
Zsolt CSUTAK**The Finnish way**

*'Where everyone thinks the same,
no one is really thinking'*

old wisdom

When talking about Finland in general most people tend to recall particularly three things: the (ex)mobile-phone giant **Nokia, Santa Claus** (but only for Europeans), and ever since the new millennia, when the most surprising PISA-results emerged, **the miraculous educational performance of the Finnish students and teachers**'. 'There is nothing new under the Sun!' we haven't invented anything new in education, we just implement what other great nations had hammered out and then neglected to put into practice'¹ the mostly humble and reserved Finns would say whenever the educational pundits and policy-makers from all corners of the world rush there and pry into the schools of this famous Nordic country, the host of a world famous educational miracle of the 21st century.

What makes the Finnish educational system so unique, outstanding and particularly efficient? Or is it really so? Could we just copy- and paste, and adopt it in Hungary or in the USA, for that matter? Is it really true that Finns read the most, learn the least but can still use the largest set of skills and competences from among other nations in our post-modern digital world? Well, these are the kinds of recurring challenges obviously eagerly waiting for quick, positive and prompt responses to which the Finns tend to say something blurry and murky or just uneasily shrug not possessing the expected witty answers. If we wish to get satisfactory replies, unfortunately we have to take a much deeper look into the Finnish way of life and habits of the mind and even their modern historical and social-cultural background deeply rooted in the harsh Nordic environment.

To answer the inspiring great questions above, we can rely on several great studies on Finland both by Finnish and foreign analysts, scholars like Pasi Sahlberg, Maria Kouta or the witty presenter and connoisseur of the Nordic people's psyche Michael Booth, and not so much on the personal findings, experiences and research of the author of the present short study. So, let me guide you through this interesting inquiry on the much-cited Finnish educational system attempting to find a bit broader and more satisfactory answers to our questions tending to deal with the **historical-political, psychological and educational policy** aspects, background factors of the *suomalainen tapa* or the *miraculous Finnish way*, within the constraints of this paper in three main chapters.

¹ see Sahlberg (2015) Kindle version loc.450-500 and Kouta (2012)

1. The shadow and glory of the past

*'He who controls the past controls the future.
He who controls the present controls the past.'*

George Orwell

No doubt history has pretty much to do with our present status and conditions in any matter in any country, definitely not just in the rather gloomy dystopian context of Orwell presented in the motto. Finland is a relatively young, small and humbly insignificant country in terms of her historical importance and independent sovereign statehood – next year the Finns will be celebrating the centennial anniversary of their fragile independence guaranteed by the two eternal rival giant neighbours, Sweden and Russia. Being a Finn in the remote Nordic wilderness meant almost daily struggle for survival both against nature and his landlord masters sent by either the kings of mighty Sweden for more than 600 years or lately the tsars of imperial Russia for about a century. This double frontline of the daily grind resulted in developing and cherishing great and useful skills and competences, which are so to say genetically coded in the less than six million inhabitants living on a vast and harsh granite terrain of land, the size of France. Finns managed to adopt and learn new things quickly and silently and also to preserve their identity, language and society based on hard work, individual duties and tough decisions as well as on the constant cooperation of the mostly rural population. Nevertheless, the Finns quickly realised that they are basically a small nation standing alone in the storm, basically ever since 1809 when at the diet of Porvoo, Sweden agreed to hand over her grand principality of Finland to tsar Alexander I. of Russia. Then in the ensuing nationalistic new Finnish *Fennoman* movement the Finns realised that they have to find their own way and life and they must stand up defiantly for their rights and existence against their mighty neighbours thus proclaiming that 'Swedes we are no more, Russians we cannot become, therefore Finns we must be²!' As history has manifested, this national idea of the 'small but beautiful' and tough Finland has proved to be quite prevailing ever since the 19th century.

