PEL Pensamiento Educativo. Revista de Investigación Educacional Latinoamericana
2015, 52(1), 136-145

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile
Facultad de Educación

A Model Lesson. Finland Shows that Equity and Excellence Can Co-exist in Education

Un sistema escolar modelo. Finlandia demuestra que la equidad y la excelencia pueden coexistir en la educación

Pasi Sahlberg

Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, USA

Abstract

Finland's education story is important because it brings hope to all those worried about whether improving their educational systems is at all possible. Finland has a unique educational system because it has progressed from mediocrity to being a model educational system and «strong performer» over the past three decades. If Chile intends to follow the Finnish Way and listen to successful international experience from other countries, there is no better lesson than investing systematically and wisely in enhancing equity in education. This conference paper offers a discussion to all those worried about whether improving their educational systems is at all possible. The United States, England, Sweden, Germany, and Chile, to mention just a few, are among those where public education is increasingly challenged because of endemic failure to provide adequate learning opportunities to all children.

Keywords: Chile, Finland, educational reform, public education

Post to:
Pasi Sahlberg
Harvard Graduate School of Education
6 Appian Way, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA.
Email: pasi_sahlberg@gse.harvard.edu

ISSN: 0719-0409 DDI: 203.262, Santiago, Chile
doi: 10.7764/PEL.52.1.2015.22

Resumen

La historia de la educación finlandesa es significativa porque transmite esperanza a todos quienes se interesan en mejorar sus sistemas educativos en caso de ser posible. Finlandia posee un sistema educativo único que ha progresado de la mediocridad a un modelo y se ha transformado en un «actor sólido» durante las últimas tres décadas. Si Chile pretende seguir el método finlandés o prestar atención a las experiencias internacionales exitosas de otros países, no hay mejor lección que invertir sistemática y prudentemente en mejorar la equidad en la educación. El presente artículo propone un debate para todos los que se preocupan por mejorar sus sistemas educacionales en caso de ser posible. Estados Unidos, Inglaterra, Suecia, Alemania y Chile, por mencionar solo algunos, están entre los países donde la educación pública está cada vez más cuestionada debido a un fracaso endémico para ofrecer oportunidades de aprendizaje adecuadas a todos los niños.

Palabras clave: Chile, Finlandia, reforma educacional, educación pública

International indicators show that Finland has one of the best-educated citizenries in the world, provides educational opportunities in an egalitarian manner, and makes efficient use of resources. But at the beginning of the 1990s, education in Finland was nothing special in international terms. The performance of Finnish students on international assessments was close to overall averages, except in reading, where they did better than most of their peers in other countries. The unexpected and jarring recession of that period brought Finland to the edge of a financial breakdown. Bold and immediate measures were necessary to fix national fiscal imbalances and revive the foreign trade that disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990.

Today, there are countries around the world where education leaders find their own educational systems in a situation very similar to that of Finland some decades ago. The United States, England, Sweden, Germany, and Chile, to mention just a few, are among those where public education is increasingly challenged because of endemic failure to provide adequate learning opportunities to all children. Finland's education history is important because it brings hope to all those worried about whether improving their educational systems is at all possible.

Finland has a unique educational system because it has progressed from mediocrity to being a model educational system and «strong performer» over the past three decades. Finland is also special because it has been able to create an educational system where students learn well and where equitable education has translated into small variations in student performance between schools in different parts of the country. In Chile, for example, there are notable differences in student learning between different regions and schools in the country. This internationally rare status of Finland has been accomplished using reasonable financial resources and less effort than other reform initiatives.

