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Book review

Finland is recognized by various organizations the most successful in the area of school education. The main slogan of " Finnish dream" is an equal access to quality education. The main principles are the state's monopoly on schools, individual approach to student, and the prestige of the teaching profession. Finland in recent years has consistently been ranked as the country with the highest level of secondary education. Fifteen year Finnish students are significantly ahead of the students in other countries, showing a significant advantage in the natural sciences. It has been estimated, they are about 50-60 points ahead of the average rating (500 points) of students from other countries. (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 6- 7) What is the success of the Finnish model, described in his book " Finnish lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?" Pasi Sahlberg, Director of the Research center under the Ministry of Education. This researcher, now a government official, and in the past - a teacher of mathematics and natural sciences, believes that the key to success has served the bold decisions taken in the 60-70s of the twentieth century. (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 167) According to him, the most important condition for success is to ensure equal access to education for all citizens. And I consider that it can not be done without a proper role of the government. In those countries where there is no state monopoly in education, there can not be provided the principle of equality. Private, " closed" school on the one hand, and poor schools like public schools, on the other hand, lead to the discrediting of this principle. In Finland, the country known as the Scandinavian model of socialism, an education reform began in the 70s of the last century with the publication of

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the law on a compulsory nine-year school education. There were eliminated the private schools and a national program for raising the level and the quality of learning was implemented. An equal access was ensured not only by "nationalization" of schools, but also by the significant budget assets. Sahlberg calls a national education system - the embodiment of "Finnish dream." (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 10)

1. What did you find most interesting about this book? When I read the book, I was interested in some principles of the Finnish educational system such as relationships between teachers and students or the attitudes toward pupils. The best thing about the Finnish education system is the attitude of teachers to students: relationships between teachers and students are not constrained by formal framework, they are free and unconstrained. In my opinion, the main secret of pedagogy is to be in contact with the child, which is a human mutual understanding. The quality of education, according to Sahlberg (2011), largely depends on the quality of teaching staff. Everything possible was done in order to make the teaching profession one of the most prestigious in the country. Each year, nearly one of five students considers the profession of the teacher in high school as the first option of his career. Those who enter the universities for training programs for teachers are ten times more than places for this position. Personnel are trained at the best universities in the country, and young professionals, starting to work, get a solid salary, government benefits, including preferential loan for the purchase of property. (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 49)

According to Sahlberg (2011), in Finland the children are treated as the personalities, this is facilitated by a small number of students in classes (5-

15 people), and, of course, huge budget costs. Learning in the secondary schools is intended to identify the tendency of the child to a particular profession and to make his life interesting. (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 52)

Unfortunately, writes Sahlberg (2011), in many countries the trend towards the introduction of testing for teachers and pupils has led to boredom, monotony, indifference to the educational process. Contrary to ordinary opinion that the modern technologies are part of our lives and should be implemented in schools, the Finnish school does not seek to give student a computer knowledge and practice. Teachers in Finland are using these technologies very different. Some teachers use them very rarely, the others - more often, and here there are no recommendations. (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 41-45) I believe that the main thing is to understand that computer skills are considered as a tool, not a goal. The purpose is a pedagogy, communication and identifying the interests of the student.

2. How do you think the notion of accountability presented in this book differ from the one that informs current educational policies in the US? Sahlberg writes about the feeling of educational crisis which has captured not only the U. S. but also other countries. In America, the people responsible for making decisions rely on market mechanisms such as " stiff competition, information technology, suppression of the unions of teachers, expansion of private initiative in the form of charter schools and the implementation of corporate management practices". In contrast, Finland has been forty years developing an entirely different system of education based on teaching staff training and the reduction of the test system to the minimum. This system gives priority to not accountability, but to the trust and responsibility, its schools and

education departments are managed by professional teachers.

