

**Simola, H. (2015). The Finnish education mystery: Historical and sociological essays on schooling in Finland. New York, NY: Routledge.**

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Over a period from 1993 to 2011, Hannu Simola (2015) wrote or co-wrote 12 papers about schooling in Finland that he calls “studies in progress” (p. 273). Simola, a professor of sociology of education in the Institute of Behavioural Sciences at the University of Helsinki, has turned these papers into a very useful book not only for scholars of Finnish education, but also for comparative and international education scholars. Ironically, in one of the later chapters, Simola makes the case that comparative education suffers from “certain methodological deficits and serious under-theorization” (Simola, 2015, p. 224). Although this is likely true, *The Finnish Education Mystery* is an in depth exploration of schooling in Finland that offers international educators much to reflect upon about schooling in their own countries.

For a variety of reasons, Finland’s school system has garnered much attention among educators in international circles. Much of this has to do with the country’s repeated high rankings in the test scores of the Program for International Assessment (PISA) administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) every three years. Beginning with the release of the first set of PISA exam scores in 2001, Finland’s international reputation began to shine brightly as Finnish 15-year olds were collectively at or near the top in all three tested subject areas: mathematics, reading, and science literacy. Paradoxically, except for the one time they write the PISAs and some university entrance exams, Finnish students do not experience standardized testing. In fact, Finnish educators strongly believe standardized testing does not conform to best practices (Sahlberg, 2011; Simola, 2015).

Simola’s fellow countryman Pasi Sahlberg wrote a popular book called *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* (2011). The major difference in the two books, however, is the depth to which Simola’s (2015) work explains how Finland got to a place where teachers are trusted and respected, and why teaching is the most popular profession in Finland today. Whereas both books reach similar conclusions about Finland’s successful school system, I really only understood the non-linear historical trajectory of the Nordic nation’s policy development after reading Simola’s *The Finnish Education Mystery*. Although I agree with Simola that comparative education is fraught with flaws and weaknesses, I believe that understanding the Finnish context and how it differs from the Canadian context can still yield some valuable lessons.

The 12 chapters are equally divided into four sections with different foci in each. The first chapter is a critique of educational reform in Finland. Written in 1998, before Finland had experienced its PISA success, Chapter 1 employs discourse analysis in Finnish education documents from the 1860s to the 1990s. Invoking Michel Foucault (1980) and Pierre Bourdieu (1990), Simola (2015) analyses how the individual student is represented in school documents, and

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explores the shift from using the public school primarily in support of society to that of the individual. He points out that the “principle of individualizing teaching was not part of the Finnish pedagogical vocabulary before the 1960s” (Simola, 2015, p. 7). In neighbouring Sweden, however, “the public school was already seen as being in the service of the individual rather than society” by the 1940s (Simola, 2015, p. 7). Simola attributes this delay mainly to the late transition in Finland from an agrarian to an industrial society.

Chapter 1 also examines government documents for discourses about the teacher as professional. It is noteworthy that when this chapter was written in 1998, teachers in Finland had not yet been given the same degree of trust and respect that came shortly afterward. According to Simola (2015), since the 1970s, Finnish “classroom teachers have been seen as obstacles and objects rather than as innovators and subjects of reform” (p. 9). Building on the longstanding notion of what the teacher was expected to teach since the 1860s, the goal-rationalized curriculum dominated Finnish pedagogy from 1970 until 1994. The ideal teacher was expected to have internalized the state-sanctioned goals set out in the curriculum. Simola cites American historians of education Herbert Kliebard (1995), David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995) to support his argument that educational reforms often happen too quickly and are only effective if the teachers themselves are involved in the development.

