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PWR: Rhetoric of Education

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What Can the United States Learn from the Finnish Education System?

Finland as a nation has set itself as an exemplar for international education standards. It is the holy grail of schools around the world, of policy makers, and of teachers. The United States is in the middle of a transition, from the discontinuation of the No Child Left Behind policy that sought to address educational disparities via annual testing, report cards (for students and teachers alike), and more recently, a standardized curriculum, to the Every Student Succeeds Act that retransfers accountability back to the local level. In lieu of the reorganization of federal laws, participants at every level of the system — from teachers to principals to state lawmakers — must reconsider the balance between autonomy and accountability. Along this spectrum are systems of trust and balance and questions of incentives and power, between nation and state, state and district, district and school, school and teacher, and teacher and student. All of this Finland has seemed to perfect in the past few decades along their path to modernization, and has been observed to be true from eyewitness accounts to evidence-backed research. In this process of transition, Finland poses as an aspiring teacher who has solved their own accountability versus autonomy problem via educational reform, the same problem the United States faces. The purpose of this conversation is not to copy Finland, as Finland, as will be brought up, is a fundamentally different country, but to enact a simulated conversation between various Finnish-American comparative education sources and see what insights we can take out of it.

Pasi Sahlberg¹, Betsy DeVos², Ms. Chartouni³, Jenni White⁴, and Michael Sun⁵, sit down at the round table, discussing what the US can learn from Finland's education system. Pasi Sahlberg and Ms. Chartouni have been invited for this international summit meeting, and are being asked to weigh in from their experience. They hold great pride for Finland, reflected by many optimistic plans they are proposing. Ms. White sits with a stern face, a product of the system herself and her body as stiff as his defeatist attitude toward the topic. Betsy DeVos, the decision maker, remained a neutral and analytical demeanor throughout, soaking in arguments from both sides for her report to the president. I, a student at Stanford doing a research paper on Finnish-US comparative education, has the privilege to be of presence too.

Betsy DeVos: The United States is in vacillation over the educational system. We are a leading power in economic output, academic thought, and more importantly, a nation of more than 50 million primary and secondary school students, yet we struggle to consistently crack the top 30 on the PISA exams. Since 2000, our solution had been NLCB, but when it was brought forth for reauthorization in the 112th congress, states failed to act on it due to the ineffectiveness of using standardized testing as the sole criteria of the effectiveness of the education system, instead proposing the new ESSA. Finland, as a nation consistently ranked in the top 5 in all three major subject areas — math, reading, and science — by the PISA standards, whose successes my advisors and I have studied extensively, no doubt can teach us lessons for improvement. We want to begin with the nation's teachers, a distinguished one of them sitting next to me, understand their experiences teaching within their respective systems, and set our

¹ Pasi Sahlberg is a former teacher, researcher, and policy advisor of Finland at the Finnish of Education and Culture. The conversation in this paper are not quoted from him or meant to represent his take on the issue. The same applies to the other participants in the conversation.

² Betsy DeVos is the US Secretary of State. She is publicly known for advocating the privatizing of US schools, including charter schools, vouchers, and increasing parental choice.

³ Ms. Chartouni is a Finnish teacher, mentioned in the Atlantic article.

⁴ Ms. White (Jenni White) is an Oklahoman teacher and lobbyist who spent years advocating against the Common Core.

⁵ Michael Sun is a Stanford student.

insights in the context of the two educational systems respectively. To begin with, I want to ask the teachers, Mr. White, to talk about why he thinks NCLB failed and what challenges lies ahead, and Ms. Chartouni, as to the extent to which Finland has experienced the same challenges, so we can begin our comparative discussion between the two systems.

Ms. Chartouni: We have a lot of freedom and trust. We are involved not only in the development of the curriculum, but also the implementation of it, which means active discussion about its success and challenges.

Ms. White: I imagine doing so requires a great deal of trust for the teachers. How has that been possible?

Ms. Chartouni: I think a large part of this freedom comes from the years teachers in Finland have spent doing research as part of their masters degree, and applying the latest of teaching methods during practical training. I never saw my job to administer tests, but to make my own contribution to the network of teachers.

Transforming Education, edited by DeVillar, Binbin Jiang, and Cummins, is a research-based volume that contains a substantiate section on Finnish teachers. The source echoes Ms. Chartouni's view of Finnish teachers' roles being key decision makers in the system, stating teachers "cannot be simply implementers of decisions, but must also be partners in the development of those decisions" (91). They "are expected to be able to take an active role in evaluating and improving schools and their learning environments" (91). When Ms. Chartouni mentions "active discussion about its success and challenges", she is likely referring to the fact Finnish teachers "belong to the same teachers' trade union (the OAJ, founded in 1973)... In recent decades it has been invited to play an active role as a partner in all major reforms of teacher education and school curriculum" (DeVillar, Binbin Jiang, and Cummins 93).