Many have wondered what has made Finnish schools so successful. The equitable education system is a result of systematic attention to social justice and early intervention to help those with special needs, and close interplay between education and other sectors —particularly the health and social sectors— in Finnish society. Complimentary school lunches, comprehensive welfare services provided in all schools, and early support to those in need have been made available for all children in all Finnish schools, free of charge. By law, every child has a right to these welfare and support services in their school. Therefore, attempts to explain the success of the education system in Finland should be put into the wider context and seen as a part of the overall function of democratic civil society. Economists have been interested in finding out why Finland has been able to become the most competitive economy in the world. Educators are trying to figure out the secret of Finland's high educational performance. The quality of a nation —or its education system— is rarely a result of any single factor. The entire society needs to perform satisfactorily.

Enhancing equity in education

Education policies that have driven Finnish reforms since the 1970s have prioritized the creation of equal opportunities, raised quality, and increased participation within all educational levels across Finnish

society (Aho, Pitkanen, & Sahlberg, 2006). As a result, more than 99% of the age cohort successfully completes compulsory *comprehensive school*, about 95% continue their education in upper secondary schools, and an additional 3% enroll in a voluntary 10th grade of *comprehensive school*. About 95% of Finns eventually receive a secondary education certificate that provides access to higher education.

Equity in education is an important feature in Nordic welfare states. It means more than just opening access to equal education for all (or equality). Equity in education is a principle that aims at guaranteeing high quality education for all in different places and circumstances regardless of children's family background, socioeconomic status, domicile, or individual conditions. In the Finnish context, equity is about having a socially fair and inclusive education system that is based on equality of educational opportunities and fairness of allocating resources to education. As a result of the *comprehensive school* reform of the 1970s, education opportunities for good quality learning have spread rather evenly across Finland (OECD, 2013). There was a visible achievement gap between young adults at the end of compulsory education in the early 1970s, due to very different educational orientations associated with the old system. This knowledge gap strongly corresponded with the socioeconomic divide within Finnish society at that time.

After abolishing early selection of children and streaming them according to academic ability in the mid-1980s, and thereby making learning expectations the same for all students, the achievement gap between low and high achievers began to decrease. Clear evidence of more equitable learning outcomes came from the OECD's *first* PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) survey in 2000. In that study, Finland had the smallest performance variations between schools in reading, mathematics, and science of all OECD nations (OECD, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2013). A similar trend has continued in all PISA studies since then.

An essential element of the Finnish *comprehensive school* is systematic attention to those students who have special educational needs. Special education is an important part of education and care in Finland. It refers to designed educational and psychological services within the education sector for those with special needs. The basic idea is that, with early recognition of learning difficulties and social and behavioral problems, appropriate professional support can be provided to individuals as early as possible.

A new special education system in Finland since 2011 is defined under the title of *Learning and Schooling Support* and all such students are increasingly integrated into regular classrooms. There are three categories of support for those pupils possessing special needs: (a) general support, (b) intensified support, and (c) special support. The first includes actions by the regular classroom teacher in terms of differentiation, as well as efforts by the school to cope with student diversity. The second category consists of remedial support from the teacher, co-teaching with the special education teacher, and individual or small group learning with a part-time special education teacher. The third category includes a wide range of special education services, from full-time general education to placement in a special institution. All students in this category are assigned an *Individual Learning Plan* that takes into account the characteristics of each learner and thereby personalizes learning to meet each learner's abilities. As a consequence of this renewed special education system, the number of those students categorized as special needs students will decrease.

Many believe that Finland's special education system is one of the key factors that explain the world-class results in achievement and equity of Finland's school system in recent international studies. My personal experience, based on working with and visiting hundreds of Finnish schools, is that most schools pay very particular attention to those children who need more help in becoming successful, compared to other students. Many teachers and administrators who have visited Finnish schools, including experts and politicians from Chile, think the same way but are often stuck in the middle of *excellence vs. equity* quandaries due to external demands and regulations in their own countries. Standardized testing that compares individuals to statistical averages, competition that leaves weaker students behind, and merit-based pay for teachers all jeopardize schools' efforts to enhance equity. None of these factors currently exist in the Finnish education system.