Chapter 2 was written by Simola and two colleagues in 2002 and has the provocative title “Abdication of the Education State?” It examines the connections between two related phenomena in the 1990s: school governance without government involvement and the introduction of market mechanisms brought about by neoliberal economics. Neoliberalism has been particularly influential in the Anglo-Western world, especially in the US and the UK (Orlowski, 2015). It was somewhat surprising to learn that Finland, a nation seen by many to be a model of social democracy, had adopted neoliberal policy so strongly in the 1990s. The Finnish politician Simola interviewed, however, refused to describe policy such as deregulation as “neoliberal”, preferring to use the much more poetic term “the renaissance of individualism” (Simola, 2015, p. 29). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Finnish economy plummeted from 1990-93, and with this the longstanding Finnish support for the egalitarian society suffered, as well. Simola et al. point to the inherent unfairness caused by neoliberal policy in society, and particularly in the school system. “Corporate managerialism” led to the establishment of productivity targets, competition between schools, and “doing more with less” as school funding was decreased (Simola, 2015, p. 34). Regarding students, “[t]he gap between those dedicated to success and those doomed to failure appears to be wider than before” (Simola, 2015, p. 37). Immigrant students in particular were disadvantaged even more than before.

Yet, something interesting occurred in Finland. The “previously unshakeable belief in centralized planning” (Simola, 2015, p. 33) led to decision-making at the local level. The municipalities decided where to make cuts, and were also able to make changes that minimized the negative effects of neoliberalism found in other nations. According to the authors, Finland’s “social-democratic egalitarian discourse” mitigated neoliberalism’s deleterious effects (p. 36).

Hannu Simola wrote Chapter 3, called “Quality Assurance and Evaluation in Finnish Compulsory Schooling,” with four colleagues in 2009. This chapter primarily examines the evolution of Quality Assurance and Evaluation (QAE) in the context of the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM) that spread across much of the world with neoliberalism. It gives a glimpse into the unique sociocultural history of Finland since the Second World War. This includes the USSR’s influence up until its collapse in 1991, the other Nordic countries, and the OECD.

The Finnish Teachers Union (OAJ) came into existence in 1973 and became one of the strongest teachers unions in the world. The OAJ gives input and has veto power on all educational policy in Finland. This is part of the reason why the Finns developed such a healthy attitude toward QAE in their schools. Four specific traits about QAE in Finland emerged that

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are noteworthy for Canadian and American education policy-makers: i) QAE should not be an instrument of administrative control; ii) QAE should serve schools, not families or the public; iii) QAE should not be used to rank schools; and iv) accountability and standardized testing are not acceptable practices. These four traits demonstrate the strength of the egalitarian discourse in Finnish society. It also indicates a level of trust in educators that is mostly missing in Canada and the US today.

The three chapters of Part 2 explore the journey Finnish teachers have taken to become highly respected and trusted professionals. The main focus of Chapter 4 is about how teaching became a profession in Finland. It points to the unique history of Finland mentioned in Chapter 1, and the major influence that Sweden has had on educational reform in Finland. As well, the importance of a Finnish consensus “towards cooperation and stability rather than political competition” highlights the importance the Finns place on the state itself (Simola, 2015, p. 73). This is probably best summed up in Simola’s (2015) description of the Finnish consensus toward educational policy: the “belief in education as an agent for social equality has remained stronger than in many other advanced liberal countries” (Simola, 2015, p. 73). This chapter highlights the role of the OAJ and the ground-breaking policy of 1975 that required all teachers to have a research-based Masters degree. Finland remains the only country in the world that requires all its teachers to have this advanced level of education, which is undoubtedly a reason for the high status of teachers, thereby ensuring the concept of the professional teacher.

Chapter 5 is called “The Birth of the Modern Finnish Teacher” and is an experimental Foucauldian approach to simultaneously applying knowledge, subjectivity, and power to teaching. Beginning in the 1970s, the Finnish modern teacher was still expected to be a “model citizen” but now was charged with treating every student as an individual. By the mid 1990s, the strict focus on didactics and QAE gave way to teachers being given the freedom to determine what works best for them and their students.