Pasi Sahlberg: As a policy advisor, I can say Finland did a good job to achieve a balance between centralization and decentralization. While schools still have to meet national standards, a great deal of flexibility in the interpretation and adoption of them is given at a local level. Naturally, we have only one nationwide matriculation exam, and the rest is left up to individual schools and municipalities.

Continuing from *Transforming Education*, “Providers of education... have been given wide freedom when it comes to writing their local curricula.... The local curricula have to determine the teaching and educational practices of the schools concerned. The curricula must be drawn up in such a way that they take into account the schools’ operating environments, local value choices, and special resources” (89). “For more than 30 years, the most important aims of teacher education have been to help teachers to develop their own teaching and to encourage them to participate in educational discussions and reforms by making their own professional contributions” (90). “The Finnish choice has been enhancement-led evaluation at all levels of education. There is no inspection system in place for controlling the educational arrangements at schools or institutions” (90). “The results are used for the development of education” (91).

Ms. White: Ms. Chartouni, I’d like to ask a personal question. The profession isn’t the highest of pay, not the most attractive-sounding job for students coming out of secondary school⁶. After competing through a one-in-ten acceptance rate, you spent five years to complete a BA and MA in teaching, all the while splitting time between research and practical training. Tell me, what was the motivation to enter the teaching profession?

Ms. White: I just wanted a job. Coming out of college as a Gender Studies major, I was swimming in debt, and via Teach for America, I was recruited to teach at a rural

⁶ “Salaries are not the main reason young people become teachers in Finland. Teachers earn very close to the national average salary level; on average, typically equivalent to what mid-career middle-school teachers earn in OECD [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development] nations...” (Darling-Hammond and Lieberman 6 - 7).

community, and has since moved school to school around the country for better employment.⁷

Ms. Chartouni: On the contrary, for me, the reason had little to do with money. Finland is all about equity, and graduate schools for teachers, like university, are free of charge. Being a teacher is a well-respected profession, and I thought it was the mature choice.⁸ I had a lot of fun doing it.⁹

The differences between Mr. White and Ms. Chartouni's views of their roles in the education system are not unfounded. "Finnish teachers have accepted curriculum development, experimentation with teaching methods, and student feedback strategies as import aspects of their work outside of classrooms. In fact, many schools are close to emulating what have been called professional learning communities among teachers and school administrators" (17). *Teacher Education Around the World Teacher Education Around the World: Changing Policies and Practices*, edited by Darling-Hammond and Lieberman, is a research volume that describes the educational journey of a Finnish teacher from the end of secondary school to becoming a teacher. Pasi Sahlberg describes the current system — teachers are required to hold a three-year Bachelor's Degree and a two-year Master's. Unlike those in the United States, "students are obliged to successfully accomplish a curriculum that includes seventeen

⁷ "A small current uptick in teacher education enrollments is nowhere near enough to solve the problem. But recruiting more qualified teachers is only a small part of the answer" (Strauss). "About 90 percent of the annual nationwide demand for teachers is created because teachers leave the profession. Two-thirds of those teacher leave for reasons other than retirement, including lack of adequate preparation and mentoring, pressures of test-based accountability, lack of administrative supports, low salaries, and poor teaching conditions" (Strauss). As will be brought up again at the end, this statistic shows the problem of teachers is not one of money, but something more fundamental.

⁸ "Surprisingly, among young Finns, teaching is consistently rated as the most admired profession, leading the ratings of medical doctors, architects, and layers" (5). "Finnish males viewed a teacher as the most desired spouse, rated just ahead of a nurse, medical doctor and architect" (5).

⁹ Darling-Hammond and Lieberman go as far as to say, "Increased external control over teachers' work in schools... would likely deflect more bright young people into other professional careers where they have freedom to make use of their own creativity and initiative" (18).

required subjects—among them physics, chemistry, philosophy, music, and at least two foreign languages... students accepted in primary school teacher education programs have earned higher than average marks in these subjects” (10). “Teacher education curricula are designed so that they constitute a systematic continuum from the foundations of educational thinking to educational research methodologies and then on to more advanced fields of educational sciences.... Finnish [education] students also learn the skills of how to design, conduct, and present original research on practical of theoretical aspects of education” (11).

At this point, listeners of the conversation may be inclined to believe the United States is so fundamentally different from Finland, a small Nordic country the epitome of equity and homogeneity, that there is little value in proceeding further. After all, the US underwent a long history of battle for democracy. While Finland had a relatively straight path up, the US is highly heterogeneous country populated by immigrants. Due to its Christianity origins of race and gender superiority, education, similar to salvation, was only meant for the elite few, and it took over two centuries before this self-reinforcing negative feedback loop was legally (not to mention implicitly) dissolved. Because of its exclusive, and later segregative, nature since the nation’s founding, we had to pay the price in later on re-integrating people into the system. This is a very compelling narrative — and as experts agree, to an extent justified — but it doesn’t undermine what Finland can teach us, for Finland itself forty years ago wasn’t all that different.

