

IS THERE AN END TO BEGIN WITH?

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Abstract: Romania's attempt at reforming education within the last 20 years could use the example of other countries. Any recent analysis of educational reform policies will describe Finland as the country with a slow but steady reform that led to a modern, publicly financed quality education system where "nobody is left behind". Can Romania contextualize such an example into a coherent educational structure for itself?

The results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 and 2003 have brought attention to this Finnish Brave New World of education, based on the principle of "less is more" and "high is low". No later than the 1960s, the Finnish agrarian society with limited education has decided to plan for change. A culturally shared recognition admitted that education directly impacts well-being and economic health. So they set their engines into motion...

30 years later, in the 1990s, a Balkan country has the opportunity to make this change, yet the focus shifts at that time. The results will be visible a few generations later and in 2012, the civil society begins to react. Will Romania start planning for the change for the future, given the fact that its wobbly educational steps so far indicate exactly the opposite: the lack of a plan, the lack of an end? Shall we assist to a bottom-to-top pressure for change or shall we continue the well-trodden path of the top-to-bottom incoherent "guidelines"?

Keywords: educational reform, Finnish educational system, Romanian educational reform

A good system plans the **change** for the future, defines that change and the long term plan that goes with it, following it with laborious meticulousness. The Finnish educational system has designed and thoroughly implemented a 50 year plan that is now showing its excellent results. The purpose of this article is to present the Finnish educational reform and draw some conclusions as to what or how much of it can be adapted to the Romanian system, should we consider it is worth the while.

Romania's attempt at reforming education within the last 20 years could use the example of other countries. The Finnish El Dorado seems to be now an educational ideal for Romanian educationalists. In Finland, there are virtually no private schools. Nor is there a need for one, since the public system functions so well. In Finland, there are no elites and no concern for elite management since every individual reaches his/her full potential and the system is able to deliver the best possible education for every child. There are no tests and no school inspections.

"In a Finnish classroom, it is rare to see a teacher standing at the front of a classroom lecturing students for 50 minutes. Instead, students are likely to determine their own weekly targets with their teachers in specific subject areas and choose the tasks they will work on at their own pace. In a typical classroom, students are likely to be walking around, rotating through workshops or gathering information, asking questions of their teacher,

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and working with other students in small groups. They may be completing independent or group projects or writing articles for their own magazine. The cultivation of independence and active learning allows students to develop metacognitive skills that help them to frame, tackle, and solve problems; evaluate and improve their own work; and guide their learning processes in productive ways”¹, announces Linda Darling Hammond, Professor of Education at Stanford University in an article “What we can learn from Finland’s successful school reform”, published on the NEA site (National Education Association)².

Any recent analysis of educational reform policies will describe Finland as the country with a slow but steady reform that led to a modern, publicly financed quality education system where “nobody is left behind” (See Annex 1: Finland’s education system organisation). Can Romania contextualize such an example into a coherent educational structure for itself?

The results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 and 2003 have brought attention to this Finnish Brave New World of education, based on the principle of “less is more” and “high is low”. No later than the 1960s, the Finnish agrarian society with limited education has decided to plan for change. A culturally shared recognition admitted that education directly impacts well-being and economic health. The basic assumption at hand was that education is the key vehicle to enhance human capital, to preserve cultural specificity as globalisation proceeds and also to ensure economic development and social well-being.

A Statistics Report from Finland, 2008 shows more than 99% of the age group successfully complete compulsory basic education, about 95% continue their education in upper secondary schools or in the 10th grade of basic school (some 3%) immediately after graduation, and 90% of those starting upper secondary school eventually receive their school leaving certification, providing access to tertiary education. Two thirds of those enrol either in academic universities or professionally oriented polytechnics. Moreover, more than 50% of the Finnish adult population participates in adult-education programs.

How did they manage to get to this **expansion of participation in education**? By focused investment in education and its resources. Recent global education indicators show that only 2% of Finnish education costs are from private sources, the rest being covered by the state.

Since the 1950s, Finland went through a fundamental economic and especially cultural transformation that was based on an investment-driven, knowledge-based and education-oriented economy. This equity-based, well-performing and exclusively publicly-financed education system upgraded its human capital by transforming this system from one of the Cinderellas of education (less-than-average) to one of “le meilleur des mondes” since the 1980s.

Back in the 70’s, student achievement in Finland was low. **Beginning with the 1970s**, Finland decided to **equalize educational opportunity**, by eliminating the

¹ From Darling-Hammond, Linda, *The Flat World and Education: How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*, Teachers College Press, New York, 2010.

