

BOOK REVIEWS

Educating for Democracy in England and Finland: Principles and culture

by Andrea Raiker & Matti Rautiainen (Eds.)

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The results of the PISA tests, combined with the title of this book led me to expect garlands of praise for Finnish education and calls for the total reform of the English system. I was therefore surprised to find both praise and blame fairly evenly distributed. In the dozen chapters by different people that compose the book, the shared concern is that in both countries the idea of democracy is being sacrificed to neo-liberalism. The notion of education as an experiment in and preparation for democratic citizenship is taking a back seat because the purpose of the state curriculum in both countries is no longer individual development, but instead contribution to economic growth and productivity.

The twelve chapters include an account of the experiences of a teacher who has worked in both countries and seen her children in both English and Finnish schools, two chapters on teachers' conceptions of democracy and excellence, one chapter comparing the progressive Alppila School in Helsinki with Summerhill school in England, several chapters about teacher-training in the two countries and a strong plea for more study of pedagogical theory (which currently hardly features in English teacher-training).

We are not reminded that children in England start lessons when they are four to five years old, whereas in Finland they start at seven, and there is no mention of the fact that Finnish spelling is phonetic, and English spelling, the product of many other languages. is wildly inconsistent, even in the simplest words (have/save, paid/said, lose/rose, are/share, toe/shoe and so on).

We learn that Finnish teachers are allowed to teach in their own style and are not subjected to frequent inspections. They are trusted to choose the methods that suit them best, although most of them organise their classrooms with all the desks arranged in rows facing the front, and work from text-books in order to ensure that

all the required curriculum is being covered. Teachers in England, by contrast, are subject to rigorous inspections by Ofsted, yet many arrange their classroom furniture to enable group work and individual contact with the teaching staff. I can imagine British politicians pouncing on this difference to justify a demand for a return to the good old-fashioned teaching from the front, but that is not the intended message. What the Finns want is a real education for democracy which will help children to develop into independent, responsible citizens. The authors of this book assert that the way to do this is to learn from educational theories and teacher-training. Dewey and Freire feature prominently.

In one essay there is a list of the “stake-holders” in the world of education—the state, the local community, parents, the teachers and the universities—but, astonishingly, children are not included. The authors of the book do not seem to be interested in helping children to develop their understanding of democracy by exercising power within their own schools. Finnish schoolchildren listen to teachers talk, read study books and fill up exercise books, and their involvement in decision-making is typically limited to organising social events. In England, in spite of a growing number of school councils, the situation appears to be similar. Although children may be taught what democracy is, they are seldom allowed to exercise it in either country.

The book offers many examples of difference. For instance, England has national testing and publishes performance indicators. This results in a lower status work-force and difficulty in recruiting teachers for certain subjects. In England, the idea of requiring teachers to have MAs has been quietly shelved, but in Finland it is still a requirement, and teachers have a similar standing to that of doctors and lawyers. In England teachers are subjected to inspection but in Finland they are trusted. Some of this may be due to the fact that England is multi-ethnic and multi-cultural while Finland has a homogeneous culture. All Finns are said to be rowing in the same direction.

If the English wish to emulate the Finns, we are told, it will demand a culture change. The objective of English education is identified as improvement through conformity, whereas the Finnish target is the deepening of personal insight. The English education system is likened to the mass-production of widgets, and the Finnish system to craftwork.

In England the focus on English, mathematics and science is intended to result in greater economic productivity and growth, but leaves little room for exploring issues, themes and subjects that are conducive to active citizenship. Finland may be heading in the same direction. During the last few decades evaluation and ranking systems have been introduced there, as in many other OECD and EU countries. However, the authors of this book do not see a need for change in the basic assumptions underlying Finnish schooling. They believe that it is possible to have

high-quality teaching and learning without resorting to prescription, and without standardised testing

The message that emerges from these twelve essays is that governments must be persuaded to encourage teachers and the trainers of teachers to study educational theory and to enjoy a democratic freedom that is denied to their pupils. The theme of the book turns out to be education about democracy rather than for democracy. There is no suggestion that children might be better prepared for democracy if they were given real responsibility for their own environment.

Reviewer Details

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