



I'm gonna try to do something that is a very difficult, complicated thing to do, namely to paint a kind of a global picture of where we are in education. I'll leave it to you to think about where Australia, or where your school, or your community is. That's something that you need to do

Now, let's assume that we go back in time a little bit. Let's say that this is May 2001, and somebody giving a keynote asked this question, "Where would you go if you could go anywhere in the world to look for interesting inspiration and examples about successful education systems, to learn something useful for your own work, your leadership, where would you go?" New Zealand? How about United States of America? How about England? Scotland? Germany? Sweden?

The education systems that had a reputation 16 years ago were places like Australia, New Zealand, England, United States, Sweden, Norway, Germany, and of course, France. The French still think that they have the best education system in the world. But nobody would ever mention Finland because very few people actually knew anything about Finland or Finnish education. So that's how new this whole thing is.

If this was a conference 16 years ago, most of you here would know that there is this new study, new survey, or student assessment that is going to be made public later that year called PISA, Programme for International Student Assessment, and many of you will probably have a little bit of speculation about how Australia or New Zealand would do. There was one

country among the OECD countries that had no expectations whatsoever. That was Finland. Actually, we had one expectation and that was to be better than Sweden.

Seriously, we said that if we are better than Sweden, then nothing else matters. So we are looking at December 2001. This is what it looked like: Finland, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Ireland, South Korea, UK – and in many countries, this was a huge shock. In Germany, they called this a PISA shock, because look at Germany – Germany was doing very poorly, number 21 in this OECD league table, and one thing that made Finns very happy, not that we are number one, but is that Sweden is Number nine. Nobody reported that Finland is number one. Our media said, "Look at Sweden. They are number nine."

Anyway, the reaction in Finland was interesting. I remember that the morning

when the results came out, my phone started to ring. I was at the University of Helsinki at that time and many of my colleagues called me and said, "So how do we explain this?" And I said, "I have no idea, no clue." And then all these news media asked the same question, "What is the secret of Finland?" And the only thing we could offer to the world media was that we have no clue and we also said that we actually couldn't care less.

We decided after thinking and meeting with colleagues a few times in that December, that the best way to understand this new situation is to accept that the OECD has made a mistake. OECD has made a mistake with Finland, not with anybody else, because look at the other Nordic countries, we should be there somewhere in the middle of this league table.

So in Finland we decided not to do anything. We said that, "Let's take it easy," because nothing would be more embarrassing than three years later when the next PISA cycle comes that Finland would be somewhere there in number 15 and the OECD would send a letter to everybody, or that the government would say that, "We are very sorry, but we made a mistake in measuring Finnish performers three years ago. Now it's correct." So we said, "Let's wait for three years and see what happens."

Three years later it was mathematics. The results were Finland, South Korea, Netherlands, Japan, Canada, Belgium, and so on, and still in my country, many people say, "No, no, this cannot be. Mathematics?

Finnish kids are best in mathematics? No, it cannot be. It cannot be real." So we said that maybe the OECD made the same mistake twice. We had had no research papers, no books written, no conferences held. We had a very low profile.

We said that, "No, no, we take it easy. Let's wait for another three years and see where we are then." Because all Finnish grandmothers say, "Nobody is so foolish to make the same mistake three times." Okay? And this is the science, 2006 – now we are in the December 2007. Finland, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Australia and The Netherlands.

This is where the story begins because this was the moment when in Finland, my colleagues, and the media, and politicians, and others, when they had to accept that something has happened. Something has happened not only in our country but

something has happened in the world, because many of those countries that were claiming to be number one, the high performers, the successful countries were not successful at all. Actually many of them were going downhill, but we still didn't quite understand how to explain this thing.

For me, it was the first two or three cycles that are more interesting because there was not much doping going on. Now performance doping and all sorts of boosters and steroids are put into the system to get the PISA results up. The top six performers in these first three cycles, Australia and New Zealand are there. The importance of this is that we have to ask questions like what did we learn? And for me the importance is not that Finland is number one or three or whatever it is. The importance is that this thing created three very important questions that we were not really able to answer before this international comparable data was available.

First Question

And, of course, the first question was what's going on in those countries, their policies, or reforms, or practice that were thought to be successful but they're not.

Probably the most common thing is that they have built and strengthened their education policies believing that competition between schools is the best strategy to improve the performance. That people think that when schools compete against one another, in some magical way, they find better ways to teach the kids, lead the school, and the performance goes up.