² Linda Darling-Hammond is the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education at Stanford University where she has launched the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute and the School Redesign Network. She is a former president of the American Educational Research Association and member of the National Academy of Education. Her research, teaching, and policy work focus on issues of school restructuring, teacher quality and educational equity.

practice of separating students into very different tracks based on their test scores, and then by eliminating the examinations altogether. This occurred in two stages between 1972 and 1982, and a common curriculum, through the end of high school, was developed throughout the entire system. These equal changes ensured more open access to higher education. During this time, these changes were combined with social supports for children and families, including a free daily meal, free health and dental care, transportation, learning materials, and counselling in schools, just to have an overview of the range of economic investment involved.

By the late 1970s, the second stage involved **extended investment in very skilful teachers** that could later on permit local schools more autonomy to make decisions about what and how to teach. In Finland, student teachers are recruited from the top 10% of the graduate cohort, only 1 in 10 or 15 applicants being accepted to become a teacher in Finland. They have a high overall level of literacy and numeracy, strong interpersonal and communication skills, a willingness to learn (academic ability) and a high motivation to teach. Finnish teachers spend nearly half of their time in school in high-level professional development, collaborative planning, and working with parents. They are vested with much decision-making authority, choice of textbooks, student assessment policy, determining course content and fluctuation. This organicity of the system, its paradigm of flow, networks, waves, dynamisms and structure is guided by the leadership and choice of every individual.

On student achievement, teacher leadership has much more significant effects than principal or administrative leadership. This is one of the core strategic dilemmas to reconcile: pedagogical leadership or administrative leadership, educating and teaching or customer service, networking and cooperation or competition and specialisation of schools?

The well-known 2007 McKinsey Report “How the world’s best-performing school systems come out on top” evinces 3 main things top school systems claim matter the most:

1. “The quality of a school cannot exceed the quality of its teachers”
2. “The only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction”
3. “High performance requires every child to succeed”³.

These 3 requirements are the pillars of the observed Finnish system:

1. Getting the right people to become teachers
2. Developing them into effective instructors
3. Ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child.

At the conference held at the Education Forum in Bucharest on May, 13th, 2010, Dr. Jukka Kangaslahti, a Finnish expert on education and education consultant of the European Education Commission highlighted the very prerequisites of their analysis that goes along the lines of the McKinsey Report:

“The quality of ECONOMY is dependant on the quality of HUMAN RESOURCES.

The quality of HUMAN RESOURCES is dependant on the quality of EDUCATION.

The quality of EDUCATION is dependant on the quality of TEACHING AND LEARNING.

³ In September 2007, *How the world’s best-performing school systems come out on top*

The quality of TEACHING AND LEARNING is dependant on the quality of TEACHERS.

The quality of TEACHERS is dependant on the quality of TEACHER EDUCATION (AND LIFE-LONG LEARNING)."⁴

As a reaction against an oppressive, centralized system existent before, Finnish economics chose to invest in teachers. They upgraded the teaching profession. Their teachers now take a free three-year graduate school preparation program, with a stipend for living expenses. They specialise in a 5-6 year program and after teaching in model schools, they enter the classrooms after graduating a Master's degree.

Much like the British preschool curriculum that has now gone from 69 to 17 clear learning objectives, by the mid-1990s, **the Finnish national curriculum became flexible, decentralised and less detailed**, going from 700 pages of prescriptive curriculum to 10 pages of guidance for all of mathematics, just to give an example. Now, their national core curriculum is a much leaner document, emphasizing creative thinking and learning management from both teachers and children.

The Finnish educational system appears to us as a perfect epitome of "flow", creativity and individual freedom and leadership. One of the authors often mentioned by Finnish educationalists is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the author of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990) and *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (1996)⁵ with his theory of flow, creativity and happiness:

"Creativity is a central source of meaning in our lives ... most of the things that are interesting, important, and human are the results of creativity... [and] when we are involved in it, we feel that we are living more fully than during the rest of life."⁶

Creativity can make one happy/ec-static, being life in concentrated form that annuls the passing of time and the back-breaking effort. Creativity in any form or discipline can produce meaning, reality, ec-static joy.

Although Finnish educationalists try to apply the theory of "flow" to their educational system, they do think it important to find a balance between happiness and contribution, or challenge and skill, in their work. And this is another noteworthy thing about Finnish experts: when in a paradigm, they think "out of the box" or "laterally", by trying to take the best of everything, balancing paradigms and adapting them to their context.

"Most visitors to Finland discover elegant school buildings filled with calm children and highly educated teachers. They also recognize the large autonomy that schools enjoy, little interference by the central education administration in schools' everyday lives,

⁴ Professor Jukka Kangaslahti is the Educational Consultant of the European Education Commission in the European Parliament and expert of the Finnish educational system. He held a conference the Education Forum in Bucharest on May, 13th, 2010 and has been meeting Romanian authorities and educationalists ever since.

⁵ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is a Hungarian Psychology Professor, immigrated to the United States, teaching now at Claremont Graduate University. One of his former positions was that of Head of the Psychology Department at the University of Chicago. He is noted for his work in the study of "happiness" and "creativity" and is best known as the architect of the notion of "flow".

