Finland's social climbers: How they're fighting inequality with education, and winning [1]

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Finland's social climbers: How they're fighting inequality with education, and winning

Finland has remade its education system to help kids like Lara Osman – born to poor, immigrant parents – grow up to be middle-class success stories. Doug Saunders reports.

In most other countries, Lara Osman's prospects would not be good. She was born 12 years ago in a grey apartment-block district of eastern Helsinki, the first of two daughters of recent refugees from Iraq. Her father, who speaks Kurdish, is a taxi driver; her mother, who speaks Arabic and English at home but only recently mastered Finland's difficult language, has a support job at a school. It's not much income to raise a family of four in an expensive Nordic country.

On her wind-blasted morning walk from their apartment to her primary school, Lara passes multihued clusters of adults gathered outside the shops without much to do: Unemployment rates in this part of Helsinki are high, especially among the foreign-born, and business prospects are few. Many of her classmates come from families with similar stories of displacement, marginality and poverty.

The playground scene – with its circles of Eastern and Central European, Middle Eastern, East African, and Nordic kids, whose lingua franca is most often not Finnish but fractured forms of English – is competitive and a bit tough. "You have to stay strong here," says Lara, a slight, bespectacled girl whose well-developed self-confidence and curiosity have served her well. "There are some kids who will treat you badly because you're not like them. You just ignore them if they talk badly to you."

But when the bell rings at 8 and Lara steps from the playground into the sunlit hallways of Meri-Rastila Primary School, her reality, and prospects, change abruptly. In that building, her betterment suddenly becomes part of an all-hands-on-deck national obsession unique to Finland.

The small, modern, glass-and-concrete building resembles many urban Canadian primary schools, but its classrooms are more intense, each with several teachers and assistants minding circles of kids of highly varied educational and linguistic abilities: There are virtually no special or remedial classes. A lot of non-academic activities fill the day, and the combination of the school's collaborative structure and the teachers' detailed devotion to keeping each child on track sometimes gives the place the urgent mood of a hospital emergency ward.

The Finnish obsession is not with education per se, but with making sure that kids like Lara all get the maximum possible school experience. That obsession has produced results: The odds of someone like her, born below the poverty line, becoming a middle-class adult are better in Finland than in almost any other country. More important, those odds are measurably better than they were 20 years ago. And it's almost all because of the way the Finns changed their schools.

Now, a school system originally re-engineered to fill the gap between the rural poor and better-off urbanites is also addressing the wealth gap between established Finns and a growing population of poor immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers – making Finland's challenges increasingly similar to those of Canada.

This is a rare example of a country where national policy has been used to build a better pathway out of poverty and into a productive life. In recent years, that policy, while still successful, has begun to feel the pressures of a more diverse population and a fast-changing economy.

So, in both their successes and their controversies, it's worth looking inside Finland's schools to see what lessons the world's most successful education reform has for the rest of us.

Separating poverty from heredity

The poor stay poor, the rich get rich: That, in the view of many people, is simply how the world works. Social mobility – the extent to which the less affluent get richer (or the better-off become less so) – is often thought to be an accident of fate, a product of individual will, or a changeless factor dependent entirely on the growth of the economy.

But what if we can make upward mobility happen? If, instead of spending money to make life more tolerable for the poor, governments invested in transforming children of poverty into productive, non-dependent, tax-contributing people?

We are in an era – perhaps transitory, maybe longer lasting – in which the world economy has stalled, and we can't simply count on economic growth to give people better lives. It's time to look at social mobility not as something that just happens, but as something we can create.

We have known for a long time that some countries have more mobility than others. If you're born to a low-income family in Canada, your odds of having an income, in adulthood, in the middle class or better are twice what they would be if your family were in the United States or Britain, but not as good as they'd be in Northern Europe.

But some countries don't just have perpetually high social mobility – they have improved it. Finland, for example, was a middle-ranking country, closer to France, a generation ago, but has soared up the ranks as a result of a major intervention in education and early-childhood policy.

