For Australian parents struggling with school fees and NAPLAN pressures the Finnish education system can sound too good to be true: schools are all free and serve daily warm meals, teachers are educated in highly competitive five-year Masters programs, there are no school uniforms, the only standardised national test occurs at the end of secondary school and so on. Pasi Sahlberg’s *Finnish Lessons 2.0* explores the development of these and other extraordinary equity-driven educational policies, and acts as a timely warning of the perils of complacency.

Finnish education suddenly became global news in 2001 when, against everyone’s expectations, the Nordic country dominated the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings. This reputation for educational excellence grew over the following years, as Finland’s results remained high. When Sahlberg’s *Finnish Lessons* was first published in 2011 it became an international success and was translated into fifteen languages. The book became a focal point of global education debates and Sahlberg himself an essential spokesperson for ‘the Finnish Way’ of education, explaining why Finland had performed so well over the preceding decade and what other countries could take from its success. This second edition of the book includes updated data, such as the drop in Finland’s PISA performance in 2012, and recommends future pedagogical directions.

*Finnish Lessons 2.0* is primarily written to counter what Sahlberg mischievously calls the Global Education Reform Movement, or GERM (in one of the two forewords, Diane Ravitch refers to the book as “a disinfectant”, xii). GERM refers to the implementation of corporate models in education administration, standardised testing, competition between and within schools and the use of punitive accountability measures aimed at policing teacher quality. Instead, Sahlberg argues that the best-performing education systems in the world are built on social justice, collaboration and trust, and he goes on to unpack how and why Finland emerged as a global leader in the field.

Sahlberg begins with a range of caveats and addresses common rebuttals of the Finnish Way. You can sense a certain weariness from having the original work take on a life of its own, being at times misinterpreted or simply dismissed through a range of national political lenses. For example, Finland’s small size is often cited as a reason it cannot serve as an example for the education systems of much larger countries. As Sahlberg points out, though, given that most large countries’ education policies are set at a regional rather than national level there is less of a reason why such education systems could not take inspiration from Finland (in Australia, for example, only New South Wales has a larger population than Finland).

Sahlberg argues that although there are well-founded concerns over the capacity of the education system to cope with its rapid and uneven diversification (Sahlberg notes that Finland has had the fastest rate of diversification in Europe since
the 1990s and that the proportion of foreign-born citizens in Finland has tripled since 2000) “the level of student performance has continuously increased and student performance variance has decreased, while Finnish society has become more culturally diverse and socially complex.” (p. 97) A key factor in this development is the provision of individual support for all students based on their educational needs: a third of students receive special education support at some point in their schooling, and all students are entitled to educational support in their native language. At the time of writing this review, for example, a town in Central Finland is advertising for a Somali-speaking teaching assistant.

One of the highlights of the book is the chapter dedicated to teachers, covering everything from the highly competitive and free university programs to the daily practice and career trajectories of qualified teachers. Particularly eye-opening is the course structure of the Master of Education in Primary Teaching at Helsinki University, which Sahlberg provides as a means of illustrating how Finnish teachers are educated (pp. 111-113). The role of research in the program is striking: “Research studies”, including Bachelors and Masters theses and coursework on qualitative and quantitative methods, is the largest single curriculum component in the program. I looked up the entry exam that formed part of the application procedure for Finnish teaching programs in 2015: candidates were required to interpret graphs and demonstrate their understanding of the methodologies used and findings presented in set readings; as well as apply concepts as varied as postmodern, out-group exemplar, chronosystem and postliberal theology. Already on entry, then, candidates for Finnish teaching programs need to demonstrate a high level of research literacy. This research-intensive model of teacher education sheds some light on the high level of autonomy and prestige teachers have in Finland: they are practising researchers equivalent to architects, engineers and medical doctors.

Sahlberg is careful to not suggest that any single component of Finland’s education system could be simply transplanted into another country. One of the key lessons he returns to is that improvements to the education system of any country must arise from an engagement with the relevant social and political structures. Highly qualified teachers will not make much of a difference if they are restricted by frequent high-stakes testing; getting rid of the testing is not enough if schools are not equitably resourced; nor will children reach their full potential if, outside their well-equipped classrooms and supportive school environments, they live in poverty. The Finnish Way is not about replicating the Finnish system elsewhere, but about understanding that in education, equity is excellence.

Given the high international profile of Sahlberg’s work it is remarkable that Finnish Lessons was only translated into Finnish in 2015. The lag would seem to confirm Sahlberg’s contention that, having become a world leader, Finland floundered and did not know how to improve on what already was the best. While the bulk of the book focuses on what other countries can learn from Finland, Finnish Lessons 2.0 closes with recommendations for the Finnish education sector in particular. The “themes of change” Sahlberg recommends would certainly be valuable anywhere (less classroom-based teaching; more personalised learning; focus on social skills, empathy and leadership; and framing the purpose of schooling as helping each student find their own talent; 198-201). Yet in the context of Finland’s
recent public funding cuts, increasing social inequality and decreasing transparency Sahlberg believes it is especially important to radically re-centre student engagement in the education system.

*Finnish Lessons 2.0* is compelling and well-written. It will be of particular interest to those involved in developing education policy, although the book is also highly accessible and should be recommended reading for principals, teachers and parents - even in Finland.

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