

## Review of Research: The Education System in Finland: A Success Story Other Countries Can Emulate

Hani Morgan

To cite this article: Hani Morgan (2014) Review of Research: The Education System in Finland: A Success Story Other Countries Can Emulate, *Childhood Education*, 90:6, 453-457, DOI: [10.1080/00094056.2014.983013](https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2014.983013)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2014.983013>



Published online: 14 Nov 2014.



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## The Education System in Finland: A Success Story Other Countries Can Emulate

by Hani Morgan

In the new millennium, Finland has gained a reputation for having one of the best education systems in the world. Many factors, including a well-educated teaching force, contribute to Finland's success, but some aspects of the country's educational policies and practices may be surprising to those living elsewhere. For example, although students score very highly on international tests, such as the PISA, Finland has very few external accountability measures, and teachers spend less time in classrooms than in many other countries.

The ways Finland has reformed its education system have significant implications for reformers in other countries, especially those facing the same problems Finland had before its remarkable success. To achieve its status as one of the highest ranking countries in education, Finland did not create charter schools, get rid of bad teachers, increase competition, or ban teacher unions (Sahlberg, 2011a). This article explores the current research on Finland's education system and focuses on the features that transformed the country into one of the highest-performing nations in international testing.

### International Testing

Every few years, international tests help educators to evaluate how well school systems in different nations are performing. To measure 15-year-olds' skills in mathematics, science, and reading, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) administers the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) every three years. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) provides several similar tests, including the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which is given every four years to evaluate 4th- and 8th-grade students on their mathematics and science skills, and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which 4th-grade students take every five years to measure their reading skills.

Students in Finland tend to do very well on these tests (Tirri & Kuusisto, 2013). In 2009, for example, the PISA results showed that Finland ranked third in reading, fifth in math, and second in science (Stewart, 2012). These international tests are more demanding than some tests individual countries administer, because they measure more than just what students can recall and require students to apply information and defend their answers (Darling-Hammond, 2010a).

### The Educational System in Finland

In 1972, Finland implemented *peruskoulu*, a new education system that was designed to improve many of the problems its old system created. In the older system, children were separated into two streams, one with an academic orientation and the other with a practical focus, and students needed to decide which option to take by the age of 11 (Sarjala, 2013). Under this system, many inequalities existed; some schools provided students with many more resources and learning opportunities than other schools. The old system was also based on the belief that talent in society is unevenly distributed, and, therefore, some students have more potential to be educated than others (Sahlberg, 2012).

When *peruskoulu*—a nine-year compulsory system—superseded the two-track system in the 1970s, many detrimental practices and beliefs ended and progress continued thereafter. Today, over 99% of the students finish *peruskoulu*. They generally receive the same content the first six years, but are free to choose a few subjects during their last three years (Sarjala, 2013). After completing *peruskoulu*, 95% of students pursue noncompulsory upper-secondary education and have the option to choose between general or vocational education. Vocational upper-secondary education prepares students between the ages of 16 and 19 for numerous occupations and requires at least 6 months of on-the-job learning in a real work setting. Students are not committed to

either form of upper-secondary education, but can switch from general to vocational or vice versa. After students finish upper-secondary education, they can take a national exam to enter a university.

School reform created several conditions that helped Finland become a strong academic performing country (Sahlberg, 2012), including mandatory school counseling and guidance. School counseling was designed to help students make the appropriate choices regarding continuing to upper-secondary school. The three choices students have when making this transition are: 1) continuing in vocational upper-secondary education, 2) starting general upper-secondary education, or 3) finding a job. The counseling program in Finland contributes to the country's high graduation rates and helps students make connections between schooling and employment.

Another important condition that school reform created was the need for a new type of teacher. In the old system, different types of schools prepared students in different ways. When reformers created *peruskoulu*, all students started to attend one type of school; thus, teachers needed to have more expertise because they would be teaching a wider variety of students. Teachers under the new system needed to learn how to differentiate instruction and to offer alternative teaching methods. In order for teachers to be prepared, teacher education had to be reformed. These expectations led to a rigorous teacher education program that contributes strongly to Finland's success in education.

