

Simola, Hannu (2014). *The Finnish Education Mystery*. London and New York: Routledge, 308 pp. ISBN 978-041-581-258-0.

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Hannu Simola, author of *The Finnish Education Mystery* (with the subtitle *Historical and Sociological Essays on Schooling*) is the best-known Finnish *sociologist of education* of the middle generation² and an influential sociologist of education beyond the borders of Europe as well.

His new book³ brings an inspiring and different approach to the topic of the already extensively thematised (and recently also troubled) success of education in Finland.

In the eyes of educational thinkers and policymakers in Finland, Simola is an “agent provocateur”, a kind of “enfant terrible” reflecting on their work. Anyone following the mainstream articles and books discussing Finnish *success in education* will soon realise where these qualifications lead.

The anthology, parts of which we present here, is *about Finnish basic education*, “about the pursuits and coincidences, contradictions and paradoxes that have constructed it as it appears nowadays: a celebrated case in the global education policy space, created by international rankings, primarily the PISA studies” (Simola, 2014, p. xii).

Although numerous delegations of policymakers and experts⁴ have visited Finnish authorities, schools and communities to learn about the drivers

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2 “Hannu Simola’s research area could be characterised as sociology and the politics of education. His research interest has been moving from the socio-historical construction of schooling and teaching towards education policy and politics, focusing especially on the effects of quality assurance and evaluation (QAE) as a new technology of governance in education. Recently he is becoming more and more fascinated with problems of education policy transfer, i.e. questions such as how the trans-national meets the national and the local in policy and politics of education.” (<http://www.mv.helsinki.fi/home/hsimola/>)

3 Simola is known to readers outside his native Finland in particular through his articles “The Finnish miracle of PISA: historical and sociological remarks on teaching and teacher education”, *Comparative Education*, Vol. 41, Issue 4, 2005, pp. 455-470 and “Abdication of the Education State or Just Shifting Responsibilities? The appearance of a new system of reason in constructing educational governance and social exclusion/inclusion in Finland”, *Scandinavian Journal of Education*, Vol. 46, Issue 2, pp. 247-264, and also as co-author and editor of books such as *Fabricating Quality in Education: Data and Governance in Europe* edited by Jenny Ozga, Peter Dahler-Larsen, Christina Segerholm and Hannu Simola.

4 In 2006, one such group of experts also came from Slovenia, and after careful examination wrote a book entitled *Zakaj Finci letijo dlje* (*Why Finns Fly Further?*).

of excellence in education, and despite the many books discussing the topic, Simola argues that it is still worth studying the “Finnish case”. His claim highlights the fact that its explanatory potential is not only related to the *study of a curiosity from the north*, but rather to considering it as an example of a possible approach to education as an agency adding to the opportunities for decent life trajectories in contemporary societies. Although Finland is, in terms of population, a small country, Simola suggests five reasons why it is still worth studying: 1) its size; 2) its cultural mix; 3) the fact that it goes against the flow; 4) it is part of the broader Nordic WS project; and 5) it is possible to study it “as an accelerated, compressed example of the global process of mass schooling (...). Finland is among the European nations that have very recently left behind their agrarian society and lifestyle” (ibid.). In addition, it is very likely that a number of other countries have either travelled or will travel through similar trajectories.

The structure and titles of the four sections of the book and its twelve chapters are telling in themselves, and provide the reader with an enticing invitation to read: I. Education policy-making and governance: struggling between egalitarianism and market liberalism; II. Teachers and their education: paradoxes in a successful professionalization project; III. Schooling practices: a peculiar marriage of the traditional and the progressive; IV. Understanding the Finnish PISA miracle: decent work ethics, reasonable leadership and lucky constellations; followed by the *Aftermath*.

Indeed, I believe that readers will not be disappointed. They are likely to remain with the author for some time, and to return to him often during their own research in education, particularly if their area of research is comparative education and conceptualisations of contemporary shifts in rationalities of education and its agents.

If we continue our selective snapshots of *The Finnish Education Mystery* with the first chapter – *Firmly bolted into the air (wishful rationalism as a discursive basis for educational reforms?)* – we are immediately in the realm of one of the author’s thought-provoking theses. Simola is convinced that reforms do not usually bring improvements in education; as he puts it in another chapter of the book: “We do know (...) that we should ask how schools change the reforms rather than the reverse. The reforms change the school, indeed, but rarely in the intended direction” (p. 157). So-called contextualisation (cf. Bernstein, 1975, 2003) is a concept to which the author frequently returns throughout the book; in particular, it is methodologically intertwined with the concept of contingency (Joas) as one of the regulative ideas of the author’s research.

However, the first chapter is primarily about “*discursive dynamics*” or the “ways we speak about school reforms” (Simola, 2014, p. 4). Identifying four

discursive changes in official school discourse after the Second World War, Simola presents the paradoxes of educational reforms in general. He relates the first change in school discourse to the shift of school life from groups of pupils to individual learning needs, even to the personalisation of learning. The second change is related to “the knowledge base of teaching”, and is a change from content-focused curricula to didactically oriented sciences as the focus of education sciences. In addition to these shifts, the value-rational orientation of discourse has changed to goal rationalisation. In order to establish their credibility, all three of these changes require the fourth change, which the author believes is evident throughout education, from the development of teacher education to the positioning of different subjects within higher education curricula (cf. *ibid.*, 122-127, Chapter 6), namely: the *decontextualisation of education* and *didactic closure*. From these four characteristics, a common *wishful rationalism* emerges. This is rationalism in which individualisation and disciplinisation “could be seen as forming the utopian part of the discourse, whereas goal rationalization and decontextualization comprise the rational part” (*ibid.*, p. 19). In combination, they present the locus of struggle in the field of education “where reform discourse *per se* has become symbolic capital (...)” (*ibid.*, p. 17).

