



education review // reseñas educativas

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

**editors: gustavo e. fischman /
melissa cast-brede / gene v glass**

Supported by the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

October 7, 2015

ISSN 1094-5296

Sahlberg, P. (2014). *Finnish lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

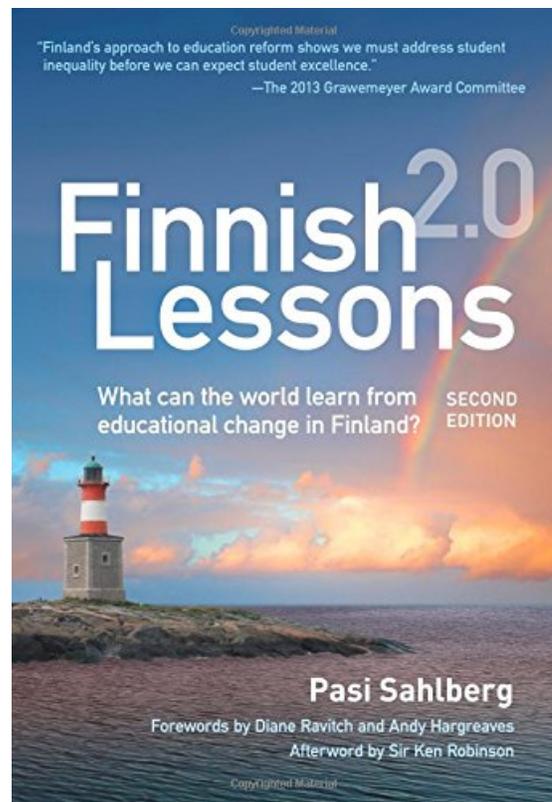
Pp. 264

ISBN: 978-0807755853

Reviewed by Margarita Pivovarova, Ph.D.
& Tray J. Geiger
Arizona State University
United States

Pasi Sahlberg is well-known outside his own country due to the success of the first edition of his book *Finnish lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* (2011). The book and the subsequent interest in the educational wonder of Finland that the book fueled made him one of the most popular guest speakers at educational forums and conferences over the world. Over the last several decades, Sahlberg has been advising governments on education policy reforms, and he also worked for European and international institutions. He also served as a liaison between international audiences and those who were part of the “Finnish miracle,” explaining the reasons behind the success of the Finnish educational system. In the second edition of his book he speaks not only as an insider and as an educator himself but also as an expert in education policy reforms.

With the recent quest to fix the “crisis” in education today, specifically in the United States, it is time to learn from an education system that has taken the world by surprise. In the past 10 to 15



Pivovarova, M., & Geiger, T. J. (2015, October 7). Review of *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* by Pasi Sahlberg et al. *Education Review*, 22.
<http://edrev.asu.edu/index.php/ER/article/view/1911>

years, Finland has also been highly ranked in economic competitiveness, governance, and the happiness of its people. In *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?*, Sahlberg (2014) demonstrates the “Finnish miracle” through his expert lens.

What initially drew attention to Finland and its education system was Finnish students consistently scoring near the top of the range in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) for reading, mathematics and science. On the 2012 PISA, Finland ranked third in these three subjects combined, after Korea and Japan. In comparison, American students' combined performance in reading, mathematics and science placed the United States at 21st among 34 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. While validity of PISA comparisons and rankings are being questioned (e.g., Kreiner & Christensen, 2014) there is something about “the Finnish way” that deserves to be highlighted and explained in depth.

Sahlberg (2014) says he is often asked about the Finnish educational system during keynote addresses and interviews. The basic theme of such questions usually revolves around the coveted “Finnish way” of education and whether it can be successfully imported into and adopted by other systems and countries around the world. In other words, educators, policymakers, and the general public around the globe want a recipe for recreating the Finnish miracle on their home ground. In the second edition of his book, Sahlberg responds to the audience with his view about the roots, past, and present of what he sees as the future of the Finnish education system.