### **Outstanding Teacher Preparation**

One of the reasons students in Finland do very well on international tests, when compared with pupils in other countries, has to do with the way teachers are chosen; Finland only selects the best. Although thousands of applicants hope to be admitted to a university program for teacher education at the primary level, only 700 are accepted (Sahlberg, 2013). Students are selected based on a two-stage process (Tucker, 2012). The first stage requires a high score on college entrance exams, a strong grade point average, and a high level of extracurricular activities. If applicants satisfy these requirements, they proceed to the second stage, which requires a passing score on a written exam on teaching, a demonstration of effective communication skills, and a satisfactory performance in an interview in which they answer various questions, including why they wish to become teachers.

If chosen, they are eligible to complete an intensive program sponsored by the government. Students in the teacher education program represent the top 10

percent of Finland's high school graduates and need to finish a 5-year master's degree to complete the program (Hancock, 2011). Their university training prepares them to be researchers and practitioners and includes a significant portion of clinical practice at a model school, where they learn how to deliver research-based instruction and mentor beginners (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011). During their practical training in schools, which comprises 15 to 25% of the program, students observe expert teachers teach, practice teaching lessons to students, and receive evaluations from teacher education faculty and supervising teachers (Sahlberg, 2011b).

Unlike other countries, Finland does not allow alternative approaches for teachers, such as online programs or Teach for America. Primary school teachers have to major in education with a minor in another subject, and secondary teachers need to major in the field they will teach with a minor in a different subject (Sahlberg, 2013). Because teachers are so well prepared, they enjoy more autonomy to teach the way they feel students will most benefit. This freedom makes the teaching profession in Finland enjoyable, thus making it one of the most satisfying jobs in the country. In addition, the teaching profession is highly respected, to the degree that young students hoping to enter this field often perceive it as more important than medicine or law (Sahlberg, 2011a).

### **A Superior Learning Environment for All**

Standardized tests are not used in Finland to rank students or schools, and teachers often use an authentic approach for student feedback by using narrative form to provide students with descriptions of their learning progress (Darling-Hammond, 2011/12). Finland also utilizes open-ended assessments during the 2nd and 9th grades, but does not use them to track or punish students. The goal of such evaluations is purely to support learning.

Educators in Finland do not believe that frequent testing and stronger accountability will increase student learning, but could create opportunities for biased teaching, which may raise test scores with little learning (Sahlberg, 2012). Because Finland does not emphasize standardized testing, there is no competition among schools and thus no unnecessary stress on students and teachers. The low level of accountability and testing allows teachers to guide students to discover their own ways of accomplishing curricular goals without fear; for most students, this type of environment encourages creativity and excellence.

Another factor leading to a superior learning environment in Finnish schools is adequate time for

collaboration among teachers. Such opportunities help teachers share knowledge of individual students, plan together, and learn from each other. In Finnish schools, teachers meet weekly to plan and develop curriculum, and they also make important decisions regarding syllabi, textbooks, assessments, course offerings, budgets, and professional development (Wei, Andree, & Darling-Hammond, 2009). Schools also share and learn from each other through a flexible and organized system that permits best practices to be universal (Sahlberg, 2012).

It may be surprising for educators in other countries to learn that teachers in Finland spend less time teaching than those in other countries. A middle school teacher, for example, averages only 600 hours annually in Finland, whereas a teacher at a similar level in the United States averages 1,080 hours annually (Sahlberg, 2012). Thus teachers have the time to enhance the quality of their instruction in several ways. Teachers spend their time outside the classroom planning how to improve teaching methods, interacting with the community, and working on curriculum and assessment.

Another characteristic contributing to Finland's success in international testing is its commitment to equity; all students receive high-quality teaching regardless of their socioeconomic background. This was not the case in the early 1970s, when there was an achievement gap between students of different socioeconomic backgrounds. By the 1980s, after reforming the school system, abolishing tracking, and dismantling the mandated testing system that blocked many students from equal access to knowledge, more opportunities were created that contributed to the rise of Finland's rankings (Darling-Hammond, 2010b). In a survey done by OECD in 2000, Finland was found to have the lowest performance variation between schools on the skills the PISA test measures, and this trend continued in 2003 and even became stronger in 2006 and 2009 (Sahlberg, 2012).

