An insight perspective of Finland’s educational system

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Abstract

Through a partnership between the University of Oradea in Romania and New England College in the USA we sought to corroborate whether or not teachers in the field agreed with the information we have been receiving through the media, change agents, and the leaders of the Finnish educational system. We believed that Finnish teachers agreed with the journalists then we would have an important message for our teachers and educational and political leaders. Our findings overwhelmingly indicated that teachers should be given the respect, support, resources, responsibility, freedom, training, and authority to effectively and professionally teach their students.

Keywords: Finland’s educational system; teacher autonomy; teacher respect; professionalism

1. Background

For many years we have been hearing about and reading articles and books about the purposeful rise and sustaining of a great public educational system in Finland. When the opportunity developed for us to visit Finland we decided to attempt to see what people in the field in Finland think about their educational system. We developed a survey for teachers in our attempt to gather data about Finnish teacher perceptions connected to the stories we have read and listened to about Finland’s successful reformation of its public school system. During our visit to the University of Helsinki we interviewed education professors, a group of international university students, and

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distributed an online survey to teachers. Our goal was to compare the data we received to the information we had reviewed through the media in our countries (Romania and United States).

As part of our partnership agreement between the University of Oradea’s (Romania) Pedagogy of Primary and Pre School Education program and the Education program at New England College (USA) we have agreed to develop common research interests to assist in the continuous progress of each program. In this spirit three people, two professors from the University of Oradea and one from New England College developed and implemented this study. We all are currently college or university educators in pre-service teacher programs in our respective institutions. The American has had 36 years of experience working in the public schools as a teacher (12 years) and as an administrator (24 years). During that time he has worked with students at all four levels of the U. S. system (elementary – K-5; junior high school – 7-9; middle school – 6-8; high school 9-12). The two Romanian researchers coordinate the practicum classes for pre-service teachers for a kindergarten and primary school program in the local public schools. They also have experience in kindergarten (10 years) and primary school teaching (4 years).

From our experiences in our two countries there is a great deal of pressure on classroom teachers to have their students do well on standardized tests. Parents in both countries feel the pressure to put their children in the correct pre-school in order to get into the correct kindergarten so they will be prepared for the correct elementary school which will get them into the correct secondary school so they will gain entrance in the correct college. In America the teacher preparation programs will now be assessed in part by the test scores of the students of teachers who graduated from each college or university program. In our experiences more and more teachers are moving away from the pedagogical methods of inquiry, discovery, problem solving, cooperative groups, and thematic projects into activities designed to create great test takers. In addition many schools in which we work have now limited recess, physical education, art and music in order to spend more time on math and language literacy.

We believe the pressure placed on teachers to produce great test scores has resulted in the loss of teachers’ ability to be creative. Teachers are indicating to us in higher numbers that they are discouraged with the current process and are ready to take back education from the bureaucrats and test makers and give it back to educators and students. Although we do not yet have the data to support our notions, we believe that education around the world is at a crossroads. Educational systems can continue down the road to accountability and continue to get what we have gotten for fifty years. Or, educators can be given the training, support, responsibility, and accountability to do their job – educate students who will be ready to be contributing citizens in the world. We wanted to ascertain if teachers in Finland have the kinds of authority to teach in ways they believe are best for student growth, or if the stories we have read and listened to are exaggerated tales with little substance to back them up. Our premise was that if teachers in Finland actually were doing what we have heard they are doing, then we would have the ability to share that knowledge and help our respective institutions improve our pre-service education programs. Since most of our sources for reports are from administration sources our goal was to find out from the people in the trenches what is actually happening in Finland’s schools.