Why should this be of concern to Canada, which already ranks in the social-mobility Top 10? Because there are signs that the "Canadian dream" is beginning to flag. They don't show up in the raw national figures yet – it takes at least 20 years to register a change in intergenerational mobility – but the signs are there.

A much more expensive housing market has limited access to one traditional tool for escaping poverty. A more precarious postindustrial economy is making it harder to find income security. And Canada's social safety net – which many studies have credited for its high rate of social mobility – is not as robust, in some provinces, as it once was.

There are also strong signs that some Canadian regions, provinces and cities are suffering much lower social mobility than is the country as a whole, and that these poverty traps may be getting worse. In the United States, economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues have used big-data studies to show that specific cities, regions and neighbourhoods differ dramatically.

"Cities such as Salt Lake City and San Jose have rates of mobility comparable to Denmark," he concluded in a 2014 paper that transformed the study of the subject. "Other cities – such as Charlotte and Milwaukee – offer children very limited prospects of escaping poverty," because their rates are lower than that of "any developed country for which data are currently available."

And many of these regional differences have to do with schools. Areas with higher test scores, lower dropout rates and smaller class sizes, Dr. Chetty's analysis has shown, had much more mobility; so did those with comparatively higher property taxes (which, in the United States, are the main source of school finance).

That kind of regional microanalysis has not yet been published in Canada. But Miles Corak, the University of Ottawa economist (now based at Harvard) whose work has shaped Canada's understanding of the subject, says he believes that Canada is also highly varied by region and neighbourhood, with the North and rural areas among the places experiencing far lower levels of mobility.

Other recent studies suggest that once-rapid social mobility experienced by newcomers may be slowing down. Shibao Guo, a professor of education at the University of Calgary, found that recent immigrants from China are facing tougher barriers to social and economic progress than did previous generations, some even experiencing "downward social mobility." Much of this, he discovered, has to do with education and skills-training obstacles.

It is therefore worth taking a close look at policy interventions that have made poverty less hereditary, as they offer potentially huge savings in social-security costs, and the potential economic benefits – higher productivity, higher tax revenues – of a more prosperous population.

From the classroom to the middle class

Lara falls into stride with her fellow students as they file into their classroom; they talk about their Instagram posts and make plans to go to the mall after school. They greet a new girl in her class, from East Asia, who is still grappling with Finnish. She won't be kept out of the class, though: She'll get an extra hour of instruction in the morning, but otherwise she, along with half the school's students who don't speak Finnish as a native language, will learn along with everyone else. Still, there will be special one-on-one attention: By the time they are 16, almost half of all Finnish students will have received some intensive form of personalized help or individually tailored guidance.

Finnish schools have been obsessively and singularly re-engineered, in three decades of radical reforms, to ensure that kids like Lara are at the centre of everything, that they receive as much intensive education as the wealthiest and most fluent students, and that they all have the chance to make it through to higher education. Other countries have made education changes, but only Finland has altered its entire system to improve the odds of poor kids entering the middle class.

Equally important is what you don't see: teachers in Meri-Rastila or any other Finnish school delivering lessons from the front of the room, and their students taking notes – the core of the "German system" that the Finns abandoned.

Remedial or gifted classes, special classes for learning-disability or second-language kids, are all but absent. Standardized testing doesn't happen. There is no "ability grouping" at all – not by schools or classes or streams – until age 16. Everyone gets the same lessons in the same classes, whether they're a troubled student in a poor rural area or a university-bound kid from a professional family; differences in ability are handled by individual attention, not by separation.

Even the lunchroom is organized around a notion of empowerment: A buffet of hot food is laid out; all kids, down to the youngest, grab a plate and serve themselves as they wish, but are careful to follow a promise to take no more than they can eat.

Slightly more than half the 222 students at Meri-Rastila, who range in age from 7 to 13, are immigrants: Somalis, Ukrainians, Russians, Estonians and Arabs (from various Mideast countries) are the most numerous, with kids like Lara, the Finnish children of immigrants, also a sizable group. A lot of them have learning disabilities, or troubles at home. A significant proportion arrive each morning not having had breakfast: Malnutrition is a concern.