Second question

The second one is the test-based accountability. People think that much more testing, standardised testing, and your NAPLAN, My School stuff is a good example of this. The students' outcomes and achievements, the test results have been the indication of the excellence. So this would be often called a kind of a system that can be illustrated by standardisation

The other side of this question, after these first three cycles of PISA was, of course, "What's going on in those education systems that we're doing exceptionally well?" We tried to understand and somehow explain the high systems performance and that has been the focus of my work intensively during the last ten years.

My primary question has been to try to understand the Finnish thing. The Finnish system, like Canada, and increasingly, Singapore, Japan, South Korea and the Netherlands, have been building their educational improvement and policies, their whole culture, on collaboration. It is a very, very strong policy – philosophy – underlying philosophy of everything we do, how we fund the schools, how we finance the school improvement, how teachers are prepared and educated. Everything always has to go back to the question, "How does this enhance or enable collaboration between people or institutions?"

Rather than test-based accountability, those education systems that have been doing better than average have tried to build trust in schools, and teachers, and principals, and cultivate the professional lateral responsibility within the schools. It's a different thing than accountability and testing.

Third question

The third one is the kind of a consistent work on teacher and leader professionalism and here, Singapore is probably the best example how to do that. We do not allow anybody to teach in our school system, whether it's the pre-school, or primary school, or high school, middle school, without at least having a master's degree on the subjects that they teach or in education, if they're primary school teacher. And then sustained improvement rather than addicted to reform.

Developing and reforming are two different things. This is what the Canadians have been doing very successfully during the last 20 or 30 years in most of their provinces – sustainable development and improvement of the system rather than reforming, turning the things upside down.

And then equity that we often call creativity. Creativity kind of illustrates this type of policies or systems where people are encouraged to find the best ways to do the work. If you're school principal in Finland, you often hear the minister and other leaders saying, "Find out the best way to teach your kids. Provide good education for everybody." Rather than saying that, "These are the regulations, and standards, and rules that you have to follow. Make sure that you follow all of these things." Figure out what is the best thing in your own community. It's a very different way, different approach. Now, where would be Australia and New Zealand?

And one of the challenges that you have is that you have to change this, call this and that there are different ways, and you as a principal, you are often not sure which way to look anymore.

A little thing that this is really concerning me the more I see schools and meet principals, and teachers, and parents is that the pace of everything is so fast nowadays that children are suffering that they don't have time to really reflect and think about what's going on and the same with teachers. So let's give the children and teachers a little bit more time to do these things.

Just look at Australia, how much behind you are here when it comes to funding primary to higher education. How much you are behind the rest of the OECD family in terms of the proportion that you spend of your national wealth in education. So if anybody says that you are spending a lot of money, public money on education, it's not true, because you are one of the low spenders in education.

Now, four lessons I'm gonna leave you with And these are fairly obvious. I've said this already, but let me repeat it once again that you, as school leaders, are important people, you can influence many others. People listen to you. When you write, or when you open your mouth, when you speak, many people listen, including those who have the power, whether it's political or technical power in education. People wanna hear what you think, so that's why you are in a very important situation.

Lesson 1

The first one is to invest in collaboration. Always remember this. The research is very clear that when we try to enhance schools, improve schools, through investing in social capital, teacher collaboration, making teachers more networked, everybody benefits. Social capital, teacher collaboration is positively linked

to increasing human capital in schools, meaning what teachers know and what they're able to do. So collaboration – it has to be a policy. It has to be a systemic, strategic way to invest resources so that it enhances collaboration. Same thing with your students in the classroom.

Lesson 2

Then the second one is about the equity. If you take equity more seriously, if you're clear about what it is and if you break it down into concrete actions and steps in your own school, or in your own community, or district, or state, the equity pays off even more. That's for sure particularly in a country, in a place like Australia where you have issue, whether equity or inequality is a challenge in many ways, much more than in Finland or other places.

Lesson 3

Building professionalism is a must and this you know. All of us, we know this already. Leader professionalism and teacher professionalism that the schools will not improve without professional learning of the people who are there. So that has to be done carefully.

Lesson 4

And then finally help everybody to find their passion, find their inner heart, what is in your heart. But your passion must be a larger idea than that. It's about what you really feel that you are passionate to do. What do you want to do in your life?