Chapter 2 reflects on “*Abdication of the education state?*” (*ibid.*, p. 27) and examines changes in education related to its function as a mechanism for inclusion and exclusion in times of *neoliberal reason* as the dominant reason. Simola reflects on education practices in times of the growing influence of the market mechanism in the field of public education as well. According to him, the shift towards *new reason* in Finland took place during the crises of the 1990s, when Finnish education, especially comprehensive schooling and vocational education, decreased by 13 and 20 percent (cf. *ibid.*, p. 29). In combination with cuts in the domains of health and social security, this represented a reconstruction of the welfare state. Just how influential the shift in the prevailing type of rationality actually was is demonstrated by the fact that the interviewees who took part in the research that provided the material for the analyses presented in this chapter “were ready to admit (...) that the reform with its markers: decentralisation, individualization, freedom of choice; personalization, quality assurance, etc., had been carried out with surprisingly extensive political consensus and a feeling that there was no real alternative” (p. 29). In fact, as in many countries around Europe in the 1990s or in the years after 2008, the new rationality (neoliberalism) successfully introduced the new-speak of (Bourdieu, 2001) “the renaissance of individualism, autonomy, freedom of choice etc.” While pointing out that he is not “claiming that the Finnish Government has abdicated responsibility for education in general” (p. 42), Simola explicitly states that “some parts

of education seem to be in danger in a similar way as remote post offices, small schools and unprofitable sleeping cars on Finnish railways”(ibid.). The reason for such danger is simple: parts of education are not “viable when evaluated by simple economic indicators such as effectiveness, efficiency and profitability, and they must go” (ibid.) In this “new kind of rationality”, the unconstrained logic of the market “seems reasonable, whereas demands for citizens’ rights in education are inconceivable”(ibid., pp. 42-43).

Chapter 3 focuses on a *Finnish rarity* in basic education on the global scene: no inspecting, no testing and no ranking.

These are precisely the kind of rarities of Finnish education to which authors from Finland (cf. Sahlberg, 2011) often direct our attention. In the 1970s, Finland was alone in the world in this respect. Simola is rare among the authors presenting teacher education as a social field and as “a multidimensional space of positions and relationships in which expert discourse, and thereby also the serious and authoritative way of thinking and acting, are produced, reproduced and transformed”(ibid., p. xvi). What is different in Simola’s account is thus not the aforementioned fact concerning early inauguration, but rather his analysis of the internal struggles in the newly established university field in Finland. In Bourdieuan fashion, he discusses how this “new science of teacher education tends to isolate itself from its academic neighbours to create a genuine and legitimate scientific base for the teaching profession”, examining the extent to which, in positioning themselves in the academic milieu, the didactics of different disciplines prevailed and the degree to which such a hegemony de-contextualisation of education grew in parallel with better positioned teacher education institutions. Simola also critically writes that, rooted in the tradition of the place, “(...) educational research in Finland has been positivist in its methodology, but at the same time seems to have been normative in terms of commitment to the values of the official policy. One might say that the research is a product of two different traditions, the old German ‘state ethics’ that has been influential since the nineteenth century, and the Anglo-American empirical research that came to the fore after the Second World War. The former tradition produced the uncritical loyalty to the state of Finnish intellectuals, and the latter tended not to question it” (ibid., p. 84).

In Chapter 10, which Simola singles out as his “most frequently cited article”, he provides the socio-historical background of the success story. “As befits the field of education, the explanations referring especially to the excellent teachers and high-quality teacher education. Without underrating the explanatory power of these statements, this contribution presents some of the social, cultural and historical factors behind the pedagogical success of *Peruskoulu*” (p. xviii).

Aftermath, the concluding chapter of the book, is a kind of *reopening of the reflections and considerations* of education not only in Finland but further afield, providing insights into the present and likely future research of Hannu Simola and his group in Helsinki. There are several topics particularly worthy of mention:

1. The dynamics of policymaking as an important research axis in education research due to the “fluid and mobile nature of the subject” (p. 274).
2. A plea for a “strong and ambitious theory-based framework with the potential to incorporate the socio-historical complexity, relationality and contingency of the research” (ibid., p. 274), in order to be able to “reach the level of political importance” (ibid.) of comparative education, which too often stops at the level of “merely listing the similarities and differences” (ibid.). This plea is of particular significance as it comes from a researcher with broad theoretical insights and the ability to combine them with extensive empirical research, emerging in times of the widespread neglect of the importance of conceptualisations and omission of the potential of the combination of theoretical and empirical approach to education, even when deciding upon education policy studies and reforms.
3. He again returns to the central feature of Finnish education: the relation between equality and equity as an element of dynamics that, in the decades covered by the book, “spiralled between the social-democratic-agrarian tradition of equality and the market-liberal equity that emerged in the late 1980s in Finland” (p. 276). In the interaction of the two, “embedded egalitarianism” buffered “against the travelling policies of market liberalism” (cf. ibid., p. 276), and, in a certain respect, enabled the system to travel against the flow.

Let us conclude our invitation to reading with the words of Hannu Simola: in order to capture the complexity of the “movements, elements and powers, that run the system” (p. 279) we must at least take into account:

- dynamics related to the specific socio-historical context of the country (place) we are considering, and even decide to try to change them for better;
- dynamics initiated by the “more or less conscious activity of institutional actors” (ibid., p. 279), and
- “(...) tensions, paradoxes, contradictions, dispersions, discontinuation, irregularities and accidents that create the very Spielraum for the actors” (ibid., p. 279) in education.

In his book *The Finnish Education Mystery*, Simola comes as close as possible to the standards he himself conceptualises as standards for studies engaged in education policy studies.

Resources

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