The leaders of the Finnish community were keen to maintain a reserved, modest yet alert policy and covert diplomacy, carefully watching the sensitive reactions of their rulers from Stockholm or Moscow, yet ready to take action when it was due as the marshal of Finland, C.G.E. Mannerheim (a Swedish-German baron) did in 1917 after the Russian Soviets' revolution and during the inevitable devastating and fractious civil war of 1918 between the Reds (communists supported by Soviet Russia) and the White Finns (republicans supported

² motto attributed to the famous Fennoman lecturer at Turku **Adolf Ivar Arwidsson** but coined by **Johan Vihelm Snellman** see reliable Wikipedia link on Fennoman movement:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fennoman_movement

Interestingly enough, many members of the Fennoman Finnish nationalistic revival movement proved to be of Swedish origin just like the famous Finnish composer J. Sibelius, the architect Alver Aalto or colonel Mannerheim himself, considered to be the greatest Finn.

by the Imperial German Army). The civil war ended with the victory of the Whites, demanded terrible losses – more than 30 thousand victims – in lives and property as well as in the people’s mind since the political fractures disrupted and badly affected the growing and emerging urban Finnish society in the aftermath as well as the Finnish psyche for decades. Moreover, a pretty gloomy lesson indeed that boosted the Finnish fighting spirit for the motherland a lot during the terrible Winter War (or *Tarviosta*) of 1939-40 against Soviet Russia, when the young Finnish nation manifested outstanding bravery and fierce, exemplary manly resistance in the pitched battle against the Soviet invaders, who lost more than 127 thousand soldiers, though ultimately the Finns were forced to surrender and cede the Eastern part of their motherland, the Karelian peninsula to the Stalinist Soviet Union after the Moscow Peace Treaty³. During the Cold War decades, the mindful diplomatic courtesy of neutral Finland contributed a great deal to the development of the nation when the Finns were considered good negotiators and couriers of ideas, intelligence, people and spies between NATO and the Soviet Union, Helsinki became a common meeting place for grand diplomacy and espionage.

As we can witness from the quite devastating and bloody flow of events throughout modern Finnish history, the swiftly growing, urbanising and more educated Finnish population was forced to acquire, adopt new skills, experiences and competences during the social, political and cultural turmoil, which unfolded within a few generations⁴. These experiences galvanised the Finns who realized their strengths and willingness to work together more efficiently and build a modern independent, self-ruling, self-sufficient, tolerant and neutral country⁵ appropriate and cherishing for all members of its population by implementing the freshly acquired democratic rights and legislation in all aspects of life.

2.The *Finnishness* or *suomalaisuus*

What is to be a Finn? In the 21st century multi-ethnic and globalised society what makes a person a Finn or Swede; are there any stereotypical features, traits of national or ethnic identity? It is a quite diverse scholarly and at the same time controversial issue. However, the social-psychological, and particularly the cultural anthropological analyses and studies have come up with great findings along the last decades which may prevail yet they are not universal, naturally. The common national characteristics are partly genetic but mostly learnt, adapted traits and skills from the ancestors and may be constantly altered by the new

³ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winter_War

⁴ the Finnish population grew tenfold within a century until the WWI with rapid urbanisation, and thanks to the very strong social-democratic party of Edvard Valpas, *universal suffrage* (women included) was launched in the Russian Grand Duchy of Finland in 1907 among the very first in the world: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Finnish_parliamentary_election,_1907

⁵ the famous foreign policy of '*active neutrality* or *Finnish solution and national realism*' proclaimed by president **Juho Paasikivi** and developed further by his successor the quasi mythical prime minister and president of Finland **Urho Kekkonen**, for almost three decades,

external impacts, e.g. immigration. Finland is not the homogeneous society it used to be before the end of the 20th century, yet they are not facing such serious challenges in this term as their great western neighbour Sweden, where more than 10% of the population is of non-Swedish ancestry.