2. Literature Review

People all around the world have watched in amazement at the rise of the quality of the educational system in Finland (Hancock, 2011). While many nations have decided that accountability, in the form of standardized test scores, is the best way to assess student and teacher performance, Finland has taken a different route (Sahlberg, 2011). Finland made the decision to recruit its best students into the field of education and train them to become professional educators (Darling-Hammond, 2010). As the reformation of the Finnish educational system was occurring teachers sought and received the authority and responsibility for recreating the pedagogical and assessment philosophy for its public schools (Chandler, 2014). The inclusion of educators in such an important way resulted in a system of education based on the experiences of teachers rather than an educational system based on political and bureaucratic demands for accountability (Sahlberg, 2011). Externally created standardized tests play little to no role in the assessment system for students or teachers. Instead of narrowing the curriculum to one national system Finnish teachers are trained and expected to help their students achieve the national goals by working with their students in ways to create learners, not test takers (Sahlberg, 2009). Finnish teachers engage their students in cooperative, inquiry-based, and problem-solving educational activities on a regular basis (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Darling-Hammond notes that Finland’s teachers rarely can be seen standing in the front of the
class lecturing to students. They are too busy coaching and tutoring students as the students are engaged in their learning. Teachers are supervised by principals who must be master teachers. The entire educational system is led by educators, not by business people or politicians (Sahlberg, 2011).

According to Sahlberg (2009) equity in education is the most important goal of public education. According to Stahlberg (2011) and Chandler (2014) the goal of equity reaches beyond the school doors into the entire Finnish community. According to Olli Luukkainen, president of Finland’s powerful teachers union, “Equality is the most important word in Finnish education. All political parties on the right and left agree on this” (in Hancock, 2011). From pre-natal care, early childhood programs, and a social system that supports children and parents Finland ensures that all students come to school ready to learn and have real access to the best education that Finland has to offer regardless of socio economic level or place of birth (Chandler, 2014; Sahlberg, 2011). Hancock (2011) indicated that the differences between the top and bottom students in Finland are the lowest in the world. Students receive the same high-level education whether they live in a rural area, small city, or a large metropolitan area (Chandler, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2010).

3. Method

Our research questions for our study included: What do educators in Finland think about their educational system? Are the opinions of the educators aligned with the information we have reviewed in journals and through other media? According to the educators, what are the greatest strengths of the Finnish system?

In this mixed methods study we developed a survey as our main data collection tool to attempt to answer our research questions. We grouped our statements into ten domains that we had determined from our review of the literature: Student Readiness, Respect for Teachers, Preparation, Teacher Autonomy, Local Control, Curriculum Development, Professional Development, Use of Standardized Tests, Teacher Developed Assessments, and School Routine (length of day, lessons taught, lessons taken, homework). In order to gather some of the personal reflections about the Finnish education system we also interviewed four University of Helsinki education professors. The purpose of the open ended interview was to develop deeper understanding of the thoughts of people who work in the system. We ran a class for and interviewed twelve international students from the university. From these students we discussed their reasons for going to Finland for a year and what they conclusions they drew from their experiences at the university and in the public schools.

The survey consisted of forty-three Likert scale (scale 1–5) questions, three demographic questions, and a final opened question for comments participants might choose to offer. The survey was delivered through survey monkey and we analyzed the results based on the ten domains listed above. All forty-three participants work in schools in Helsinki. Twenty-four percent teach in grades 1–2; twenty-seven percent teach in grades 3–6; ten percent in grades 7–9; thirty-nine percent teach in grades 10–12. Fourteen percent have been teaching from one to five years; fourteen percent from six to ten years; twenty-six percent have been teaching from eleven to fifteen years; fifteen percent from sixteen to twenty years; Thirty-one percent have been teaching for more than twenty years. Ninety-three percent of the teachers hold at least a master’s degree.

For the open ended interviews we asked the participants to tell us what they thought about the Finnish educational system, and we asked probing follow-up questions based on their responses. We analyzed their responses in relation to the survey responses to search for verifications and/or differences in the results of the survey. Four university professors of education and twelve international students engaged in the group interview process with the researchers.

4. Results

In order to test for significance in this study we employed the t test of significance. The null hypothesis used for this study indicated that: Teachers would disagree with the statements provided in the survey in relation to the ten domains assessed. We used the t test to determine whether or not the null hypothesis was supported by the data. The mean score for the null hypothesis would be 2.0, meaning respondents Disagreed or Strongly disagreed with a given statement. A p score of greater than .05 would indicate an acceptance of the null hypothesis. A p score equal
to or less than .05 would indicate a rejection of the null hypothesis. Every statement in the survey provided a p score equal to or less than .00001. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected. Teachers in Finland corroborated the information provided to us by journalists, leaders in Finland, and outside observers to the Finnish educational system.

