



CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT

Finnish fairy stories

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Cambridge Assessment

April 2015

This analysis is not intended to denigrate the achievements of educators and members of society who put enormous, concerted effort into substantial reform of education in Finland. It is, however, designed to correct a whole series of misconceptions and misrepresentations about what was done when in that reform process. The reforms in Finland were impressive. But due to myopia and elementary errors in enquiry, what foreign analysts have taken from Finland frequently has amounted to ‘Finnish fairy stories’.

In the course of the 2010 UK Curriculum Review, a number of high-performing jurisdictions were scrutinised for the form and content of their national curriculum specifications. Following its emergence at the top of the first PISA survey in 2000, Finland was included in the countries examined. Because of its leading position in PISA 2000, Finland has been subject to very high levels of ‘educational tourism’. Cambridge applied a strict criterion to the analysis of countries for the curriculum review – they needed to have secured a period of sustained improvement, and the data on that period of improvement needed to be clear.

The children in PISA 2000 were 15 years of age. We assumed that it was unlikely that 1985 was the first year of the school system being of an interesting form, so we looked back at what was happening in the 1990s, the 1980s, and the 1970s. What we found was a period of genuine improvement in educational outcomes and a determined set of reforms to schooling - but what we discovered was that the vast bulk of educational tourists had arrived in Finland 2001 and made a serious error. They got off the plane and asked the Finns about the system in 2000 – not what it was like during the 1970s and 1980s, when standards were rising. During the time of sustained improvement, the system was very different; policy formation was distinctive, the way in which this policy was implemented was distinctive - and very different from the way things were in 2000.

This elementary error of analysis has been compounded by non-Finnish analysts who have asked questions only about the things in which they are interested; they have ‘found’ what they have been looking for, and not understood the importance of things which they have not asked about. Combined together, these two errors have given a very misleading picture of what Finland genuinely appears to have achieved, and how.

The analysis here is presented as a series of statements and ripostes to put the record straight:

There is no inspection and no national testing in Finland

It is indeed the case that Finland currently does not have Ofsted-style inspection. But in the 1970s, during its period of transition to fully-comprehensive education, the system had highly centralised inspection and testing arrangements. The tests were administered by a university unit on behalf of the National Board of Education, on a sample basis across **all grades**, not just at key points of transition. These were perceived very much as an external check on attainment.

Both inspection and national testing were designed to ‘guarantee that the reform would be implemented in every municipality’ (Jukka Sarjala, Director General, Finnish National Board of Education). Many Finns describe the reforms as rigidly and centrally implemented, with teachers’ practice inspected to ensure that it was realising the new comprehensive ideals

and values.

While Finland does not currently have an Ofsted-style inspection, it is entirely wrong to assert that education is not evaluated. The answer to the question ‘do you have Ofsted-style inspection?’ is ‘no’ – the answer to ‘do you have a means of evaluating the quality of education?’ is ‘yes...since we don’t have Ofsted, we do it in a different way...’ Local authorities and the Finnish National Board of Education carry the obligation to evaluate educational outcomes and efficiency (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education). The National Board of Education very much maintains the role of ‘external evaluator’, requiring constant submission of data, allowing evaluation of quality at school level as well as municipality level. Results of evaluation are published only at a national level, while individual school results are given to schools only. But schools are obligated by law to evaluate what is happening in the school, and to complete national, standardised tests for all years. In essence, the accountability data in Finland is very similar to that in England. The difference resides in how it is used.

As for “no tests” – all Finns understand the importance of doing well in the Finnish Abitur – the university-oriented ‘finishing’ examination taken by 19-year-olds. The academic pathway (upper secondary to university) is considered of higher esteem than the vocational pathway at 16, into which over 40% of pupils go. On scrutiny, the Abitur examinations are just like English A Levels, although pupils may study seven or eight subjects, they only take four subjects – one of these in native language. The other subjects are just like A Levels – six hour, nationally-moderated tests in individual subjects. And these exams have been in place, and relatively unchanged in form, since the end of the 19th century.

The national curriculum in Finland is very general and allows schools a very high level of autonomy

It’s true that the central, top level statement of the Finnish National Curriculum is a very general document. However, just looking at the contemporary top level specification is extremely misleading. History again is important. Finland has a 120-year history of structured educational reform, using centrally-specified curriculum requirements. Far from a history of autonomy, there is a culture of negotiated social agreement about the aims and form of education.

Skip to the year 2000, and few recognised that the Finnish state exercises a form of control which would cause outrage in England; it specified how much teaching time should be allocated to specific subjects. In the period of rapid improvement in educational outcomes Finland used state-controlled textbooks to encourage and regulate the movement to a fully comprehensive system. This process ceased in the early 1990s, although when I asked Finnish teachers what made for high quality education in the country, they cited ‘high quality teachers and high quality materials...’ and expressed their continuing surprise that this was no longer the case, ‘...the only key steering mechanism not regulated by the State...’ (Vitikka, Krokfors & Hurmerinta 2012). And the dates count; the approved textbooks continued to be used in schools and continued to condition pedagogy – and this would indeed have been the period in which the ‘children of PISA 2000’ were educated.