However, concerning the basic features of the Nordic population of Finns, Swedes and Sami people there are some prevailing and mostly appropriate stereotypes of Finnish people in general, such as: they are notoriously laconic, reserved and obstinate, desperately addicted to coffee, spirits and heavy metal, feeling ultimately relieved and great at home in their remote cottages (*mökki*) surrounded by mother nature or in their genuine *saunas*⁶ far from their fellows, they tend to be very pragmatic, non-pious and thoughtful, self-reliable and individualistic however working well in small groups if necessary⁷. All these interesting traits can be observed and experienced in their everyday routines as well as in their school classrooms. The well-known taciturn pragmatism and shrewdness of the Finns helped them a great deal throughout their harsh history fighting to survive and find their own ways around and this humble but stubborn attitude, persistent self-sufficiency and stoic determination (the famous *sisu*) provided them with self-esteem and a set of values they could always rely on in challenging times. Finns are considered to be people of action and of mindful thoughts and not the ones talking too much in vain.⁸ Their love of nature and personal freedom and the high esteem of self-reliance also manifest in their common fishing-hunting-hiking pastimes, Finland having the second largest gun-owner population after the USA, though in shocking contrast to America, Finland displays one of the lowest violent crime and incarceration rate/capita in the developed world⁹.

The Finns' willingness to adopt and integrate new things and ideas in their lives and business practices enabled them overcome economic, political as well as educational challenges, crises as it happened after the two bloody wars, during the decades of Cold war or in the forthcoming years of economic plummet and crisis after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the early 1990's. Interestingly enough, Finland being considered as an extremely individualistic and secular society, the importance of social cohesion and the all-embedded presence of trust affect the course of action in all aspects of life. Trust, respect and professionalism are highly regarded social values along with hard-work and open-mindedness. These are the skills and competences which can make a modern society hit the

⁶ more than half million mökkis and 1 million saunas in a country of 5 million inhabitants

⁷ See Booth (2014) great observations on Finland

⁸ Just remember the countless great jokes about Finns talking, drinking, fishing a.s.o.

⁹ Mostly alcohol-related crime is general in Finland see: <http://sciencenordic.com/alcohol-behind-finlands-high-homicide-rate>

roof in any world ranking in terms of work and study efficiency, happiness and life-complacency as Finland has spectacularly manifested for the last few decades¹⁰.

And all these great features, basically stem from their core Finnish attitude based on their educational system which is freely available for everyone from any social and cultural or political background.

3. Unveiling the secrets in the land of the famous *peruskoulu*

Ever since the time of the Finnish revival movement Fennoman of the early 19th century, teaching has always been regarded as a prestigious, trusted profession for the Finns. Teachers are thought of as intellectual leaders, the shining ‘candles for the people’ as the Dean of the Faculty of Behavioural Sciences of the University of Helsinki, prof. Patrik Scheinin put it wittily¹¹.

The world famous educational celebrity from Finland, Harvard lecturer Pasi Sahlberg¹² has repeatedly asserted that the best decision made in modern Finnish society proved to be the establishment and launching of the Finnish educational reform based on the nine-year free comprehensive school or *peruskoulu* replacing the former primary (*kansakoulu*) and early secondary-school (*keskikoulu*). It wasn’t a smooth transition from the conventional biased and unequal school-system to the much more egalitarian, non-competitive high performing one, though it had been initiated by the pedagogues of the distant and least developed Northern region of Lapland and pretty soon the rest of the country realised that it wasn’t such a bad idea after all during the trial period lasting from 1971 to 1978¹³. The forthcoming great results, though did not prove to be convincing at all for the sceptical Finnish analysts and policy-makers, particularly taken into consideration the more business-oriented lobby groups and decision-makers who were openly pushing for switching back to a more American-style educational agenda during the crisis-stricken decade of the 1990’s, aiming to abolish the comprehensive basic school system of *peruskoulu*. Then the first great comprehensive OECD PISA results of 32 participating countries were announced in Dec. 2001, as a lightning out of the blue for the astonished world as well as for Finland. In the hindsight, it seems like an anecdote that even the Finns – evidently, missing the slightest touch of pompousness – could not believe their eyes witnessing the outstanding performance of their 15-year old students¹⁴. For them it would have been more than enough success to surpass the school performance of their eternal rival neighbour, Sweden¹⁵.

¹⁰ No need to see the various global surveys or rankings compiled by the UN, OECD, World Economic Forum or Happiness Index Rate of countries, Finland generally on every list has a top positions:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_rankings_of_Finland

¹¹ See Booth (2014), loc.4075 Kindle version

¹² A practising high-school teacher of maths and physics himself, author of the bestselling book on the Finnish educational miracle *Finnish lesson 2.0*.