"We don't have easy days – there are real challenges here," says principal Tarja Tapper, a hands-on, relentlessly upbeat school manager who sometimes wears a Toronto Maple Leafs jersey, in honour of all the Finns who have been on the team's roster. "But we are really determined to make sure that everybody stays in school, and everybody gets the maximum amount of educational attention, no matter what it takes."

The school receives special "positive discrimination" grants to provide extra teaching assistants and iPads for the many newcomers. There is a teacher or educational assistant for every 6.3 students (versus for about every 11 in Ontario) – but Meri-Rastila is otherwise identical to other Finnish schools, both in its design and its educational outcomes. Other than the two hours of intensive Finnish lessons taken daily in their first year, these "difficult" students study math, physics, history, biology and chemistry with the other kids.

Students are strictly kept together by age, not by ability, through the whole education process, regardless of their grades; by using multiple teachers and teaching assistants in each class, multiple learning levels are taught at the same time. This is a familiar practice in Canada and other English-speaking countries, but completely alien to most of continental Europe, where lessons are taught at one level and kids who fail are held back.

Finland has gone radically in the opposite direction because officials realized that less well-off children, and later those of immigrants, were in danger of becoming disenchanted and dropping out.

Tiina Kahara, the Grade 4 teacher, and her assistant present each lesson or unit three ways, to suit varying levels of language facility and education. (Half of her 27 students can't speak Finnish fluently.) This, she says, is better – not just for the immigrant students but for the native-born Finns: "It means that everyone gets more resources and a form of teaching tailored to their style. It's a better form of education for everyone."

What seems unfamiliar to educators from other countries with high-achieving systems is the lack of emphasis on what most places would call "education." School does not begin until age 7 (there are two years of preschool, but they don't include reading, writing or arithmetic). Only a third of the school day is devoted to "core" subjects such as science, math and Finnish; another third is for music, art and gym; and the final third is for second languages (Swedish and English are compulsory). There is a lot of time for recreation and socializing. It's not an intensive or competitive pedagogical experience.

"We want the children to have a lot of time to make friends, play sports and know their families – it shouldn't be stressful for them," says Ms. Kahara, sitting at a lunchroom table and eating chicken curry with some of her students.

"Stress does not create the best results. A good education plus free time builds them up as people. We think that school is for your life, not that your life is for school."

This strong focus on reducing stress is distinctly Finnish but is also a direct consequence of the focus on social mobility: It keeps people in school longer, and they are, therefore, more likely to earn more as adults.

Obsessed with opportunity

Educators from around the world visit Finland to study its famously successful school system, but often come away slightly baffled. From a purely pedagogical standpoint, the reforms offer a strange combination of the touchy-feely and the strict, the professional (all teachers must have advanced degrees) and the experiential (no testing; teachers who aren't publicly assessed and can't easily be fired; large amounts of social and play time).

It all makes much more sense when you realize that the reforms were not undertaken to improve educational outcomes at all, but to solve a social problem. In the 1970s, Finland was much less equal than it is now, with a poor rural population, dependent on fishing and agriculture, and a well-off urban elite, and very little chance of moving between the two. This became a genuine national obsession.

"It was becoming obvious in the seventies that our system was in crisis – people's outcomes were dependent on their social background, and their educational outcome depended on where they came from," says Jouni Valijarvi, a professor at the University of Jyvaskyla in central Finland who was a key figure behind the most recent round of education reforms. "Then, in the 1990s, we realized that we needed even greater educational equality to promote economic growth, which depends on social mobility."

For the next three decades, right into the 2000s, the Finns undertook a series of dramatic reforms designed to "provide equal educational opportunities to all students, irrespective of place of residence or social background," as officials said at the time.

An elite profession

"What has made Finland special," Prof. Valijarvi says, "is that education, its universality, has been accepted as something that's good for everyone – it is seen as a way to strengthen the national identity."

A big part of that, he adds, "has been to trust our schools and teachers, and allow them to work their own way."