The most striking feature of the Finnish school for Americans is that the students do not pass any unified standardized tests. Of course, they write examinations and pass the tests but the tests which are prepared by their own teachers, and not by some third-party. The Finnish general nine-year education is free from any universal testing, as children should be given the opportunity to " learn, create and develop their natural curiosity". (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 4- 6)

Development of secondary education in Finland is based on a complicated program for the preparation of pedagogical staff. Only eight universities have the right to issue the teacher's diploma. At the University the future teachers learn three years at a very intensive program, and then they are obliged to complete a two-year master's degree program. The subject-matter teachers defend their master's degrees at their respective departments, and not in the department of pedagogy or special teacher training colleges as it is accepted in the United States. Every graduate is prepared to work with any students, including people with disabilities.

(Sahlberg, 2011, p. 70- 81)

According to Sahlberg, a teacher comes to school with a sense of moral mission, and therefore he may renounce his work only if he feels " a threat to his professional independence" or if " the quality of his work will be judged by quantitative criteria (relating to the results of standardized tests)." So today the American system tends just to what the Finnish teachers believe unacceptable by their professional perspective: measuring the quality of teaching by scores of the universal tests. The state standards of arts and

sciences in Finland only determine a range of disciplines that should be included in school curricula, but do not specify in details what and how to teach, but in the United States it is not so, as the whole educational program is totally specified by the government. Every Finnish school teacher is provided with big opportunities to choose what and how to teach and how to evaluate the success of their students. Finnish teachers are convinced that "staying in school naturally implies the right of every child to individual support, which can be provided by specially trained professionals." We can also assess the autonomy of Finnish schools: the central government does not almost interfere in their daily lives. The administration and teachers have developed a comprehensive system of support for students, providing a professional help to those who need it. (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 82- 90)

I consider that compared with U. S. counterparts the Finnish children have more advantages. Due to the high taxation in their country, they have a powerful system of social support. As a result, in Finland less than 4 percent of children live in families with an average income below the poverty level, while in the U. S. this number exceeded 20 percent. In America, most of the children are not provided with a regular medical care, but in Finland every child has access to comprehensive health services. The higher education in Finland is free too. (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 57) The current educational policies in the USA consider a universal testing as the most reliable method of assessing students, teachers and schools; they are focused on the privatization of schools, on strict standards of education, on total accountability of teachers and their salaries in accordance with the results of unified examinations, on closing schools and firing teachers, whose students

show lower results in testing. On the contrary, the main aim of the Finnish education system is not getting a high score at the tests, but the upbringing of a thinking and creative personality. The foundation of this system is not competition, but cooperation. (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 32)

3. After reading this book, what changes you think are needed in the US education system and what would be your suggestions for these changes? Finland's experience has shown that it is possible to construct an alternative model of the system that exists in the United States and other countries.

(Sahlberg, 2011, p. 4) Firstly, we have convinced that the education reforms, which are managed by the needs of the market, which are focused on competition and privatization of education, are not the best way to improve the quality and equality in education. In my opinion, such system should be changed. Secondly, it is important to focus on children's welfare and learning in early childhood. Only healthy and happy children will learn well. The government should do all possible things in order to improve the welfare and education of little children. Third, the Finnish experience has shown that the equal opportunities also lead to an increase in the quality of learning, so our government should provide such opportunities to all students. (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 13) I think that new school reforms should be the key to defeating poverty and become a symbol of social justice.

In conclusion, the author argues that Finland's experience is important, because it gives hope to those who are losing faith in the public education system. In his opinion, educational system of Finland can be an example for other countries such as the United States. There are three good reasons for it. The first reason is associated with the data from the International

Programme on Student Assessment, according to which Finland is among the world leaders in terms of secondary education. The second one is that compared with other countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Finnish educational system is characterized by the smallest variance in the level of individual schools. And ultimately, Finland has adopted many ideas, most valuable for the Americans. Besides equality of educational opportunities, this is also an individual approach to each student, and evaluation of the totality of his accomplishments (student portfolio), and group training. (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 4-7)

References

Pasi Sahlberg. (2011). Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?