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Editors

Finland's Famous Education System

Unvarnished Insights into Finnish Schooling


 Springer

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Preface and Acknowledgements

As the editors of this substantial book, we see it as a response to over-excited and misleading views of Finnish education. Here, Sonja Kosunen and Jaakko Kauko describe some of the challenges of being Finnish educational researchers when Finland's PISA reputation was at its peak:

Sonja: When I was working as an intern at the Centre of Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) at the OECD in Paris I was repeatedly asked informally by other interns why I was not working in the PISA-unit, as I am Finnish. In the very international OECD-frame the Finns were somewhat regarded as people who presumably discussed education policy and practice even on their lunch breaks. More recently I was interviewing policymakers across multiple Nordic countries. When I asked questions about the relevance of quality and performance in education, the interviewees very often turned the question into a matter of PISA, and positioned me as an expert of good quality education because I was from a Finnish university. This was really confusing at times, as it turned the roles in the interview situation upside down.

Jaakko: During the heyday of Finnish PISA hype, going to conferences abroad often meant answering a series of questions that usually had little to do with your own presentation but rather about validating or debunking theories of Finnish success in the PISA international large-scale assessment. Being a researcher from Finland connotated authority in the topic. In one sense this book is a very long and delayed answer to many of these questions. Then again, it is not: as a researcher interested in Finland, my aim is not to try to explain why children got their answers right to the questions that the OECD thought would be relevant to measure, but rather to understand how education as a societal and political phenomenon works.

At the same time as Finnish education was being lauded, we could see it becoming criticised in a commercially-led 'crisis' account that was just as blinkered as the PISA hype. Piia Seppänen was following this development:

Piia: Around 2015 I started to research commercial actors that wanted to make products under the slogan of "Finnish education" drawing on PISA tested 'quality'. It was clear that Finland's educational reputation was becoming an international cash-cow but with little concern for the impact within Finland. What also struck me as contradictory was that the commercial actors were often not only celebrating the strengths of Finnish education but criticising schools in Finland as being old-fashioned and in need of change. One side of this

criticism was their aim to open up business opportunities, because the same people making the criticisms also claimed to provide the products and services that would be the solution.

It was apparent to the editors that both the story of Finnish success in PISA results and the growing edu-business criticisms had narrowed down visions for possible critique or problems in the Finnish educational system that were genuinely related to equality and social justice. There was the need for a book that would provide a wide-ranging picture of comprehensive schooling that went beyond the simplistic celebratory or crisis accounts that had dominated Finnish education. This book draws on the critical traditions of sociology and policy studies that have existed all along but have not been given the same limelight as some success stories. It shows that as well as supporting many students in a wonderful way, the Finnish education system also includes points of exclusion, marginalisation and the construction of educational inequalities. The two exist side by side in such a way that the Finnish education system is not a secret nor a miracle either there are just lesser-known sides of the story. Another requirement in the circumstances was that the book would not itself be yet another attempt to make money off the Finnish education ‘success story’ or the solutions to its supposed shortcomings: hence, we have made it Open Access.

The book was also helped along by an international collaboration that typically crossed 11 time zones. While most of the authors and editors are Finnish, Martin Thrupp is a New Zealand academic who also worked in England for a time. Hosted mainly by the University of Turku, he visited Finland a number of times between 2016 and 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic, attending various conferences and seminars and becoming involved in an Academy of Finland-funded research project on private actors in comprehensive schooling in Finland, Sweden and New Zealand. There were also Erasmus+ mobility programmes and some other opportunities that allowed Martin to travel to Finland and Piia and Sonja (and some of the other contributors to this book) to visit New Zealand:

Martin: Having worked on New Zealand education policy for years I was looking for something different. Finland captured my imagination as another small country with people who have a similarly self-deprecating and quirky sense of humour as New Zealanders. (The expression *Suomi Mainittu*—‘Finland Mentioned’ works very much like our own ‘World Famous in New Zealand’.) I also found that the academics I was meeting had a refreshingly more critical view of Finnish education than what I had come to expect from my previous reading.

Clearly, a book like this needed detailed knowledge of the potential Finnish authors and these were identified and arranged by the Finnish editors. After that chapters went back and forth across the globe to suit the daytime working hours of whoever was working on the latest draft.

Now that the book is finished, there is always a risk of how it will be used. No matter what we write in this preface, the book’s text can be used to support different and even opposing political agendas. Small signals have already emerged that the public narrative of Finnish success is turning into a narrative of past success. This book could be used to argue for the reasons for the decline in learning outcomes. The catch is that whatever the reasons for success or failure are, they are the same. For this

reason, the book is, in our opinion, much-needed. It presents, hopefully in a reader-friendly way, the depth of societally oriented educational research in Finland and helps to navigate the basic mechanisms of schooling in society. If it helps anyone interested in the questions of education to broaden their perspective, it will have served its purpose.

While editing this book, we have seen a number of long-term trends culminating. The COVID-19 outbreak gravely affected societies and their education systems around the globe and raised questions about how the loss of biodiversity is linked to pandemics. In February 2022, Russia escalated its 2014 invasion of Ukraine to an even more ruthless war, which will affect many generations to come. Record heat waves, droughts and flooding are showing how bad climate change already is with present-day carbon emissions. In the face of these momentous developments, it is our challenge as educational researchers, teachers, leaders and policymakers to understand the social and political conditions under which current and future generations will be educated. We can hold on to hope, but we also need realistic accounts such as those provided in this collection to show the way forward.

We want to acknowledge the support we have had from many quarters for this book. We thank all the authors who have contributed as well as the emeriti professors who are interviewed in the epilogue. Many thanks also to the Faculty of Education at the University of Turku, the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Helsinki, the Faculty of Education and Culture at Tampere University, the Academy of Finland (grant numbers: 310242 and 314735), Ministry of Education and Culture (grant number: OKM/823/520/2020), Turku Institute for Advanced Studies (TIAS) and the Swedish Cultural Foundation in Finland, all of which have provided financial support. We also wish to acknowledge anonymous reviewers for their invaluable work without which high-quality academic texts would not be possible. The editors have consciously avoided conflicts of interest when undertaking peer review or arranging blind-review for the chapters in the book. Grace Ma and others at Springer have helped mightily with the publication of the book over the years since it was first discussed. The editors would like to also thank Margaret Drummond (Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research, University of Waikato) and Essi Viertola (Tampere University) for their meticulous work in copy-editing the manuscript. Finally, we owe great thanks to our families and friends who have supported us during this book project.

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