success through the very people who have lived them. Since we had spoken to teachers, principals, teacher educators, government officials, and most of all, had lunch with students and visited their greenhouse, we were convinced that there was joy in learning. We saw firsthand a trust between the stakeholders. We were especially happy with the trust extended to the students. We asked questions of tour guides and everyone we met. The chance to dispel myths often spoken of regarding the Finnish schools was the highlight of our tour in Finland. We came home with examples to be implemented. This year at Al-Iman School in North Carolina, it seemed only natural to select from what we learned and consider how local Islamic school classrooms might be enhanced with new practices. After focusing on the process of change, teachers and the administration began to make those decisions and became determined to take new steps toward a holistic approach in order to transform teaching and learning.

Implementation of New Ideas

Throughout our visit to the Ministry of Education, college of education, and schools, we continually witnessed a high level of trust in the school community. Though these ideas do not seem new, they infuse a high level of synergy as they are implemented. All along the way, we were thinking about all that we were bringing back, not all new ideas, but ways we could envision teachers enhancing and building on our current methods of teaching at Al-Iman School. As a principal of an Islamic school, Jabeen set a goal to develop a shared vision and mindset that would allow the school to implement some of the Finnish teaching strategies. The most important task was to get the whole team on board, create enthusiasm, and motivate them to try out some Finnish educational system best practices. This would help students' social-emotional learning and academic growth. With this plan and vision in mind, Al-Iman School started its 2017-2018 school year with a series of discussions and a transformed principal sharing the

excitement of Finland experiences. Thus, this paper is about bringing the practices back to one Islamic school, and doesn't address the possibilities of changes in teacher preparation.

Best Practices

Here we share some of the Finnish educational system's best practices through practical examples that Islamic school educators and others can consider or implement in their individual classrooms and schools. There are various ways to bring joy, synergy, and innovative ideas to learning and teaching in classrooms and schools. Additionally, we realized many innovative ideas can be implemented to improve student learning and engagement. Some examples that we have incorporated at Al-Iman School are as follows:

- Faculty hallway huddle time
- Flexible seating arrangement
- Brain break activities
- Outdoor experience (fresh air)
- The power of play
- Outdoor science instruction
- Student collaboration
- Collaboration amongst teachers: content area/discipline experts

After we implemented some of the Finnish teaching strategies at Al-Iman School, we immediately started seeing positive changes in our classroom and school environment. Our middle school ELA teacher says, "Flexible seating benefits middle school students by transforming the classroom into a highly functional space where students feel comfortable in their learning environment. They have the choice to sit where they feel comfortable and take ownership of their learning." She further states, "Hallway huddle has been highly effective because it allows time for teacher collaboration [and] quick communication, and it strengthens the bonding between teachers when they take time to meet and greet one another on a daily basis, and [it is] a great way to start the day!"

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Empowering Islamic School Leaders, Teachers and Others

Islamic school leaders, teachers, and others can look at Finish schools as a possibility in transforming their own schools. This bears the possibility of empowering our future. Since we are aware that most Islamic schools were copied from American public schools, much of the system we are using today is a replication of a standardized testing model. This will take time and needs to be intentional, involving the stakeholders. As shared by Kimonen and Nevalainen (2017), "All staff members must participate in development work in order to achieve real changes in the school's internal reality, as well as to develop the school organization and make its activities increasingly student-centered" (p.203).

We encourage all Islamic school educators and others to seek transformative ways to enhance teaching and learning based on the Finnish model. Finland has introduced a host of educational strategies that have improved their society and led to the success of educating a whole generation. The core of their educational system is based on preparing students to be successful in all aspects of life. Involving all stakeholders in educating children through collaboration is a societal value in Finland. As students complete their education, they have a skill set for a career or the option of pursuing a university degree program. The Finnish educational system has been transformative in their society. Higher education is specialized; for example, those who decide to become teachers select a content area and complete a master's degree. This brings passion and expertise into the schools and classrooms, guiding and transforming students and society.

Conclusion

Both of us in our own ways, in our own educational spaces, have been determined to think about the Finland trip and what it can mean to education in general and to Islamic schools specifically. As a professor it means that teachers need an introduction to engaging classroom ideas, and it means that new teachers in Islamic schools should be able to think out of the box and go far beyond the traditional. As a principal, it seemed immediately useful in Al-Iman School, so enhancing teaching and learning practices began immediately. We certainly are aware from stories of the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) that people are not one-size-fits-all. He was a leader who differentiated, and that was part of the Finnish model; not all students were doing or learning the same things at the same time, and not all would develop to go on to the college-bound careers either. In the early days of Islam, our Prophet (peace be upon him) accepted variations in the character of people, and that was evident in the Finnish model of schooling. We found many things related to sound Islamic practices that gave us the initiative to share this experience in the Islamic setting.

Mussarut Jabeen holds a Master of Science Degree in Educational Leadership. She is currently serving her 12th year as principal at Al-Iman School in North Carolina, where she taught elementary and middle level language arts and social studies for 5 years. Mussarut has an additional 10 years of teaching service. She holds a North Carolina High School Social Studies License and Principal's License. She has a National Mentor Certification from NAESP. She is trained by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction for teacher evaluation and is Advanc-Ed Trained QAR Chair. Mussarut currently serves on the board of directors for the Islamic Schools League of America and serves as a chair of the Annual Leadership Retreat Program committee to be held in Florida in December 2018. She represents Islamic schools on the Council of American Private Education. Mussarut recently participated in a book study and visited Finland to understand the phenomenal educational system.

Seema Imam is co-chair of the National College of Education, National Louis University, where she has served 22 years in teacher preparation. She has served on the board of directors for the Islamic Schools League of America, which she was recently the chair. Seema served 16 years in Chicago schools and five years as principal at Universal School in Bridgeview, IL. Seema holds teaching, principal, and superintendent certificates. Seema's research focuses on diversity and technology. Seema authored Chapter 10, "With New Standards in Mind: Selecting & Integrating Educational Technologies for Student Success," in Addressing the Needs of All Learners in the Era of Changing Standards, published by Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. She is author of Chapter 3, "Separation of What and State: The Life

Experiences of Muslims in Public Schools in the Midwest,” in *Muslim Voices in School Narratives of Identity & Pluralism*, Sense Publications, 2009. She co-authored a children’s book, *I Am Listening*, Lucent Publications.

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Web Resources

<http://taughtbyfinland.com/>

<http://theconversation.com/finlands-school-reforms-wont-scrap-subjects-altogether-39328>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/01/finnish-schools-are-on-the-move-and-americas-need-to-catch-up/384358/>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/11/when-finnish-teachers-work-in-americas-public-schools/508685/>