It’s hardly fair to say Finland didn’t go through an educational reform of its own. From *Teachers’ Perspectives on Finnish School Education*, which will later be quoted from extensively, “The Finnish had a complex school inspection system with 12 districts or provinces. Each province had an education department, and one of its own main responsibilities was to inspect schools” (91). This doesn’t sound unlike states inspecting schools’ meeting of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) objectives created at a states level. “Up until 1991, there were two national boards of education, one in charge of general education and the other of vocational education” (92). The National Board of Education has all the say, and was able to unite the two boards into one to reconcile

the disparities between what was administered and what the research says. The Finnish seems to have transitioned out of their inspection system much easier than the US, which still feels strong ripple effects from NCLB (and for some states, the Common Core). As Eduardo says, “Educational inspection was important prior to the 1970 reforms...” (88). After its elimination, “inspectors and authorities attempted to change their role so they would not be viewed as inspectors but rather consultants, but this did not work. Municipal authorities, school principals, and teachers thought they did not need inspectors, stating ‘we don’t need them anymore.’ There were even cases in which inspectors, who had previously been quite powerful, started to be fearful of going into schools because of the cultural rejection they received” (90). Eduardo continues to say, “Finland’s path to modernization was much delayed, and it only adds to a compelling analysis as to how they were able to overcome “poverty, epidemics, famine, invasions, or suffering that placed Finland at an initial disadvantage in relation to other more developed countries of the time” (3). Coming out of World War II and being voided its former trade of sustenance, Russia, Finland began a series of reforms that brought education as we know it. “As part of the 1971 reforms, pedagogical education was introduced in programs for subject teachers” (51). “In Elisa Heimovaara’s words: ‘We went from a system with a teaching degree just below a Bachelor’s degree (BA) to one in which the minimum degree required would be equivalent to a Master’s degree. The previous degrees and programs were orientated toward a practical, pragmatic education that did not include components of scientific analysis and educational research’” (51). “This is an important point in the history of Finland’s teacher education that happened ‘without being planned that way’...” (51).

Ms. White: Finland seems to have had a much easier time transitioning out of their inspection system, whereas even after the repeal of Common Core, teachers I know have repeatedly complained to me how the strict enforcement of its standards have prevented them from naturally planning their lessons. Even after its ending, the effects have clearly been felt.

Betsy DeVos: Indeed, we'd wish for a similar reform, but the context of our nation as a boiling pot of diversity in background, culture, and socioeconomic conditions isn't suited for instilling a standardized route to becoming a teacher.¹⁰ In the United States, the analog of the autonomy that is given to Finnish schools at a local level is the charter school system, but the system is hardly perfect. Unlike Finland, the concept of equity is a very bipartisan issue, as many charter schools are criticized to privatize education and become discriminatory, with funding being volatile and disputed. However, learning about the system Finnish teachers operate in has given me many ideas to empower teachers for the long term.

As Betsy DeVos candidly states, the United States has many reasons, politically and socially, why a Finnish system will not be appropriate¹¹, mainly because the concept of equity, a foundational premise that has driven the Finnish educational reform, has been disputed throughout the history of this nation. It wasn't until the late 19th century when African Americans or women could receive an education, and advocacy against discrimination ripple throughout the nation even to this day. The directing of funding will forever be a complex web of power and incentives to navigate, but that doesn't mean we can't use the inspiration we have gotten from Finland to empower future cohorts of teachers to formulate their own professional contribution to the teaching literature and community, to resourcefully operate in their own context, and to serve as whom kids can respect and (some) aspire to become. Strengthening cooperation amongst teachers in district-wide communities and training programs, even with initial dips in test scores and report card grades, is key to reinforcing long

¹⁰ In the introduction of *Transforming Education*, many educational researchers "dispute the blanket generalization that American schools are failing and highlight instead the fact that underachievement is concentrated in schools serving low-income and racially/culturally marginalized students. These researchers suggest that policies enacted during the past decade under the No Child Left Behind Act have failed to close the achievement gap between social groups because these policies have ignored the abundant research examining the causes of educational underachievement. They argue strongly (in agreement with the OECD) that a focus on equity is essential to improve overall educational performance" (9).

¹¹ "The USA provides a good example for comparing alternate routes, because there are hundreds of teacher training programs. This contrasts sharply with the scheme in Finland, where we find practically a single access path for teaching..." (Eduardo 10).

term growth of teaching quality. Requiring teachers in training to contribute to research will reinforce teachers' identities as intellectual dignitaries, not just cogs in the system who grade tests. In the long run, this can lower teacher turnover rate and create positive reinforcing feedback loops that Finland is known for.

Pasi Sahlberg: Thanks for the insights, everyone. This has been a fruitful conversation. I will draft a report of these insights and show them to the president.

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