Over several rounds of cross-country reforms, the Finns changed almost everything: All forms of testing were abolished (except for analytical purposes). Selection of students into academic or vocational tracks was raised from age 12 to 16 (and even then was easily

reversible). Private schools were ordered to become, in effect, fee-charging public schools, using the national curriculum. And the teacher-education system was redesigned around inclusion – keeping kids in school came to count above all else.

A big part of the new system is the exceptional prestige accorded to teachers. New teaching universities were built to create a highly professional cadre of educators. Teaching is considered an elite profession, and requires a master's degree in education, half of it dedicated to a specialty subject (even preschool teachers must have a degree).

And, although teacher salaries are no higher than in most other Western countries, education degrees are highly sought after: This year, Helsinki University's undergraduate education-degree program accepted only 5 per cent of applicants. A big part of that is due to the promise of lifetime job security, but there's also the autonomy: Teachers set their own methods and goals, which are assessed twice a year in meetings with their principals.

The results of the changes, after a generation had elapsed, were startling. In 2006, a team led by Finnish economist Tuomas Pekkarinen, then based at Oxford, conducted a detailed analysis of the population – looking at the same counties before and after the reforms kicked in – and found that the average chance of Finns' being stuck with their parent's income had declined by seven percentage points, a huge increase in social mobility.

At the same time, Finns' "intergenerational income elasticity" – the share that family background plays in a person's future income – fell from 30 per cent to 18 per cent.

And, in an interesting and not really intentional side effect, the reforms also gave Finland the West's (and often the world's) consistently highest scores in the PISA exams, the international ranking of student success compiled by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. The Finns intended to make their system more equal, and accidentally also gave it the best educational outcomes in the world.

While other countries have high scores in social mobility (Denmark consistently beats everyone), Finland is almost unique in having changed, in three decades, from a mid-ranking country to one that now sits near the top: Using a single state intervention, it all but eliminated family background as the main determinant of financial fate.

Finnish-ing our schools

If Canada's envied record on social mobility is slipping – as the increased inequality, regional stagnation and declining immigrant success rates suggest – what can we learn from Finland?

It's a pressing question not least because low mobility comes with a hefty price tag: Finnish officials estimate that, over a lifetime, each child who doesn't complete high school costs the state $1.8-million in social expenditures and lost taxation.

In the past few years, Canadian scholars have begun to take social mobility, as a specific policy goal, more seriously. A research paper that the U of O's Dr. Corak produced for a 2013 social-mobility conference, organized by the non-partisan think tank Canada 2020, proposed that three groups have a significantly higher tendency to fall out of the education system and become trapped at the bottom of the economy: boys, especially those with blue-collar or immigrant parents; children from some indigenous communities; and children born in countries where English and French aren't spoken – if members of that non-fluent group are over age 14 when they arrive, almost one in five drop out of high school, extremely high by Canadian standards.

Early-years programs are also important: They prepare children for success in school; they provide language and social-skills education to kids from different cultures; they often allow parents to remain employed and thus able to support their children's further education. Likewise, an emphasis on making postsecondary education, and especially university, more accessible to deprived students – which generally involves lowering the financial risk of a four-year degree commitment – can ease the path to mobility.

Second-generation tensions

Finland's emphasis on social mobility over narrowly defined educational success becomes more visible with immigrant students because they do not perform as well in international assessments as do students from immigrant backgrounds in other (mainly Northern European) countries. Finnish officials insist that this is deliberate: They see keeping all kids in school as more important than straight grades.

"Academically, immigrants here lag behind the Netherlands and Denmark, but in social inclusion, they are registering much higher than in those countries," says Jari Lavonen, head of teacher education at the University of Helsinki. "It's not just the teaching methods, but the social interaction that surrounds our activities" that spurs integration, he says.

And because students are not sorted into university-bound or vocational paths until age 16, there is a radical determination to treat even recent arrivals and those with learning disabilities as potential university graduates – including those from "troubled" schools such as Meri-Rastila.

"All the students here can go as high as they want," says English teacher Sari Jaatela. "It's not easy for all of them, but everyone has the same possibility. Going to this school will not burn any bridges."