In the 2012–2013 school year, almost one third of all students in *comprehensive school* took part in part-time or full-time special education within the old system. More than one fifth of *all students* were in part-time special education that focuses on curing minor dysfunctions in speaking, reading,

writing, or learning difficulties in mathematics or foreign languages. Respectively, 8.5% of students were permanently transferred to a special education group, class, or institution. The number of students in permanent special education has doubled in the last 10 years; at the same time, the number of special education institutions has declined steadily since the early 1990s. Since 2011 only those students who receive intensified or special support in school are considered as special needs students. In the 2012-2013 school year in *comprehensive schools* 12.7% of students were included in this new type of special education, 7.7% received special support, and 5% had intensified support. In vocational upper secondary education, approximately 14.3% of all students were in special education during the 2012–2013 school year.

Unlike the Chilean school system, as well as many others today, the Finnish system has not been infected by market-based education reforms that typically emphasize competition between schools, high-stakes standardized student-testing policies, and privatization of public schools. The main reason is that the education community in Finland has remained unconvinced that competition and choice with more standardized testing than students evidently require would be good for schools. The ultimate success of a high-stakes testing policy is whether it positively affects student learning, not whether it increases student scores on a particular test. As a result, Finnish education today offers a compelling model because of its high quality and equitable student learning. As Figure 1 shows, Finland, Canada, Estonia, Japan, the Netherlands, and South Korea have education systems that rate highly in quality and equity; they produce consistent learning results regardless of students' socioeconomic status.

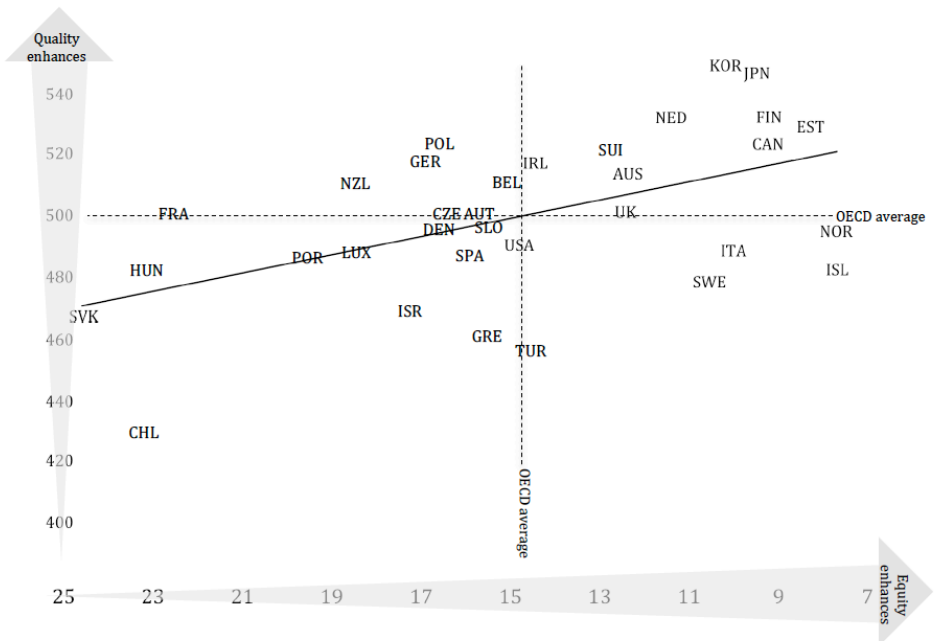

Figure 1. Equity and quality of education outcomes (mathematics) in OECD countries in 2012 (Sahlberg, 2015).

The high-performing education system in Finland is not a result of educational factors alone. Basic structures of the Finnish welfare state play a crucial role in providing all children and their families with equitable conditions for starting a successful educational path at the age of seven. Early childhood care, one year of free preschool for the entire age cohort of six-year-olds, comprehensive health services, and preventive measures to identify possible learning and development difficulties before children start schooling are accessible to all in Finland. In order to prevent children from being ranked according to their educational performance in schools, grade-based assessments are not normally used during the first five years of *comprehensive school*. It has been an important principle in developing elementary education in Finland that structural elements that cause student failure in schools should be removed.