¹³ See the short historical outline on this website, as well: <https://www15.uta.fi/FAST/US5/REF/wesfin90.html>

¹⁴ Kouta (2012).

¹⁵ Sahlberg (2015) loc.1138 Kindle ed.

According to the new decrees on Finnish education issued back in the late 1970's, all the educational staff from pre-school to high-school teachers were obliged to obtain master's degree in education, as well, which resulted in the emergence of a highly trained and devoted educational staff all over the country from downtown Helsinki to the remotest villages of Lapland. As we know, hard-work, professionalism with humble modesty are highly appreciated and respected personal characteristics and values in the Nordic society, the highly educated and trained teachers have steadily turned into one of the most trusted and high ranked professionals in the Finnish society – along with physicians, engineers and judges - which obviously may result in great professional performance.

The masters of education, namely teachers on all levels, could easily get acquainted with the various international trends in pedagogical methodology and philosophy and choose, implement whatever they have found feasible and efficient, useful for their daily work in and out of classrooms for the benefit of their students. Thus, basically, the unique Finnish education system is a nice blend of ideas and practices elaborated in the USA, Canada, Germany or Sweden though it has been masterfully mixed, customised and put into practice in Finland meeting the local expectations and the project-practice based pragmatism of the Nordic population. It is worth emphasizing that the sheer fabric of the Nordic society is based on trust, professionalism, and open-mindedness to adopt new techniques, therefore the national and local school curricula are regularly reviewed and updated to harmonize with the new trends and expectations in the rapidly changing postmodern world. This process is carried out by a nationwide professional board of educators compiled of around 300 chosen outstanding educational experts from all over the country, unlike in many other places where the mostly jurist or economist policy-makers have the final say in national educational issues.

Surprisingly enough for external analysts, there is no formal control, supervision, assessment of any kind on educators which can be directly derived from the common trust and high esteem given for the teaching profession. Nor are the schools ranked as in the rest of Europe, since there are no high-flier elite or underachieving schools according to the Scandinavian-Nordic idea of moderate high-performing middle-class society also reflected in the school system. The head teachers help and monitor the daily work of their school staff and report their findings back to their ... fellow teachers. The 100% publicly funded education system¹⁶ relies on the commonly shared concept of teachers' professionalism and trust in their devotion for the benefit of the entire society, as such. Thus, there is no need to bother them with external supervision and control – as it happens in many under-performing over-controlled education systems where, in most cases the slightest touch of common trust is missing from the part of society and educational policy-makers, as well. The

¹⁶ even in times of economic downturn the education expenditure of Finland remains around 6% of the country's GDP, and about 12% of the annual state budget, which is of outstanding rate in the EU: http://www.stat.fi/til/kotal/2014/kotal_2014_2016-05-11_tie_001_en.html

highly professional and practice-oriented vocational education and training is greatly appreciated in the Finnish society also meeting the demands of the new technologies and businesses in the market-economy, therefore it proves to be a quite popular career choice among secondary school students¹⁷.



The national curriculum is a framework guideline for the schools that they can totally supplement or even partly neglect it. One recurring and perhaps valid criticism is upon the neglected talent management of the high-achievers in schools, who have to take care of themselves since the primary attention and care of the Finnish educators is supposed to focus on the lower performing students so as to avoid the increasing number of drop-outs - and as a result a prevailing consequence: juvenile delinquency and youth unemployment - which on the other hand, naturally is the lowest among the OECD countries, with an average rate around 4% (in Hungary, for instance is more than 10% and the trend is dramatically soaring)¹⁸.