There were four important conclusions drawn from the research data. Firstly, the people of Finland take education very seriously. Secondly, teachers believe that most students come to school prepared to learn. Thirdly, teachers in Finland feel respected by every aspect of the community, especially by families, school administration, and colleagues. Lastly, every teacher participant in the study indicated that they have the responsibility, authority and autonomy to teach in ways they believe are best for their students.

From multiple perspectives we found that people in Finland take the education of their children very seriously. University faculty explained that Finland offers a “tremendous” program for its young children including: prenatal medical assistance, three years of maternity leave with pay, free preschool for all children beginning at age five, and a compulsory beginning age for school of seven. Universities recruit students at the top of their classes. One university instructor stated, “We only take students in the top 10% of their class!” Another stated, “And we have a large waiting list every year.” When asked if different constituencies support the school, 82% to 88% (mean scores of 3.83 – 4.05) of the respondents indicated that the school is supported well by the community, the district, and parents. Seventy-eight percent (mean of 3.71) of the teachers responded that parents assist the school by working their students at home. An international student noted, “I am amazed to see the kind of support and resources that teachers in Finland have in their schools.” Eighty-five percent (mean of 4.05) of the teachers felt that they have the resources they need to do their work with students. When asked why they had come to Finland to learn about being a teacher all of the students agreed with this statement from one of their colleagues, “I came here thinking that Finland takes training of its teachers very seriously, and I was right.”

Eighty-eight percent (mean of 3.91) of the teachers indicated that students come to school prepared to learn. A university professor explained it this way: “Every aspect of the community supports children. We have every necessary program available for parents and their children. It is almost unheard of to have a child come to school hungry or neglected.” The professors also indicated that “most” parents take advantage of the maternity leave time offered to their families. “This,” stated one instructor “gives children the opportunity to make those important connections during their first years of life.” They indicated that this gives the children the emotional and psychological stability to be prepared to learn. They also indicated that the socioeconomic quality of life in Finland is “high”. University personnel, all of whom are parents, agreed that parents in general take the job of educating their children “very seriously”.

Teacher participants in the survey indicated that teachers are respected by all parts of the community. Ninety-eight percent (mean of 4.17) of the teacher respondents indicated that they feel respected by parents. Ninety percent (mean of 4.31) felt respected by school administration. Seventy-six percent (mean of 3.83) of the teachers felt respected by the general community (while seventeen percent were neutral). For the district administration fifty-nine percent (mean of 3.55) of the teachers felt respected, while another thirty-five percent were neutral on the subject). A university professor explained, “The parents respect the teachers as professionals and look to their teachers to do what is best for their children.” An international student stated, “The parents are awesome. They are respectful and interested in what their children are doing in school.” One hundred percent (mean of 4.26) of the teachers felt supported and respected by their colleagues. A university instructor reported, “We count on each other for help and support. We understand how important it is to support each other professionally, and, when necessary, personally.”

Every teacher (mean of 4.67) indicated through their surveys that they have the autonomy and responsibilities to teach their students using the techniques they think are best. Ninety-three percent (mean of 4.29) of the teachers indicated that if a topic of interest develops during class that they have the authority to pursue that topic with their students. All teachers above the primary level must hold at least a master’s degree and this training, according to the university professors, “...gives our the training they need to know how to adapt the curriculum to run with topics that naturally develop during the year.” One of the international students stated, “It is cool to see the students get excited about something and be able to go with them to explore the topic more.”
5. Discussion

From our review of the data it is clear that teachers who participated in our study believe that they have the autonomy, responsibility, respect, training, collegial support, school administration support, and resources to do what they believe they should do. When we asked about pressure to pass tests we were told that there are no required standardized tests required for public schools. Beginning in sixth grade teachers may voluntarily use standardized tests. Many apparently do use them but only for local school purposes. Eighty-five percent of the teacher participants agreed that standardized are not used to compare teachers. Twenty-five percent of the teachers believe that standardized tests are used to compare schools. The university instructors felt that may be more about university testing than tests given in the public schools. Eighty-three percent of teachers indicated that real world assessment is more important than standardized test results. At the completion of high school students do have to take an exam. They have a combination of required and student chosen elective areas as part of their final secondary school exam.