Preventing failure in school

Grade repetition in the old Finnish school system was not rare in elementary schools, and it was an integral educational principle of grammar school. In some cases, a student repeated the 3rd grade of elementary school in order to improve knowledge and skills required in the grammar school admission test at the end of the 4th grade. At the time of the introduction of the new nine-year comprehensive school, approximately 12% of students in each grammar school grade did not progress from their grade. Up to half of those graduating from upper-secondary grammar school repeated one or more grades at some point of their schooling (Välijärvi & Sahlberg, 2008). Furthermore, significant numbers of students abandoned school before completion —often after not being able to progress from one grade to the next.

In the early days of Finnish basic school reform, grade repetition was seen as an inadequate and incorrect strategy for fixing individual learning or social deficiencies. In the elementary school, grade repeaters who had difficulties in one or two subjects were often labeled as «failing» students who also had behavioral and personality problems. This educational stigma normally had a dramatic negative impact on students and also lowered teachers' expectations regarding these students' abilities to learn. Grade repetition created a vicious circle that, for many young people, cast a negative shadow right into adulthood. Educational failure is linked to an individual's role in society and is characterized by unfavorable attitudes toward learning and further education. Grade repetition, in most cases, led to increased social inequality and lower equity rather than helping students to overcome academic and social problems, as shown in Figure 2. In Chile, according to the OECD, more than one quarter of students reported that they had repeated a grade at least once in primary, lower secondary, or upper secondary school (OECD, 2010, 2011). Retention rates are much higher in Spain and France where more than one third of students have repeated a grade at least once.