Based upon the guidelines of the current national curriculum, the local school syllabi tend to focus on creating, developing and cherishing all the vital skills and competences necessary for the next generation living in a digital age modern society, such as: problem solving practices, advanced ICT-applications from an early age, individual and team work, creative, critical, and analytic thinking. The ancient Chinese wisdom of 'learning by doing is the best' has been taken remarkably seriously for a long time in Finland, and as of the new academic year of 2017 the new National Curriculum Framework calls upon the regular, monthly application of the *Phenomenon/practice based learning (PBL)* method in all schools aiming at teaching cross-curricular topics or projects implemented in practice by the students themselves.¹⁹



¹⁷ see http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Koulutus/ammattillinen_koulutus/?lang=en

¹⁸ see the latest comprehensive OECD countries' report in 'Education at a Glance 2015' : http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/education/education-at-a-glance-2015/finland_eag-2015-55-en#.V441lvmLRD8

¹⁹ See the NCF of Finland on PBL: <https://www.noodle.com/articles/phenomenon-based-learning-what-is-pbl>

And here we get to the heart of the matter, the essence of the Finnish education system and most likely the secret of their great performance: namely, student-centric customised education and curricula with a lot of personal freedom for both the teachers and the students, far less centrally standardized testing and much more practice and time to digest the subjects in and out of the classroom.



Home economics class:cooking in practice for high school sts

Among many educational pundits, Sahlberg also asserts that the quite balanced socio-financial background of the students takes a lot into account when we assess the generally outstanding performance of the Finnish school children. There is a direct correlation between the school performance and the financially deprived and socially more disadvantaged students and their families. The same way, the educational record of the parents highly affect the performance of their offsprings.

According to a common wisdom shared by PISA-educationalists²⁰, “the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers” which seems absolutely adequate in many comparative studies on education emphasizing the importance of professional background as well as the social and human factors behind school-children.

When the *peruskoulu* and high quality early-age education was launched in Finland, most likely, the decision-makers were just instinctively aware of the result of years-long American survey of this kind on the significant impact of high-quality early-age education and successful career path of the adult individuals later on.²¹ So, these factors from above combined culminate in the outstanding performance of the Nordic education system and not as a consequence of the financial aspects as many experts tend to misconceive.²²

The OECD standardized tests tend to assess the personal problem solving, creative thinking and reading comprehension skills of 15-year old students from more than 70 different countries. Acquiring those skills assessed by PISA²³ or even by the more curriculum-based

²⁰ Most likely originating from South Korea see. OECD PISA-report (2007) p.17,crossref.19

²¹ See the great survey of Project STAR in Tennessee, USA (Friedman et al.) 2011, pp. 1655-56.

²² Sahlberg (2015) loc.1565, taken that e.g. the US spends much more on education than Finland in ratio though with much worse efficiency and outcomes see the famous McKinsey and Co. report (2007) pp.6-7

²³ see the OECD PISA (2012) p.5

There are countless outstanding studies and analyses which highlight the importance of investments into the human capital, and especially in education for the success of developed



An average IT-room in a normal high-school

nations.²⁹ In this respect, Finland serves as a sort of role-model country for the rest of the crisis-stricken European countries, since in the Nordic countries – not exclusively in Finland – the flagship priorities of the ambitious EU strategies do coincide with the national strategic priorities of the country, namely: promoting digital society, increasing the R&D investments, fostering the opportunities for lifelong learning and supporting all kinds of educational development and youth employment projects. Obviously, all these lofty principles are not considered to be mere catching phrases at all - as it would be the case in several other EU-member states - but they are meant to be running feasible projects implemented at cross-country level on a daily basis.

At this point, we are supposed to come to some sort of conclusions concerning the essence of our findings from above on the hidden success factors of the Finnish miracle, particularly in the field of education. However, were we laconic Finns we could whisper that there is not much to investigate or make a big fuss about anything since they have just been doing their best in their taciturn, thoughtful and pragmatic *sisu-like* manner with strategic steadfastness of purpose for the last few decades relying on the prevailing trust, sense of responsibility and professionalism which penetrate to the core of their Nordic society.

As for the educators they ‘have always been the candles for the people’ in Finland, so nowadays, they also share increased responsibility and duty in shaping the future of the country by coaching and guiding the next generations towards the highways of success endowing them with the vital skills, competences and lexis to meet the demands of the 21st century.



The author in front of a high-school in Tampere

²⁹ see the great revelations of Daren Acemoglu and James Robinson (2012)

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