Simola and two colleagues wrote the final chapter in Part 2 during the late 1990s on the professional teacher. Entitled “Didactic Closure,” Chapter 6 argues that to understand the professionalization of Finnish teachers, one must consider the professionalization of teacher educators. Using Bourdieu’s (1990) social capital theory, Simola et al. examine the rise in status of teachers in Finnish society and also of teacher educators in relation to their peers in other university disciplines. Attention is given to the role of the state and its traditional relationship to teachers: “the Finnish state has succeeded in engaging an extremely loyal army of primary school workers” (Simola, 2015, p. 118). The teachers union (OAJ) has never been very radical, and one reason given is that most teachers are conservative by nature. From my own research of the Finnish school system, however, the teacher-bashing discourse that is prevalent in Canada and the United States is absent in Finland (Orlowski, 2016). The authors explore the relationship between educational research and the status of teacher educators in Finnish higher education. They also examine how educational research has affected teacher education programs in Finland, particularly pertaining to educational foundations and curriculum studies.

Part 3 is composed of three chapters that collectively examine Finnish schooling practices in which Simola (2015) highlights Finland’s unique mix of the traditional and the progressive. Chapter 7, entitled “From Exclusion to Self-Selection,” explores the emphasis given to behaviour or conduct as a category on student report cards from the 1860s to the late 1990s. Interestingly, up until 1970 behaviour assessment was used as an instrument for punishment and exclusion. In the 1990s, students self-assessed their behaviour, a practice they still do today. Overall, three conclusions were reached. First, behaviour assessment has been used to mould each individual to become a citizen who has internalized what is true, what is good, and what is right according to “hegemonic divisions of [Finnish] society” (Simola, 2015, p. 155). Second, behaviour assessment was particularly emphasized on deviant students until the 1970s, mostly

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for purposes of punishment and exclusion. Third, the “most ambitious techniques, often proposed by academics” were quickly discarded if used at all (Simola, 2015, p. 155). In general, the authors argue that behaviour assessment is much too subjective and gives too much power to the teacher in influencing the future life paths of students.

Chapter 8 is an analysis of 53 transcripts of teacher interviews that took place during 1999-2000 about how their work had changed over the previous decade. The vast majority of the teachers saw teaching as their main task, but accepted that educating students in appropriate social behaviour was a growing concern. The teachers voiced similar complaints as teachers in Canada do such as too many fruitless meetings, irresponsible parents, and unmotivated students. There was a remarkable difference – by and large, the Finnish teachers held a high degree of job satisfaction and were not opposed to new educational reforms. In fact, many saw these reforms as progress. Although they accepted the Finnish tradition of teachers presenting as “model citizens” (Simola, 2015, p. 168), many expressed concern, however, that the “authorities and the media expected too much of the school” (Simola, 2015, p. 165). One interesting finding was that many of the teachers were pleased that schooling had become deregulated as a result of the funding cuts of the early 1990s. This could be seen as a positive emanating from the neoliberal experiment of that period. The fact that every teacher in Finland had a Masters degree was considered to be why Finnish teachers had such high social status.

“Changes in Nordic Teaching Practices” is the title of Chapter 9, and was written by Simola and four colleagues in 2007. It compares how pedagogy addressed the individual in schools across the five Nordic nations: Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland. This is perhaps the most problematic chapter in the entire book as some of the data discussed were missing in some of the countries, thereby weakening the comparative value, a flaw that the authors admit to (Simola, 2015, p. 195). That said, all five nations were on similar paths but different timelines regarding the individual in educational policy. At the beginning of the twentieth century, each country grappled with the issue of how to use the school to encourage the individual to contribute to the nation. This idea of educating the individual *for* society shifted at different times and at different speeds to educating the individual to *participate* in society. In the 1990s, each country adopted the individualism of neoliberalism to varying degrees. Teachers were expected to foster a sense of competition and self-reliance in students. Of course, the social democratic tradition in all five Nordic nations inhibited the acceptance of the hyper-individualization found in Canada, and especially the US.