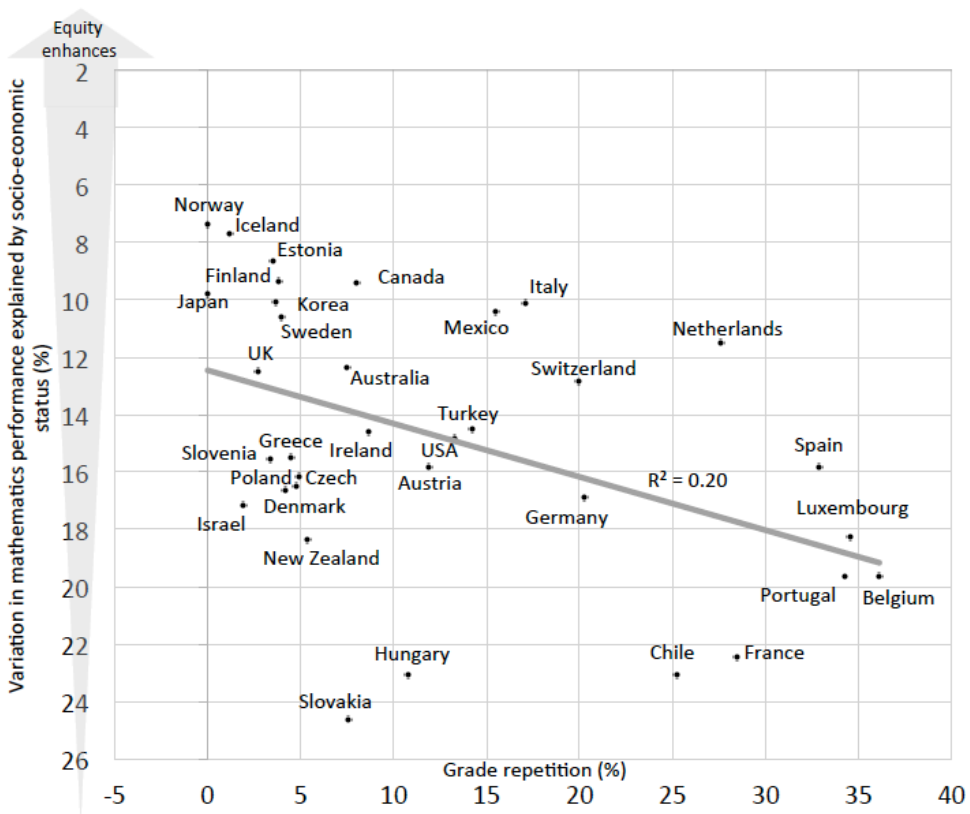

Figure 2. Grade repetition and equity in school education in OECD countries in 2012 (Sahlberg, 2015).

The *Comprehensive school* quickly changed grade repetition policies and practices. The new comprehensive school did not completely eliminate the problem of repeating grades, but the number of students who repeated grades in the comprehensive school decreased significantly. Personalized learning and differentiation became basic principles in organizing schooling for students across society. The assumption that all students can achieve common educational goals if learning is organized according to each student's characteristics and needs became another foundation. Retention and ability grouping was clearly against these ideals. Different students have to learn to work and study together in the same class. Diversity of students' personalities, abilities, and orientations has to be taken into account in crafting learning environments and choosing pedagogical methods in schools. This turned out to be one of the most demanding professional challenges for teachers. Even today, schools are searching for an optimal educational and economic solution for Finland's rapidly increasing diversity. It is true that Finland long remained ethnically homogeneous. However, since it joined the European Union in 1995, cultural and ethnic diversification has been faster than in other European Union countries, especially in districts and schools in larger cities, where first —and second— generation immigrants account for one quarter of the total population.

Minimizing grade repetition has been possible primarily because special education has become an integral part of each and every school in Finland. Every child has the right to receive personalized support provided early on by trained professionals as part of normal schooling. This special support is arranged in many different ways today. As described earlier, special education in Finland is increasingly organized within general mainstream schooling.

Upper secondary schools —both general and vocational— operate using modular curriculum units rather than year-based grades. Thus, grade repetition in its conventional form has vanished from Finnish upper secondary schools. This non-class structure has also abolished classes in which the same age group of students moves from one lesson to another and from one grade to the next. In the early 1980s approximately 15% of students repeated a grade at least once. Today students build their own personalized learning schedules from a menu of courses offered in their school or by other education institutions. Studying in upper secondary school is therefore flexible and selected courses can be completed at a different pace depending on the students' abilities and life situations. Rather than repeating an entire grade, a student only repeats those courses that were not passed satisfactorily. Most students complete upper secondary school in the prescribed time of three years, although some progress faster and some need more time than others.

Teacher professionalism and leadership

All teachers in Finnish primary, junior high, and high schools must hold a master's degree; preschool and kindergarten teachers must hold a bachelor's degree. There are no alternative ways to receive a teacher's credential in Finland; the university degree constitutes a license to teach. Primary school teachers, who teach grades one to six, major in education, while upper-grade teachers focus their studies in a particular subject, for example mathematics, as well as didactics, consisting of pedagogical content knowledge specific to that subject.

Teacher education is based on a combination of research, practice, and reflection, meaning that it must be supported by scientific knowledge and focused on thinking processes and cognitive skills used in conducting research. In addition to studying educational theory, content, and subject-specific pedagogy, each prospective teacher for primary school and beyond completes a master's thesis on a topic relevant to educational practice. After completing secondary school and entering a teacher preparation program, successful completion of a master's degree in teaching generally between five and seven and a half years, depending on the field of study.

A broad-based teacher-preparation curriculum ensures that newly prepared Finnish teachers possess balanced knowledge and skills in both theory and practice. It also means they possess deep professional insight into education from several perspectives, including educational psychology and sociology, curriculum theories, student assessment, special needs education, and pedagogical content knowledge in selected subject areas. All eight universities that offer teacher education in Finland have their own strategies and curricula that are nationally coordinated to ensure coherence, but locally crafted in order to make the best use of the particular university's resources.