⁶ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, Harper Perennial, New York, 1996.

systematic methods to address problems in the lives of students, and targeted professional help for those in need."⁷

Finnish schools are generally small (fewer than 300 pupils) with relatively small class sizes (around 20 students), and are uniformly well equipped. The notion of **caring for students educationally and personally** is a central principle of their school policy. All students receive, as I have mentioned before, a free meal daily, as well as free health care, transportation, learning materials, and counselling in their schools, so that the foundations for learning are in place. Beyond that, access to quality curriculum and teachers has become a central aspect of Finnish educational policy.

Between ages 7-14 years, a Finnish child spends around 5400 hours in school. Within the same age period, a French child spends around 8300 hours in school. So, "less is more" at this point and quality does prevail over quantity.

Finland has been doing what Romania has not and apparently, in this context, cannot or is not willing to. Over the past 40-50 years, Finland has moved focus from a highly centralized system emphasizing external testing to a more localized system in which highly trained teachers design curriculum around the very flexible national standards that are used as guidelines to follow. The logic of the system is to invest in the capacity of local schools and teachers' leadership to meet the needs of all students.

We resume a few of the principles of the Finnish Reform:

- Finland **changed paradigm**: from a closed paradigm based on "either/or" polarities, on fixed dismembered things, they moved to a live organic one that synthesizes, relates, organizes, contains "both/and" polarities.
- Finns **decided to invest in education** to change course.
- They **provided social support** for students including a free daily meal, free health and dental care, transportation, learning materials, and counselling in schools.
- They **upgraded the teaching profession and trained better teachers**. All teachers have a Master's degree.
- They **changed curriculum**, minimizing objectives and vesting teachers with decisional leadership.
- They **eliminated standardized tests** that tied teachers' hands.
- They **eliminated school inspections** permitting each school and teacher to use the curriculum as a starting point of their educational endeavour.

30 years later, in the 1990s, Romania has the opportunity to make a "different" educational reform, yet the focus shifts at that time. The results will be visible a few generations later and in 2012, the civil society begins to react. Will Romania start planning for change for the future, given the fact that its wobbly educational steps so far indicate exactly the opposite: the lack of a long-term plan, the lack of an end? Shall we assist to a bottom-to-top pressure for change or shall we continue the well-trodden path of the top-to-bottom incoherent "guidelines"?

Romania's highly centralized and politicized system registers throbs of internationalism in one Minister or another, but the Government, even though it has expressed a need for Reform, does not seem interested in articulating a long-term plan with clear simple outlines that all political parties follow, irrespective of parti-pris. How long a term can Romania plan for, given the change in management, philosophy and

⁷ Sahlberg, Pasi, *Educational Change in Finland*, in A. Hargreaves, M. Fullan, A. Lieberman, and D. Hopkins (Eds.), *Second International Handbook of Educational Change*, Springer, New York, 2009, page 7.

vision? Do we even have a management philosophy of the public sector that is followed systematically with commitment and enthusiasm by all parties involved?

At the conference held at the Education Forum in Bucharest on May, 13th, 2010, when asked “What can Romania do at this point in time?”, Dr Jukka Kangaslahti answered:

- Recruit the best teachers – which is crucial for the success!
- Do not copy; Romanian context counts and is important!
- Experiment in context – do not abandon the positives of the Romanian school curriculum/teaching methods!
 - Do not get stuck in rigid procedures – develop and make better: Evaluate!
 - Don’t be afraid of mistakes – we learn from mistakes!
 - Set long term educational goals and short term aims: Process view, be patient!
 - Take advantage of co-operation: share best practices!
 - Fight against bureaucracy!

For all I know, Finnish educationalists have met Romanian authorities and have presented to them everything we know and more – the need for change in educational administration, the suggestion to eliminate bureaucracy, etc. What they choose to do with this information still remains unknown.

This point in time of the Education Reform presents a preschool curriculum that follows the guidelines of the IB (International Baccalaureate), a new primary school curriculum with less educational objectives that no longer follows the IB guidelines but that can be integrated with the international curriculum objectives, should one choose to do so, and an old curricular scheme for the secondary school packed with objectives and uncorrelated information.

Interesting to note as well is the fact that statistics regarding the teacher-training financed by European Union funds have a rate of investment of 10-20%. Conclusion: the teacher instruction has not improved outcomes! So the questions that come to mind are then: “Why is Romania so resistant to change and why has it not planned for change more efficiently?”, “When are we going to draw valuable conclusions from the actual state of education nowadays?”, “Would Romanian education system be so willing to overhaul old mentalities and habits for new ones, whose benefits for children have already been proven?”

In order to begin the Education Reform, one must have an end to look to, since most beginnings start with a long-term end in mind. In the meantime, while still formulating our long-term educational objectives, we give and spend more, from all points of view, including the financial one. Or in Derek Bok’s words, American educator and lawyer: “If you think education is expensive, try ignorance”.

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Appendix

