

It is difficult for societies, just like individuals, to stay in the same place for a long time: they either thrive or decay. The thrift or decay can have many forms and many causes, one of them being neglect of their children and education. In modern societies, this need to regenerate and renew is just as necessary as in any ancient society, but now we have a different way of dealing with it.

Modern societies have without exception developed an educational system to deal with the problem of upbringing and education of the young and to renew these societies. This simple fact tells us that division of labour in modern times requires that specialists in education need to work with children and adolescents to make them fit for the modernity that awaits them. The simple truths we could once learn at our mothers' knees are not what modernity requires.

Any education and educational system must fulfil at least three functions: it must prepare the young for living in a society (and nowadays this means that they must learn to live in a democracy); it must prepare them for living in a capitalist economy (meaning that they must acquire skills suitable for that kind of economy enabling them to get a job that is such that somebody is willing to pay for the services provided or goods produced); and lastly education must prepare the young to live well, to live in families dealing with intimate relations, having their own families, to enjoy the course and direction their lives have taken and even have a feeling that there is a meaning within their lives. This is a tall order and I am not sure if there are many educational systems serving all these functions.

One of those that come close to it is certainly the Finnish educational system. In international comparative research Finnish students are among the best in whatever is measured: mathematical skills, scientific literacy, reading literacy. Among the member countries of OECD they nearly always come at the top. It also seems that there is widespread consensus among the Finns themselves about the educational system, which indicates that they believe that it serves them and their society well. It cannot be an aim of an educational system to come out on top in international comparative research, but if it serves its children and in general its society well and comes out on top in international comparison, then that is quite an achievement.

This book is about the Finnish educational system, its features, structure and principles. The authors emphasise many features of it that are interesting indeed in an international perspective. They describe a well-functioning system that aims to form well-rounded individuals, morally and emotionally mature, and well advanced cognitively. Yet the system is not competitively driven, there are no national exams that students have to complete at regular intervals, there is no national inspectorate of schools, and teachers are autonomous in their decisions about their methods in teaching within the limits set by each school and by the national curriculum. These features go against the grain, at least in the Anglo-Saxon context, because there the trend has been towards more accountability to the political authorities through increased testing, competition between schools and discriminating pay scales for teachers who achieve results.

In the light of their achievements in international comparisons, it is natural to ask if there is anything special that might explain the Finnish miracle. How do we account for it? For one, the Finns have emphasised equality in their school system and it shows in the results. Those who do best are similar from most of the countries measured, but what makes a difference for the Finns is that those who are weaker also do well, lifting the general score for Finland. It is also the case that differences between schools are negligent, account only for 8% of the variation in the scores. There is a gender gap in reading, girls doing better than boys by 55 points, the largest difference between girls and boys in all OECD countries. There is a difference between the two language groups, Finnish and Swedish, but those who speak Swedish in Finland do considerably better than Swedes in Sweden. The Finnish state only spends averagely on education, Finnish pupils get the third fewest lessons from the age of 7 to the age of 14, the average number of students per teacher in the OECD countries is 16 but 11.4 in Finland, and the average class size in Finland is 20.1 students, the sixth lowest. Teachers have to complete a master's degree to get a qualification as a teacher; studying for a degree in teaching is very popular and the universities only accept 10-15% of those who apply. Teaching is a high-status profession in Finnish society. On the whole it seems that Finnish teachers are cautious in their approach to their teaching and trust the well-tested rather than the innovative, relying heavily, for example, on textbooks in the natural sciences.

This book is divided into four sections. The first is about the general frame within which the educational system as a whole operates in Finland. The second concentrates on special features of the whole system, such as the emphasis on equity and excellence and how

evaluation is mostly used formatively, how the national curriculum is structured and the research orientation in teachers' work. The third part is on the subjects taught in Finnish schools covering all of them, not just those that have been used in international comparisons. The last part is on future directions for the system, discussing drama education as a part of arts education in the future, ICT in schools, the links between public institutions e.g. museums and schools, and LUMA (the project to bring science to everyone). It is very interesting to see how carefully Finnish teachers planned the use of ICT, realising that the most important thing was to figure out how you want to use these new machines. It is also striking that the Finnish students, who are so skilled in scientific literacy, score very low on interest in the natural sciences and therefore it was decided to establish the LUMA project.

If you want to become acquainted with the Finnish system of education this book is a good place to start. It is a sympathetic approach and very informative. It also gives the reader a flavour of the strong and varied academic research tradition in education and teacher training in Finland.

Share this:

Share