Subject teachers complete a master's degree in one major subject and one or two minor subjects. Students then apply to a university's department of teacher education to study pedagogy for their focus subject. Subject-focused pedagogy and research are advanced in Finnish universities, and cooperative and problem-based learning, reflective practice, and computer-supported education are common. A higher education evaluation system that rewards effective, innovative university teaching practice has served as an important driver of these developments.

Finland's commitment to *research-based teacher education* means that educational theories, research methodologies, and practice all play an important role in preparation programs. Teacher education curricula are designed to create a systematic pathway from the foundations of educational thinking to educational research methodologies and then on to more advanced fields of the educational sciences. Each student thereby builds an understanding of the systemic nature of educational practice. Finnish teachers also learn how to design, conduct, and present original research on practical or theoretical aspects of education.

Another important element of Finnish research-based teacher education is practical training in schools. Over the five-year program, candidates advance from basic teaching practice to advanced practice and then to final practice. During each of these phases, students observe lessons by experienced teachers, practice teaching observed by supervisory teachers, and deliver independent lessons to different groups of pupils while being evaluated by supervising teachers and department of teacher education professors and lecturers. Practicum experiences comprise about 15 to 25 percent of teachers' overall preparation time.

Discussion

The Finnish lesson for Chile

Finland has no private schools where parents pay for tuition. Education reform in Finland has been intended to make all public schools good places for children to learn and teachers to teach. It is difficult to have an equitable education system that has liberal school choice policies through private schools, because choice invariably increases segregation. The basic question is: *How should public funds be spent in education to create the most positive impact for society?* Finland has followed the path of fairness and inclusion in building a more equitable school system. Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) has made that appeal in her award-winning book *The Flat World and Education*. The new government in Sweden is now changing the course towards a more equitable and fair education system. Since the 1970s Finland has invested fairly and more heavily in schools within disadvantaged communities and insisted that the best way to provide equal educational opportunities for all is through public schools, just like the OECD (2013) advised others to do in its study *Equity and Quality in Education* three decades later. Perhaps elevating system-wide equity, rather than measured excellence, as the primary goal of public education is why so many young and talented Finns declare that teaching represents their dream career. Teaching is fundamentally about making differences in people's lives. If Chile intends to follow the Finnish Way or listen to the successful international experiences of other countries, there is no better lesson than investing systematically and wisely in enhancing equity in public schools. This would eventually mean adopting a new paradigm for schooling in Chile that would be different from the market-based education model. The direction is clear and so is the evidence: No education system has ever succeeded in improving by relying primarily on policies that currently form a foundation of the logic of management of education in Chile.

The original article was received on January 27th, 2015
The revised article was received on April 3rd, 2015
The article was accepted on April 6th, 2015

References

Aho, E., Pitkänen, K., & Sahlberg, P. (2006). *Policy development and reform principles of basic and secondary education in Finland since 1968.* Washington, DC: World Bank.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

OECD (2001). *Knowledge and skills for life: First results from PISA 2000*. Paris: Author.

OECD (2004). *Learning for tomorrow's world. First results from PISA 2003*. Paris: Author.

OECD (2007). *PISA 2006. Science competencies for tomorrow's world* (Vol. I). Paris: Author.

OECD (2010). *PISA 2009 results: What students know and can do. Student performance in reading, mathematics and science* (Vol. I). Paris: Author.

OECD (2011). When students repeat grades or are transferred out of school: What does it mean for education systems? *PISA in Focus*, *6*, 1-6.

OECD (2013). *PISA 2012 results: Excellence through equity* (Vol. II). Paris: Author.

Sahlberg, P. (2015). *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Välijärvi, J., & Sahlberg, P. (2008). Should 'failing' students repeat a grade? A retrospective response from Finland. *Journal of Educational Change, 9*(4), 385-389. doi: 10.1007/s10833-008-9089-3