In *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, Sahlberg does not discuss Finland’s successes in changing its educational system, but rather provides an assessment of the system that ascended in two decades from a quite mediocre education system to a superstar among OECD countries. Yet, given that over the most recent decade, Finland started seeing a downward trend in its students’ PISA scores, Sahlberg suggests his personal views and reasons for why that might be the case. This discussion is

also an attempt to understand why the “Finnish way” may not be a universal solution for all systems’ and countries’ educational dilemmas.

Another major and related theme of the book is the contrast of market-based policy initiatives in education that are prevalent in many advanced countries, including England and the United States, such as accountability policies that focus on standardized testing, school choice and competition, and paying teachers for their performance (really, for their students’ test scores) versus education systems that fully exploit the social and human nature of the teaching profession and rely on carefully selected, trained and motivated teachers.

The story of the “Finnish miracle” unfolds throughout five chapters, where each chapter represents a building block of the Finnish education system. The story is built around 10 “notions” that define the Finnish education system and its basic principles. These principles are learning from the past; creating equal opportunities; motivated teachers; a competitive teacher preparation system; teacher autonomy; focus on achievement within the country, not international competition; a personalized approach to education; less time spent on teaching and studying; and the absence of standardized testing. Throughout the book, Sahlberg contrasts these notions against the market-based accountability system that exists in most modern nations.

The first chapter is an introduction to the miracle—Finland’s education system and its guiding principles. Sahlberg also introduces the historical context of Finland’s present-day education system by discussing the country’s education and economic states at the end of World War II, and how those circumstances led to broad-sweeping changes to the country’s social, cultural, economic, and political systems. Subsequently, this chapter presents a historical excursion into the Finnish education system and its rapid development over the last few decades. The description of the transformations through which the education system underwent coupled with the associated national

historical events provides a context for the rest of the book to unfold.

In chapter two, Sahlberg focuses on the progression of the education system over the last few decades and relates it to the societal and cultural norms prevalent in Finland. He also documents overall trends in the achievement and educational attainment of Finns over the recent decade, and compares those trends to the outcomes in the rest of the OECD countries. This chapter subtitle, “Less is More,” points out what Sahlberg considers to be three main paradoxes: (1) teach less, learn more; (2) test less, learn more; and (3) achieve more equality through growing diversity.

Unfortunately, for the curious reader, Sahlberg does not provide enough justification for why the first two points are working so well in Finland. He states the facts about a typical school day in Finland and compares that to a typical day in an American school. However, it remains unclear how these differences translate into the differences in student outcomes. Related to the final paradox, Sahlberg provides statistics to demonstrate an important point: when the majority of the differences in Finnish student outcomes are observed *within* a school and not *between* schools, it indicates that “schools successfully deal with social inequalities” (p. 97), as inequality between schools suggests that there are gaps between different schools’ quality and performance.

Chapter three is the core of the book and is devoted to the strongest link in the chain of the Finns’ education system – the teachers who are the real “Finnish advantage.” Sahlberg is a well-known advocate for a carefully selected, properly trained, and motivated teaching force. He argues that “it is more important to ensure that teachers’ work in schools is based on professional dignity, social respect and collegiality so that they can fulfill their intention of selecting teaching as lifetime careers together with their likeminded peers” (p. 135), compared to simply having smart teachers in schools. Sahlberg identifies three “peculiarities” of the Finnish teacher education policy that, in his view, create its comparative advantage in an international perspective. First, the most able and

talented individuals go into teaching; being a teacher is rated as one of Finland's top professions, even above being a doctor or lawyer (Liiten, 2004, as cited in Sahlberg, 2014), and Finns relish and respect their teachers. Second, there is close collaboration between subject faculties and schools of education, as faculties in all areas of Finnish universities see teacher education as an integral component in all academic programs. Finally, teacher education in Finland has a systematic and research-based structure so that each teacher is a researcher and has experience in theory, methodology, and critical reflection. Sahlberg points out that simply transporting Finnish teachers and school principals into a random state in the United States is not a solution that would solve the U.S. "crisis," and gains in student achievement most likely would be minimal. This is because the Finnish education system is a complex institution where education policies create professional and social contexts that allow for the realization of teachers' "knowledge, experience and passion for the good of their students' learning" (p. 175). Sahlberg says that transplanting Finnish educators into the U.S. would not result in the same success in the U.S. as in Finland as Finnish teachers would be severely limited in utilizing their skill and passion due to the education policies in the U.S.