It appears that respect and autonomy play vital roles in the perception of teachers as to the professionalism of their career. Forty percent of the teachers surveyed agreed that their salary is a professional level salary. Teachers are not choosing to become teachers for money. Teachers appear to believe that their work is respected and that they have the authority to do what they think is best to accomplish their work. Eighty-five percent of the teachers surveyed agreed that the curriculum is developed so that students who work hard will be successful. As one university instructor explained, “Teachers believe that if they work hard they will have the resources and support to be successful with their students.”

6. Conclusions

This research study has brought us to the following conclusions: 1. Teachers should be prepared in teacher preparation programs that are geared to give students the theoretical and practical experiences to be ready to begin their careers as educators. 2. Students deserve and require the most qualified people to teach them. We should recruit the brightest and best people to enter the field of education. 3. All teachers should be required to earn a minimum of a master’s degree including content and pedagogical knowledge. 4. Teachers should be responsible for and have the autonomy to choose how to work with their students. 5. Each community should support education by taking children seriously by incorporating programs and assistance to families to begin and sustain their children from the pre-natal stage through to the beginning of public school. 6. The goal of any school’s assessment program and curriculum should be to prepare students to perform in the real world. The point of assessment should be developed from an educational perspective and not from a political or accountability perspective. 7. The school curriculum and pedagogical practices should encourage inquiry, collaboration, creative and critical thinking, and the positive social skills required to become active and productive local, national, and global citizens. 8. The public education system should be led by people who understand and have experience as educators. All school and district administrators should be master teachers as a prerequisite for their administrative positions. At the district, state, and national levels the leadership should be composed of educators. As in other professions community boards should assist in the process but important educational decisions should be made by master professionals from the field. We should seriously consider changing the mentality of accountability in education to a philosophy of education.

Appendix A

Finland has a reputation for running an effective and professional public school education program. According to researchers from Stanford University (Linda Darling Hammond and Laura McCloskey) Finland is listed as one of the best educational systems in the world according to international assessments. This is true while Finland encourages more student centered assessment practices. Teachers in Finland are reported to have great latitude in how they work with their students. The curriculum is noted for its local flavour and connection to the students in the local schools. In order to help our schools in our quest to improve our local schools we are attempting to find out what elements of your program in Finland contribute to your success. We ask you to take some time to
share your thoughts with us about your system. This, of course, is a completely voluntary process and you may or not answer any of the questions in this survey. The results from this survey will only be used in aggregate form. We are not asking for any identifying information and we are simply looking for ideas to help us improve what we do in our schools. Therefore confidentiality and safety concerns are very minimal. Since we are only asking opinion questions there are no physical or psychological concerns in this study.

I understand the goal of this survey and volunteer to participate in this study. ____

A. **Choose the best response.**

1. I teach in grades:
   1-2: 10  3-6: 11  7-9: 4  10-12: 16

2. I have taught for:
   1-5 Years: 6  6-10 years: 6  11-15 years: 11  16-20 years: 6  20+ years: 13

3. My highest degree is:
   Bachelor’s: 3  Master’s: 36  Lisensiaatt: 0  PHD: 3

4. Parents support our school.
   Strongly Disagree: 0  Disagree: 0  Neutral: 6  Agree: 25  Strongly Agree: 11

5. My students come to school prepared to learn.
   Strongly Disagree: 0  Disagree: 0  Neutral: 6  Agree: 31  Strongly Agree: 5

6. Parents support the students in their work.
   Strongly Disagree: 0  Disagree: 0  Neutral: 9  Agree: 30  Strongly Agree: 2

7. The community supports our schools.
   Strongly Disagree: 1  Disagree: 2  Neutral: 2  Agree: 35  Strongly Agree: 2

8. I have adequate resources to be able to teach the way I think is best for my students.
   Strongly Disagree: 1  Disagree: 2  Neutral: 3  Agree: 23  Strongly Agree: 12