Finland also uses exemplary teaching methods for students with special needs. Special education instructors earn a little more than regular class teachers, and early intervention is considered essential. If classroom teachers suspect a student requires additional support, they can request the services of a special education teacher (Takala, Pirttimaa & Törmänen, 2009). To implement special education, schools use the least restrictive environment, which means that students experience an environment that is most like the regular classroom and interact with other students, while, in certain cases, a separate class for students with

special needs may be necessary (Jahnukainen, 2011).

In the early years of schooling, strong emphasis is placed on identifying and providing support for all children who have needs in reading, writing, and math. As a result, schools in Finland have a larger number of students with special needs at the primary level than many other countries. This emphasis on providing children with support and special education continues as the children grow older; many students are placed in some form of special education program before they complete compulsory schooling. In 2009-2010, for example, approximately one-third of the students enrolled in the nine-year compulsory school program participated in a special education program in which they were either with others in the regular classroom or in a separate classroom. By the time children are 16, as many as half of the students in the compulsory system have been placed in special education at some point during their years of schooling (Sahlberg, 2012). The strong emphasis on providing many students, rather than a few, with effective special education not only helps children improve academically, it also reduces the stigma often associated with these types of programs. If many students receive it, they do not stand out from the rest of the students.

### Low Grade Repetition

One of the reasons students in Finland tend to experience a stimulating environment results from practices that avoid grade repetition. Repeating a grade is detrimental to students and schools for several reasons. First, it is embarrassing and often turns students into reluctant learners. Second, it is inefficient because pupils are usually not weak in all subjects; thus, repeating only the subjects they are weak in is a much better approach that allows them to make more progress. Repeating a grade also prevents students from experiencing a stimulating environment and costs the school more.

After *peruskoulu* was implemented, the new system significantly lowered grade repetition rates. Today, Finland has very few students who experience grade repetition; by the age of 16, less than 2% of students who have finished the compulsory school system have repeated a grade (Väljjarvi & Sahlberg, 2008). This outcome results from the strong support students receive in the specific subjects that cause difficulty (Sarjala, 2013).

The problems associated with grade repetition have been completely eliminated at the upper-secondary school level because, at these schools, there are no grade levels, and both general and vocational schools use modular curriculum units that allow students to take courses at their own pace (Sahlberg, 2012).

This approach permits students to create their own schedules and to only repeat the courses they fail. Some students complete these final years of schooling in two years, while others may take four years (Sarjala, 2013).

### **A Model for Others**

Because Finland's education system includes many exemplary policies and practices that enable students to do their best work, reformers from other countries would be warranted in borrowing various components of Finland's school system to improve their own. However, mimicking Finland's reform movement can be difficult. First, part of the rationale that led Finland to reform is determined by Finland's social values. These values include a devotion to equity and cooperation (Sarjala, 2013). Today, these values are reflected in the school system's ideology, which is based on the belief that all students deserve a good education and are all capable of learning. Countries that are more individualistic and lack these social values will likely face difficulties in achieving Finland's success in education.

Furthermore, reformers need to consider that borrowing one aspect of Finland's system without considering the others will likely not make much of a difference. Finland's system works well as a result of the various components that complement each other; isolating only one of its parts for implementation will most likely prove futile. Unfortunately, many countries use haphazard intervention methods when they reform, which are antithetical to Finland's holistic and systematic approach (Sahlberg, 2012).

For those reformers who are interested in using many or all the characteristics of Finland's educational practices to improve their country's system, the following summary list of components may be useful:

- Highly qualified teachers for all students
- Strong support for student needs
- Free teacher education program
- Equal opportunities for all students
- Lack of external standardized tests
- Innovative teaching strategies
- Few external accountability practices
- A culture of trust for teachers
- Strong early intervention programs
- Social support for children and families
- Freedom for teachers to apply national standards in different ways
- Strong support and cooperation among parents, teachers, principals, government officials, and teacher unions.