Part 4 includes three final chapters that explore Finland’s success with the OECD PISA exams from various perspectives. Chapter 10, called “The Finnish Miracle of PISA,” is a historical and sociological commentary on teaching and teacher education. Simola (2015) admonishes the global education community for placing too much emphasis on PISA test scores. Nations that do not fare as well often demonize their teachers and education policy-makers while “Finland has been basking in educational glory” over the PISA results (Simola, 2015, p. 208). Simola argues that although Finland has a strong teaching force, its success on PISA has more to do with various “social, cultural, institutional, and historical issues” (Simola, 2015, p. 208). An interesting point Simola makes pertains to the effect geopolitics has had on Finnish society. Sitting on the border of the West and the East, Finland’s social democratic traditions are more “authoritarian or even totalitarian” compared with the other Nordic countries (Simola, 2015, p. 209). This would explain why Korea and Japan pose challenges to Finland in the PISA rankings. The high status of teachers in Finland is another reason Simola gives, and by corollary, the appreciation of teachers and the trust placed in them by the public. He also suggests that the conservative nature of teachers politically and pedagogically is a factor, as is the relative satisfaction Finnish teachers have for their job. By detailing Finland’s socio-historical background, this chapter explains more than any other why Finnish schools have been so successful in the twenty-first century.

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Chapter 11, perhaps the most difficult read in the book, begins as a philosophical tract that asks why Finnish schooling is so successful despite its apparent unorthodox educational policy with respect to governance, pedagogy, and assessment. Invoking concepts such as convergence, path dependence and contingency, the authors make the case that the decentralization of governance in schooling has been a major factor in why Finland is charting its own educational path. This unique form of local school governance has been especially influential in Finland bucking the international trends toward increased standardized testing. The Finns do not consider standardized testing to be in the best interest of student learning, and further, they abhor the practice prevalent in other countries of ranking schools and publishing their standardized test scores for public consumption. The Finns use the information gleaned from QAE for administrative purposes, not for parents. They consider QAE to help develop student learning, not for control or for determining the allocation of funds. Lastly, they favour sample-based assessments rather than assessment on a national basis. The authors speculate that the explanation for this unorthodox trajectory in assessment is because of the extent to which the social democratic values of egalitarianism and collectivism are deeply embedded in Finnish society. Because of this, educational policy was able to eschew most of the neoliberal influences that were taking over other nations. In other words, Finnish social democracy was able to withstand the onslaught of GERM.

The final chapter in Simola's (2015) book is entitled "Education Politics and Contingency." Its focus is similar to the previous chapter, namely, to explain how social, cultural, and historical factors have shaped Finland's educational policy especially around "trendy quality-assurance and evaluation systems" (Simola, 2015, p. xviii). The chapter differs from Chapter 11 in that it suggests theoretical paths in order to strengthen comparative education, a field that Simola considers flawed mainly because of the lack of emphasis on context. Finnish people have a strong belief in the value of schooling itself, a result of the "contingent conjunction of three social changes that came late to Finland: the expansion of schooling, the modernization of the occupational structure, and the construction of the welfare state," especially in relation to its Nordic neighbours (Simola, 2015, p. 257). The chapter highlights the trust placed in Finnish teachers and their high social status, and the decentralization of the school system that came about by the devastating recession that hit Finland between 1991-93. Decentralization led to local governance that in turn led to freedom for their teachers to create their own pedagogy without national standards.

In sum, Hannu Simola's (2015) *The Finnish Education Mystery* is a powerful rendering of one country's successful educational transformation that resulted in international accolades and scores of inquisitive scholars from across the world. Because of the density of the chapters, many key points have been omitted in this review. There was some repetition, but that is to be expected in a collection of 12 articles published over a 19-year period. There are many valuable lessons for international scholars to reflect upon - perhaps the most important is that in order for a nation to improve its school system, careful consideration must be given to its social, cultural, and political history. Perhaps just as importantly, teachers should be respected, trusted, and treated as professionals. I highly recommend this book for educational policy makers, educational administrators, and teacher educators.

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