Chapter four situates the Finnish education system into the context of the Global Educational Reform Movement, or GERM (which, given the context of the book, could allude to real germs in education systems across the globe). To Sahlberg, Finland is a leader in the anti-GERM movement. He attempts to introduce juxtaposition between what typically occurs under the GERM and what Finns do (regarding learning standards, collaboration/competition, accountability, etc.). Sahlberg describes GERM as being based on five principles: standardized learning, focus on literacy and numeracy, test-based accountability, competition between schools, and school choice. This opposes the basic Finnish principles summarized by Sahlberg as personalized learning, focus on finding your passion, trust-based responsibility, collaboration among schools, and

equity of outcomes. He argues in favor of trust (i.e., giving the power of authority to schools and teachers), and against centralized accountability and regulation which is represented by GERM, and emphasizes that none of GERM's principles have been adopted in Finland. Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, Sahlberg (2012) concludes that “[l]essons from Finland help you to kill 99.9% of GERMs” (para. 13).

The last chapter offers a perspective on a potentially successful adoption of the Finnish miracle by other education systems. The main idea remains the same as before – Sahlberg contrasts the market-based initiatives (broadly defined as accountability based on standardized testing) with what could be called “grass-root” initiatives, or the Finnish ways to prevail in the education system. Sahlberg also offers a number of innovations to keep the Finnish miracle running, some more attractive than others. We found the idea of personalized curriculum with the appropriate technology as the most appealing one. It is true that a child's curiosity should be addressed in school through a personalized approach to teaching.

In sum, Sahlberg's work is enlightening in that it espouses an education system that is different from many other systems in advanced countries across the world and provides solid background on the historical context that allowed Finland's education system to transform into a powerhouse. While the book does not include much about how support was received for such widespread changes on a micro level, and only very briefly discusses overcoming the opposition of those against making such changes to the Finnish education system, it fulfills Sahlberg's goal of explaining the very questions he is frequently asked about the “Finnish way.”

References

Kreiner, S., & Christensen, K. B. (2014). Analyses of model fit and robustness. A new look at the PISA scaling model underlying ranking of countries according to reading literacy.

- Psychometrika*, 79(2), 210-231. doi:
10.1007/s11336-013-9347-z
- Sahlberg, P. (2011). *Finnish lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Sahlberg, P. (2012). Global Educational Reform Movement is here! [Web log]. Retrieved from <http://pasisahlberg.com/global-educational-reform-movement-is-here/>
- Sahlberg, P. (2014). *Finnish lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

About the Reviewers

Margarita Pivovarova, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College

Arizona State University

United States

margarita.pivovarova@asu.edu

Margarita Pivovarova is an Assistant Professor of Education Economics at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University.

Margarita's research interests include education policy and related quantitative research.

Specifically, her research studies the economic consequences of accountability and financial incentives in education. In addition, she studies peer interactions in school contexts and optimal classroom/school design.

Tray Geiger

Doctoral Student

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College

Arizona State University

tjgeiger@asu.edu

Tray Geiger is a doctoral student in the Educational Policy and Evaluation program in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. His research interests include educational policy, high-stakes testing, equity issues, and Critical Race Theory. He has presented

scholarship at national conferences, including those sponsored by the American Educational Research Association, the American Evaluation Association, and the Association for the Study of Higher Education.



education review // reseñas educativas

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

editors: gustavo e. fischman /

melissa cast-brede / gene v glass

Supported by the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

 *Education Review/Reseñas Educativas/Resenhas Educativas* is supported by the edXchange initiative's Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and ***Education Review***, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or ***Education Review***. ***Education Review*** is published by the Scholarly Communications Group of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University.

Please contribute reviews at <http://www.edrev.info/contribute.html>.

Connect with *Education Review* on Facebook

(<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Education-Review/178358222192644>) and on Twitter @EducReview