### **Possibilities for Improvement**

Even the best education systems in the world can improve. In Finland, concerns have been raised primarily in two areas: teacher induction and in-service education. Some schools provide extensive support for new staff, while other schools provide none (Sahlberg, 2011b). Personnel responsible for induction also vary from school to school. In some cases, the principal is responsible, while in other cases, a senior teacher assumes this role. In-service education varies from school to school. While some municipalities provide in-service opportunities, others do not and leave it up to members of the school to determine the type of professional development that is needed, a condition allowing for more opportunities for professional development for some teachers and fewer for others (Sahlberg, 2011b).

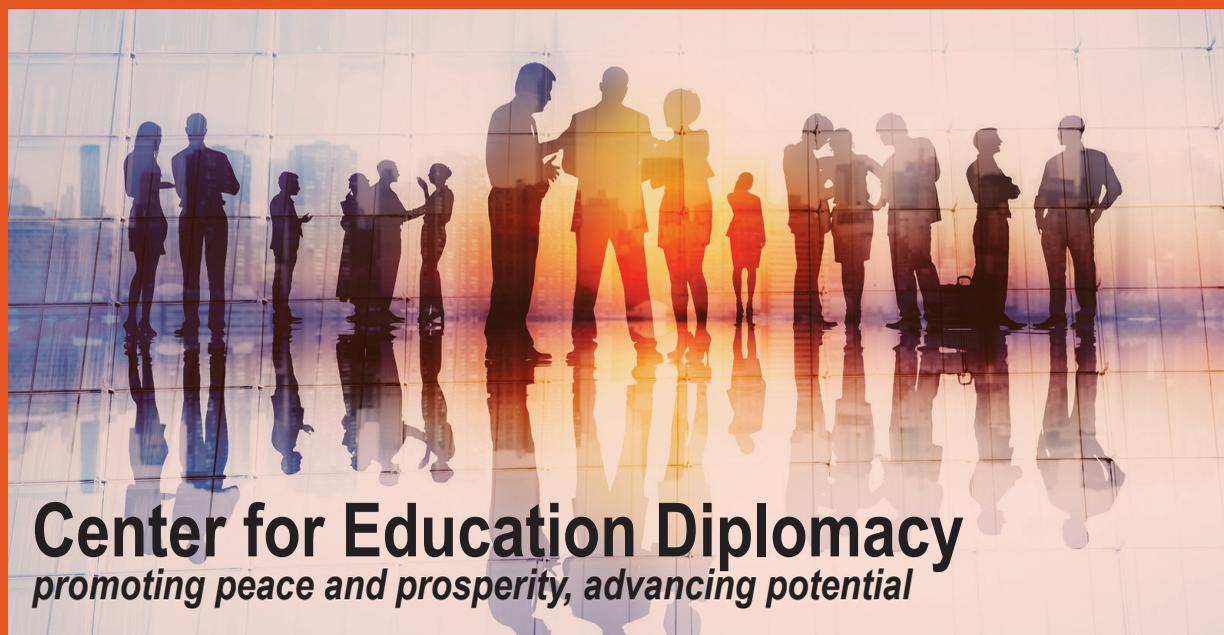
### **Conclusion**

Finland's education system has outperformed most countries in international testing for various reasons, including an outstanding commitment to satisfying the needs of all students, a student-centered approach for teaching, and a highly trained teaching workforce that is selected from the best students in the country. While these characteristics have undoubtedly contributed greatly to Finland's success in education, other notable factors play a role as well. Part of this success relates to Finland's social values, which emphasize equality, cooperation, and a strong commitment to providing strong welfare programs for all its citizens. For example, Finland offers early childhood care, health services, and measures that identify learning problems prior to the start of schooling (Sahlberg, 2012). Finland's education system reflects its superior welfare system and offers free hot meals and other welfare services free of charge (Sarjala, 2013).

Although it is important to consider the many positive components of the entire country when evaluating the success of its education system, educators and policymakers from around the world can learn from the exemplary practices of Finland's school system and model these practices to improve their own. Finland's success in international testing is relatively recent; in 1990, its system was similar to those of many countries that are having problems today in providing a stimulating environment for all students. Finland's strong performance occurred only after specific reforms were made. Therefore, policymakers in countries with poor or average results in international testing should be hopeful that they can achieve improvements.

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