9. Parents respect me as a teacher.
   Strongly Disagree: 0  Disagree: 0  Neutral: 1  Agree: 32  Strongly Agree: 9

10. I feel respected as a teacher by the community.
    Strongly Disagree: 1  Disagree: 2  Neutral: 7  Agree: 25  Strongly Agree: 7

11. I feel respected as a teacher by the administration of our school.
    Strongly Disagree: 0  Disagree: 0  Neutral: 4  Agree: 21  Strongly Agree: 17

12. I feel respected as a teacher by the district administration.
    Strongly Disagree: 1  Disagree: 2  Neutral: 14  Agree: 20  Strongly Agree: 3

13. I feel that my teacher preparation program prepared me well to become a teacher.
    Strongly Disagree: 0  Disagree: 2  Neutral: 12  Agree: 24  Strongly Agree: 4
14. I have a great deal of autonomy over how I teach.
   Strongly Disagree: 0  Disagree: 0  Neutral: 0  Agree: 14  Strongly Agree: 28

15. I have the authority to adjust my schedule as needed to meet the needs of my students.
   Strongly Disagree: 1  Disagree: 6  Neutral: 7  Agree: 21  Strongly Agree: 7

16. If a topic arises that interests my students I feel that I have the authority to take the time to pursue the topic with my students.
   Strongly Disagree: 0  Disagree: 1  Neutral: 2  Agree: 22  Strongly Agree: 16

17. Our curriculum is adapted for our students.
   Strongly Disagree: 0  Disagree: 1  Neutral: 13  Agree: 25  Strongly Agree: 1

18. The local community has a voice in our curriculum.
   Strongly Disagree: 1  Disagree: 6  Neutral: 18  Agree: 16  Strongly Agree: 0

19. Our curriculum is set so that most students can accomplish its goals if they work hard.
   Strongly Disagree: 0  Disagree: 1  Neutral: 5  Agree: 27  Strongly Agree: 8

20. Our curriculum is set to prepare all of our students for graduation from high school.
   Strongly Disagree: 0  Disagree: 3  Neutral: 4  Agree: 24  Strongly Agree: 9

21. Our curriculum is set to prepare all students for college or university.
   Strongly Disagree: 0  Disagree: 6  Neutral: 13  Agree: 17  Strongly Agree: 5

22. When our students graduate from high school they are prepared to enter the work force.
   Strongly Disagree: 3  Disagree: 16  Neutral: 9  Agree: 13  Strongly Agree: 0

23. I have a voice in our curriculum.
   Strongly Disagree: 1  Disagree: 5  Neutral: 11  Agree: 23  Strongly Agree: 2

24. I feel that my salary is a professional salary.
   Strongly Disagree: 2  Disagree: 13  Neutral: 10  Agree: 15  Strongly Agree: 2

25. I have availability to adequate professional development.
   Strongly Disagree: 1  Disagree: 2  Neutral: 5  Agree: 30  Strongly Agree: 4

26. My school or district supports my professional development.
   Strongly Disagree: 0  Disagree: 1  Neutral: 9  Agree: 29  Strongly Agree: 3

27. When I entered the profession of teaching I had good mentor support.
   Strongly Disagree: 5  Disagree: 13  Neutral: 9  Agree: 14  Strongly Agree: 1

28. I am/was required to earn a degree beyond my bachelor’s.
   Strongly Disagree: 1  Disagree: 4  Neutral: 13  Agree: 9  Strongly Agree: 15

29. My school or district financially supports teachers to earn advanced degrees.
30. I have the support I need to work with individual students who have special needs.
   Strongly Disagree: 2    Disagree: 9    Neutral: 11    Agree: 18    Strongly Agree: 2

31. I feel supported by my colleagues.
   Strongly Disagree: 0    Disagree: 0    Neutral: 4    Agree: 23    Strongly Agree: 15

32. We do not use standardized tests to compare schools.
   Strongly Disagree: 4    Disagree: 7    Neutral: 5    Agree: 16    Strongly Agree: 10