Asserting that the system has high autonomy simply by looking at the form of the National Curriculum represents hopeless myopia. A national curriculum is only one form of restriction

– and by ‘restriction’ I am referring to ‘means of securing convergent, high quality practice’. One has to look for where ‘restriction’ is applied. From Uno Cygnaeus in the 19th century, the importance of teacher training in conditioning education has long been recognised. Through the last decades, each year only 10% of applicants have been accepted for teacher training and these are selected on the basis of capability in developing – through the five to six years of research-intensive initial teacher training – high expertise in specialist subjects and in teaching approaches. ‘Restriction’ – ensuring that some things are done and other things are not done – is secured not by applying inspection and accountability on minimally trained practising teachers (back-end restriction), but by ensuring convergence on high quality practice in the first place (front-end restriction).

We are familiar with this in England in respect of medical and legal training. It is just too crude to talk of the Finnish system as a ‘high autonomy’ system, where teachers are ‘left to get on with it’ – rather, you have to spot where the restriction comes. And it comes – in spades – before teachers are allowed to qualify. Teachers are expected to realise a very common set of ideals – no assumptions of fixed ability, special support to all children who need it, multi-service review of the progress of every child.

Of course you don’t need speed cameras and active traffic police if everyone is trained never to break the speed limit. Look for restriction in the right places, and you find it.

And it’s important to recognise that the consensus about ‘fully comprehensive education’ which was driven through the system in the 1970s followed wide, prolonged discussion and negotiated agreement about which form the education system should take. Marc S Tucker (National Center on Education and the Economy, USA) explored with Finns the way in which this represented a general social consensus – it was generally considered to be the desirable direction of economic and social development in a country which would be highly dependent on human capital for its economic success. The education system did not improve as a result of some commitment to a general sense of ‘school autonomy’ – rather it improved at a time when a consensus had been carefully developed, around a very tightly defined common set of ideas and practices.

Far from ‘permissive, divergent autonomy’ this would best be described as ‘specific social consensus’ – a very different story from the one usually told about Finland.

There are no private schools in Finland, and is no policy of school choice

Nonsense. The numbers are small – around 2% of pupils attend private schools (source: Ministry of Education and Culture) – and 12% of post-16 vocational schools into which around 40% of pupils progress – are private. The reason for the ‘no private schools’ myth (oft-repeated) is that these schools cannot charge fees. They receive a state grant comparable to a municipal school of the same size. Selective admission is prohibited. Look specifically for school choice, and it can be found. Thirty-seven per cent of pupils attend free schools in Helsinki (source: Gabriel Sahlgren) and admission by test score dominates admissions to upper secondary education – something which sends down through the system strong messages regarding the importance of high attainment in education. Competition, high stakes assessment and admissions, school choice. Not things usually present in any of the common narratives about Finland.

Teachers are highly respected and highly paid in Finland, far more so than England

It certainly is the case that the teaching profession is highly respected in Finland, but this is not the result of excessively high pay. Respect for teaching comes from a complex set of cultural factors, including the vanguard role of teachers in resistance to the Russian occupation of Finland, with teachers refusing to teach Russian language in schools.

Pay is a different matter. It is certainly the case that teacher working conditions are different – with teaching hours below the OECD average. But when above average pay is moderated by high costs of living in Finland, the country ranks well below England, and has the same order of difference between teaching and other professions (sources: Stephen Exley, TES, 2013; International Labour Organization; Statistics Finland).

Finland is a model for the rest of the world

Even the Finns get very uneasy about this. Finland, like many of the high-performing jurisdictions – Alberta, Massachusetts, Hong Kong and Singapore – is small. These all have populations between four and seven million. Finns I have interviewed talk constantly of the need for social consensus about education, about the value of education, of respect for educators. In the late 1960s they recognised the need to enhance human capital and did something about it, through common and systemic education reform, driven and monitored from the centre. And Finns would be the first to say that it is not perfect. The programme of closure of thousands of small rural schools – resulting in massive reductions in some municipalities (in Oulo only a quarter of schools open in 1991 remain so in 2014 – source: Outi Autti) has been extremely controversial. Changing demographics in urban areas are fuelling various forms of segregation (source: Raento & Husso).

Standards are not on the way up – Gabriel Sahlgren's (unpublished) meticulous examination of the trajectory of educational standards shows that even with its premier position in 2000, Finland was on a downwards slope, not an upwards one. All the assumptions in 2000 seemed to be of Finland at the top and on the rise, not on the way down. And that was mistaking PISA for a longitudinal study, rather than a cross-sectional one; PISA looks at very specific skills and knowledge. TIMSS, which takes a more curriculum-focused look at maths and science shows a different story - of a worrying decline in core elements.

There are some fascinating insights to be gained from looking in detail at Finland – but the greatest insights come from looking, with sensitivity, at history and a wide range of evidence. The Finns effected wholesale, coherent system change. Moving an entire system to fully comprehensive education was an outstanding feat of social consensus, policy formation and meticulous, centralised implementation strategy. Look there – the past, not the present – for insights as to what another nation might aspire to do, and what means might be used to achieve it.

Fairy stories often have a dark side, and pick up 'eternal truths'. There's a dark side perhaps, but no eternal truths in the last decade's fairy stories about Finland's education system. In the case of Finland, people have been seriously misled by stories told by people who have looked at Finland through their own, restricted lens. The real story of Finland is more subtle, more challenging, and far, far more interesting.