What we are not doing in Finland, and many other countries, is that we are not helping all the children to find their passion, understand what they are good at. Most of our 16-year-olds, when they graduate from junior high school in Finland, if you go there and do a kind of quick survey and you ask, "Tell me what are you good at?" More than 50 percent of them will say, "I'm good at anything. I've learned all sorts of things. I can do a little bit of this and that, but I feel that I'm not really good at anything like some of my friends are." It's a shame. And this is what I tell to my minister every time we meet. I say, "It's a shame that we still have an education system where we let children, tens of thousands of kids, leave the school with this feeling that I'm not good at anything."

We can only be happy when most of our kids leave the school and say that, "I have found my passion. I know what I want to do and the school helped me to do that. Without school, I would have never realised what it is, what my

and I was helped. I got the support and encouragement in the school to go further.” This is what we need to do and that’s why I think this is that reimagining part of this thing.

Conclusion

So, these are my lessons for you and I was thinking about what happened yesterday in Manchester and my e-mail has been full of people expressing their sorrow and concerns about what’s going on and I was asking myself that, “So what is it that helps in a situation like this?” And my answer is always the same. It’s music. Music will heal. It always has or arts. And that’s why I think we need to make sure that we have arts and music as a central place in all of our schools because this is what will help children and adults in times like this

Delegate 1. A comment from the floor

I heard you in Melbourne probably six, eight years ago, with Andy Hargreaves, and it was just a similar message. I think the people that are assembled in this room have an immense passion for education and immense passion for our roles in Catholic education. We know what we need to do to get higher quality and higher equity but our education policy in Australia is pushing us the other way. The wellbeing of our principals, the wellbeing of our children, the wellbeing of our staffs, the quality in our schools – the inequity across Australia is getting worse and worse and we’re very frustrated. We know what we should be doing, but our education policy is going the other way, and I don’t know what to do about it.

Pasi Sahlberg response

Yeah. It’s a good point. Well, maybe I can borrow the words of the late John F. Kennedy who said that, “Don’t ask what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.” And we have a room full of – a lot of power here -- that’s what I always say when the principals are in the room, that you have much more power than you think. And I think if you remember Kennedy’s line, “Ask what you can do for your country,” or for your system, I think the answer will be there. And I think I would ask this critical question, “What have we done? Have we done enough as leaders?” Leaders from the middle – that is the most important and most difficult leadership position when you lead from the middle, not from the top or in the classroom level. You are leaders in the middle. Have we done enough? Have we made it clear to others what is our concern? Are we absolutely sure that everybody, when we talk about equity, that everybody understand what we’re actually talking about? And if you have any doubt, if you think that there’s any room for doing more or more systematically, then I think this is what you need to do and simply because if you don’t do it, who will? You don’t lead with small data. If you don’t lead with your own insight and vision, you will be led by somebody else with big data. And that’s going to happen. Before you do anything else, ask yourselves this question that, “Have we done enough and all we can to make sure that our communities and the power that is deciding what happens really knows and understands these things?” Well, if you have done everything, then I really don’t know what to do. Come to Finland.

Delegate 2. Comment from the floor

Our education system is highly politicised and I wonder whether politicians or ministries ever asked educationist like yourself to talk to them. Are they interested in that? I know in Canada, it’s a huge part of their platform. Are you asked to speak at political gatherings?

Pasi Sahlberg response

Yes, all the time and yes, in Australia too. Education ministers, have the lightest portfolio of the whole cabinet of ministers, and they often have to do what somebody else is asking them to do, or then what happens? You lose your job or you have to go because you cannot do these things anymore. So I’m speaking to politicians all the time. I’m an adviser to several governments right now, the ministers and prime ministers, and people listen. They have this concern. So I think we should not undermine politicians and ministers’ ability to listen and understand these things.

But again, I would throw a kind of a challenge on the table is that are we communicating these things? For example, I don’t know exactly what your concerns are, but are we communicating these things clearly and convincingly enough that people would understand what we are thinking about? And in many places the plain bold answer is that not at all. Teachers are silent. Principals are not really saying anything. And so, how can we change the conversation if people don’t know – if we are not writing op-eds in the newspapers or if we are not running podcast shows in the local radio stations so that people would understand what we are worried about, what our concerns are. We need to probably do more.

Again, if you wait that somebody will do these things for you, it’s not going to happen. This story is not going to end nicely in education if we just wait. Now it’s time to stand up and be clear about what is at stake in many parts of the world. That’s what I think – communication, conversation, dialogue with people. Making sure that we use our students as well in the communication so that they will speak about the importance of education and schooling. That will make a difference. Waiting for Superman will end in disaster, I think.

Presentation by Pasi Sahlberg

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