That said, there are some uneven patches beginning to mar the smooth surface of Finland's educational-equality model. For starters, a system designed to elevate poor rural students is now mainly concerned with poor students who are immigrants or the children of immigrants – who are 10 times more numerous than they were in the 1980s. After the government gave special attention and funding to multilinguistic urban schools, rural areas now say they are suffering from a comparative lack of resources.

The proportion of students who drop out at 16 – and are therefore much more likely to become a big expense to society – remains stubbornly stuck at around 6 per cent. (By comparison, 12 per cent of Canadians and 21 per cent of Americans don't make it through Grade 12.)

In tiny Finland, whose population of 4.5 million is about the size of Toronto's, that 6 per cent amounts to only 4,000 students a year, but Pasi Sahlberg, an official responsible for the 1990s reforms, says it "has become a social and political problem." In 2011, the government launched a special program to guarantee apprenticeship or extended-study places to all students who leave school before 18.

And Finland is beginning to see a pattern that happens in many Western countries in which school choice – an idea that was introduced here, to a limited extent, in the 1990s, and allows parents to apply to send their children to schools in other parts of a city – allows aspirational Finnish and immigrant parents to shift their kids into more middle-class neighbourhoods, leaving the poor immigrant-district schools with a more troubled population. This isn't happening to the huge degree that it is in Western Europe or the United States, but a recent study found that such choices are eroding equality and potentially harming social mobility.

"Today the worry is that we're starting to lose the equality," says Prof. Valijarvi. "But the numbers aren't strongly showing it yet." There is another set of reforms, currently under way, intended to address this by connecting the more vulnerable urban schools to the information economy and the city's institutions. That, combined with the "positive discrimination" funds that schools receive, means that some are now different: Unblemished sameness is no longer the sine qua non of Finnish education.

When the reforms began, Finland was moving from a rural to an industrial economy; now, life is dominated by the sharp decline of Nokia, the nation-defining cellphone company whose loss of market dominance leaves many Finns afraid for a new generation entering a more challenging postindustrial economy. They, like Canadians, face a set of challenges that didn't exist 20 years ago: a stagnant world economy; nations missing some of their old motors of surefire growth; housing markets that no longer provide an easy path to prosperity, especially for newcomers; and a more diverse population often needing extra help to get a foot on the bottom rung of the ladder.

What if these obstacles end up leaving part of a generation – or certain regions, cities or ethnic groups – stuck at the bottom, unable to repeat the climb into security experienced by previous generations?

In both Finland and Canada, the cost of such a setback would be huge – economically (in damaged productivity and entrepreneurship) and fiscally (in lost tax revenues and increased social-assistance costs). There could also be a political cost in the creation of an embittered, disappointed citizenry that does not feel included in the Canadian dream and is vulnerable to extreme messages, as we've seen in Europe and the United States.

Canada's robust social-security, provincial-equalization and health-care systems have so far helped to smooth out the uneven patches on the road to a comfortable and secure life: In the five decades since sociologist John Porter denounced Canada's rigid class hierarchies in The Vertical Mosaic, public policy has dramatically improved the odds of rising above your family's station.

Likewise, Finland's profoundly inclusive education system has so far protected its list-topping equality and mobility rankings, in spite of a decade of challenges. But both countries face major threats to the functioning of their economic escalators, and can offer lessons to each other: Finland can learn from Canada's decades of experience in moving newcomers to the centre of economic life within two generations. And Canada can learn from Finland's even more comprehensive approach to ensuring that the most deprived children get the same education as the most privileged; it's not perfect, but it represents a different, and potentially valuable, approach.

As Lara Osman says, her school is far from utopian. "It's tough enough for me," she says, "and I know a lot of kids who are having a harder time, who don't understand much." But the amount of attention they all get is high by any standard. She dreams of studying languages – she's already fluent in three, is working on her Swedish, and hopes to learn Japanese.

Her success owes a lot to her own considerable ambition, to her parents' determination to have high-achieving, very European kids, and to some good teachers – but also to a system designed, above all else, to make sure nothing gets in her way.

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