

FINNLAND. AAMU.  
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***Opening speech by Dr. Pasi Sahlberg***

Alvar Aalto, Finland's most renowned architect and designer, made the wise statement that "we should work for simple, good, undecorated things, but things which are in harmony with the human being and organically suited to the little man in the street." Similarly, one might say that Finnish teachers prefer traditional, reliable, calm teaching over the sort of heroic feats we've seen in the movies. If anyone thinks they're going to find a bunch of Robin Williamses from *Dead Poets' Society* in Finnish schools, they will be disappointed. Finns don't believe a few super-teachers can save their children and their schools. It takes a whole village to raise a child.

The world has been talking and writing about the Finnish education system for nearly a decade and a half now. At the start of the twenty-first century, the results of the first PISA exam of 15-year-olds' academic skills instantly plucked Finland from the periphery of the education world and placed it centre stage. This came as a huge surprise to Finns and everyone else as well. At the same time, there was talk in Sweden, Norway, France and especially here

in Germany about 'PISA shock' as a result of those countries' weaker-than-expected results in the international league tables. It also marked the start of the new practice of 'PISA tourism' in search of the secrets of good education. For years now, Finland has hosted a larger number of these visitors than any other country.

Some of the so-called 'PISA tourists' regard Finnish schools as a utopia, a fairytale land where teaching is regarded as a dream job by young people, where parents trust in the ability of schools to educate their children to be good human beings, and where political decision-makers all agree on the direction of changes in educational policy.

To other visitors, the Finnish school system is regarded as an oddball swimming against the current of other countries' education systems, or as a young Hollywood-style rebel. Children do not begin formal education until the age of seven. The school day is shorter, and less homework is set than in other countries. Finnish schoolchildren do not spend time sitting lots of tests or exams – the only test that is applied as a universal yardstick is the matriculation exam, which comes at the end of secondary school.

So what is the 'golden thread' that runs through the world-famous story of Finnish schools? Why do schoolchildren in Finland outperform their peers in most other countries? Many books and articles around the world have addressed these questions. My own story includes three aspects that address this topic.

The first aspect describes the way Finland has worked over many years to build an excellent education system based on the principles of equality and fairness for all children. This means that schools are funded according to pupils' needs; every child has the right to early-childhood education and a secure school

environment; all schools pay attention to pupils' health and well-being; and the curriculum emphasises each individual's overall growth and learning.

The second aspect is about how teachers in Finnish schools have more time during the school day to interact and collaborate with their colleagues than in most other countries. For example, a typical Finnish teacher working in a secondary school spends around half as many hours teaching per day as their American counterpart. Collaboration among teachers in a school strengthens professional networks and social capital, which many studies have shown to be linked to improving the quality of teaching and learning.

The third aspect of my account describes how play has a central role in Finnish educational concepts about children's development and learning. Finnish legislation ensures that every hour of teaching must include a quarter-hour for pupils' own activities. In most schools, these breaks are used by the children for self-directed play. In many other countries, play and other activities during the school day have had to give way to the teaching of reading and maths. For example, in the United States a quarter of primary schools have abandoned recesses altogether, in order to fit more classroom study into the school day.

The reason the Finnish education system has become a world leader is not because Finns have managed to improve teaching and learning in schools using the same methods as in other education systems. Some have wondered whether it might be because Finland's small, homogeneous population has made it easier to implement changes that are difficult to achieve elsewhere. What is true is that Finland has bravely pursued its own path of change, which differs from the paths of other countries.

In my own experience, the rest of the world associates Finland with two

things: education and Nokia. There are some interesting points that the Finnish school system and Nokia have in common. Both can trace their origins back to the mid-1860s. The inspiration for both came from ideas and innovations discovered in Germany. The man who brought those ideas to Nokia was Fredrik Idestam, an engineer, while the father of the school system was the clergyman Uno Cygnaeus. In addition, the rise of both Nokia and Finnish schools to global prominence was accelerated by unprecedented Finnish ideas and innovations in the 1970s and '80s. That was when Nokia began to specialise in mobile communication technology and primary schools based on universal general education took on their current form.

People whose job it is to ponder the future of education would do well to study the story of Nokia in detail now that its mobile phone business has been sold off. One reason Nokia lost out in the high-tech contest was its rapid rise to the top and the complacency that accompanied it. It's not easy to be at the centre of attention from your consumers and competitors. It's difficult to reform something that works well, especially in Finland. When you're at the pinnacle of success, you have to know how to spot the next big opportunity and to seize it, even at the stage where today is still better than yesterday.

People often use terms like 'persistent', 'able to solve fiendish problems' and 'moderate diplomats' to describe Finns. These characteristics crop up in fictional literature about Finnish people as well as historical works detailing the achievements of great statesmen. Solving the challenges that people face will depend on how well we succeed in guiding each person via the education system to discover their own talent. "For the past fifteen years, Finland has been well ahead of the curve in education," Sir Ken Robinson wrote in his afterword to my book. He

added: “The rest of the world has much to learn from these Finnish Lessons. One of the most important is that this story is still evolving and is far from over.”