

Chapter 41

Finnish Education: An Ambiguous Utopia?

Tuija Itkonen

Department of Teacher Education, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Fred Dervin

Department of Teacher Education, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Mirja-Tytti Talib

Department of Teacher Education, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

Finland represents an educational utopia for many educators and decision-makers around the world. The Nordic country is known for its excellence in learning results and the emphasis it lays on equality/equity in education. This paper focuses on the way the latter has been presented and constructed in two popular commercial products on Finnish education: a book and a 60-minute documentary. Audiences for both include educational scholars and practitioners, decision-makers and the general public. The authors examine assumptions, ideologies, and silences in the discussions of equality and equity behind the discourse of excellence in Finnish education. As Finland is actively involved in marketing its education around the world, this calls for a review of the myths and realities of Finnish education.

INTRODUCTION

Finnish education represents an educational utopia to many people around the world (Liu & Dervin, 2016; Dervin, 2013ab), despite the recent slight decline in the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies. International educators, scholars, and decision/policy-makers are interested in the high professional status and independent working conditions of Finnish teachers in basic education and especially in the successful performance of Finnish 15-year-olds in mathematics, science, and literacy in PISA studies (OECD, 2004, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2014, 2016). Built on egalitarian ideals, the Finnish Comprehensive School is described as having accomplished this success with relatively short

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school days and semesters, no high-stakes policies of teacher accountability, and without frequent national standardised testing (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Sahlberg, 2011, 2015).

Finnish education is frequently associated with words such as miracle (Niemi, Toom, & Kallioniemi, 2012), mystery (e.g. Simola, 2015), phenomenon (e.g. The Finland Phenomenon, 2011). Stimulated by an 'influential intermediary network' composed of transnational agencies, consultancies and the media (Auld & Morris, 2014, p. 129), numerous official foreign delegations, 'pedagogical tourists', seek for options, consultancy, and training on educational change from Finland (Kupiainen, Hautamäki & Karjalainen, 2009). Alongside private business entrepreneurs and companies, Finnish educational authorities are marketing the excellence of this system of education (cf. Schatz, 2015; Ball, 2012; Sellar & Lingard, 2013). Educational consortia between Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences export professional knowledge of researchers, teachers, and teacher educators (Dervin, 2013ab, 2015; Schatz, 2015). Regarded as an internationally viable asset, Finnish education is turning into a commodity to be competed for in a global educational marketplace (cf. Ball, 2012; Schatz, Popovic, & Dervin, 2015; Sellar & Lingard, 2013).

Finns, however, are currently dealing with conflicting discourses and realities. The traditional ideologies that support 'imagined' (Anderson, 1983) Finnishness (e.g. Itkonen & Paatela-Nieminen, 2015; Martikainen, 2013; Paatela-Nieminen, Itkonen, & Talib, 2016), infused with the values of social justice and equality (cf. Ahonen, 2012; Simola, 2015), homogeneity, self-reliance, and perseverance (cf. Kärki, 2015; Martikainen, 2013) compete with Finland's treatment of its diversifying population, dismantling ideals of the welfare state, and global demands for neoliberal market-based political, societal, and educational mindscapes (Dervin, 2013ab; Kärki, 2015; Riitaoja, 2013; Simola, 2015).

Finland has shown that promoting equality in educational systems can support high quality learning (e.g. OECD, 2012). From the outside, in comparison to a number of other countries, it looks as if all is quite well in Finland. However, from a critical perspective, realities within the national borders are not necessarily matching current global discourses of equality and equity in Finnish education. We argue that there are more dimensions to the story of excellence of Finnish education than is discussed and marketed internationally. Examining assumptions, ideologies and silences in a commercially marketed and popular book and a documentary on Finnish education, we aim to make visible some of the less talked about narratives and to promote a better understanding of what happens at the intersection of the myths and realities of Finnish schooling (Dervin, 2013ab; Itkonen, Talib & Dervin, 2015). We also wish to add to the current critical work on the influence of international agencies and consultancies in discussions of excellence and performance in education around the world (cf. Auld & Morris, 2014; Ball, 2012; Meyer & Benavot, 2013).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Imagined Finnishness

The story of equality and excellence in education is one of the narratives (re)producing 'imagined' (Anderson, 1983) Finnishness (e.g. Itkonen & Paatela-Nieminen, 2015; Paatela-Nieminen et al., 2016). The collective notion of Finnishness has been constructed via history, narratives, and juxtapositions (Martikainen, 2013). The development of the educational system for an emerging nation offered a way to come to terms with ignorance and poverty but also with historical Swedish (until 1809) and Russian

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