33. We do not use standardized tests to compare teachers.
   Strongly Disagree: 1    Disagree: 2    Neutral: 3    Agree: 10    Strongly Agree: 26

34. We do not use standardized tests to compare students.
   Strongly Disagree: 3    Disagree: 16    Neutral: 6    Agree: 12    Strongly Agree: 5

35. We use standardized tests to improve our programs.
   Strongly Disagree: 4    Disagree: 14    Neutral: 12    Agree: 12    Strongly Agree: 0

36. Teachers create assessments in line with their teaching and student learning.
   Strongly Disagree: 0    Disagree: 3    Neutral: 6    Agree: 24    Strongly Agree: 7

37. I develop assessments to engage my students in problem solving and other higher level thinking.
   Strongly Disagree: 1    Disagree: 0    Neutral: 7    Agree: 25    Strongly Agree: 6

38. I create assessments in which my students engage in real world related activities (e.g. solve real world type problems).
   Strongly Disagree: 0    Disagree: 2    Neutral: 5    Agree: 23    Strongly Agree: 10

39. On average I give homework each night that takes _____ to complete.
   15-30 minutes: 29    35-55 minutes: 11    1 hour: 0    More than 1 hour: 0

40. I use homework for independent practice for my students.
   Strongly Disagree: 0    Disagree: 3    Neutral: 3    Agree: 25    Strongly Agree: 8

41. I use homework to formatively assess my students’ progress.
   Strongly Disagree: 1    Disagree: 5    Neutral: 12    Agree: 20    Strongly Agree: 1

42. I use homework so my students can assess their own progress.
   Strongly Disagree: 0    Disagree: 3    Neutral: 11    Agree: 25    Strongly Agree: 0

43. I do not usually assign homework.
   Strongly Disagree: 12    Disagree: 16    Neutral: 4    Agree: 6    Strongly Agree: 2

44. On average our school day for students is _____ long.
   4 hours: 6    5 hours: 15    6 hours: 12    7 hours: 9
45. On an average day I teach ___ lessons.
   4: 9      5: 24     6: 6     7: 1      8: 0

46. On an average day our students take ___ lessons.
   4: 10      5: 17     6: 9      7: 4 8: 1

B. Please add any comments you think might be important for us to know about teaching and learning in Finland:
   1. In my school we have lessons of 75 minutes and that’s why on an average day I teach 3 lessons.
   2. Parents don’t want to take enough care of children. Children play too much with computers. 1/15/2014 10:56 PM
   3. School values are main focus and good leadership 1/15/2014 8:18 PM
   4. Focus to the necessary. World is full of all kind of knowledge, the most important skills are still being able to read, calculate, discuss and learn more.
   5. I teach both 1-2 and 3-6 classes (French and English) 1/13/2014 12:36 PM
   6. A lesson in our school = 75 min.
   7. Classes are quit big, around 25 pupils in one class. And the teacher is usually alone with the kids. For example I have 5 children with special needs in my class and no assistant teacher.
   8. I also teach in grades 5 - 6 and 10. Finnish schools often include grades 1 - 9 / 10 and we have both class teachers and teachers of subjects working in those schools.
   9. Some clarifications: 1) I give typically only one homework during a 4-5 week course. It is typically a broader essay. 2) I work at the upper secondary school, and depending on the period, my work time varies. In some periods I may have 2-3 courses to teach, in some periods I have 4-6 courses to teach. So, in some periods I may teach only 2 hrs per a day etc.
   10. The teaching can vary very much depending on the teacher. Some teachers may use very modern methods. On the other side the teachers can be old fashioned despite of their age or sex. In my opinion the most important moment for children in learning is the beginning. If all children could have talent teacher during the first two years, it would give them easier and happy path of learning for their future! greetings from Finland!
   11. Lessons in Finnish high schools are usually 75 min. On an average day I teach 3 -3.5 lessons. 1/10/2014 3:37 PM
   12. Lessons are 75min, teaching is quite different in voluntary courses and not-voluntary courses, many things differ from subject to another

References
Hancock, L. N. (September, 2011). Why are Finland's schools successful? The country's achievements in education have other nations, especially the United States, doing their homework. Smithsonian Magazine.