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Finnish education system as seen from an Indonesian perspective

Ratih Adiputri

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss the Finnish education system from an Indonesian perspective, and consider what citizens, notably from middle-income countries, may learn from the Finnish system. The source material is the author's book, which provides an Indonesian perspective on the Finnish education system, supplemented by discussions from webinars and weekly Instagram Live discussions on the topic. It is known that education is part of a country's culture, thus the Finnish education system cannot simply be implemented as such in another place. Yet there certainly are elements that can be adopted to the local culture, in this case, in Indonesia. The different models of education in Finland and Indonesia are compared to conclude with lessons that we can learn from Finland, notably regarding a sustainable future and the possibility of learning simple daily life skills.

Keywords: Finnish education system, society, culture, Indonesian perspective, sustainable future, life skills

Introduction

Finnish education is famous throughout the world following Finland's success in PISA tests. The PISA is the Programme for International Student Assessment, a global test for 15-year-old students conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD. The test was first implemented in 2000. It runs every 3 years, and the most recent was in 2018, when 79 countries participated. Finland has always ranked high—if not the first—for literacy, math, and science more times than most countries and better than the OECD average. Thanks to the PISA, Finland has gained international attention. Since 2010 the ranking has not been at the top, yet Finnish students' performances remain in the higher rankings. Indonesia is one country that has admired Finland's success, and Indonesia aims to achieve a similar trajectory for its national education. In fact, the Indonesian education assessment system plans to follow the model of the PISA test (Kompas, 3 April 2020). While the Finnish model can be learnt, Indonesia has realized that it is not easy to copy or digest the best practices from Finland, which a small country with a small population (Kalla, 2019). However, elements of best practices on learning can perhaps be learnt, and that is why any story concerning the Finnish education system is salable in Indonesia.

Adiputri (University of Jyväskylä). Corresponding author's e-mail: ratih.d.adiputri@jyu.fi. © Author(s) 2021. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). ISSN 2736-9749 (print), 2490-0958 (electronic).

Being an Indonesian who has lived in Finland for more than 10 years, my perspective on the Finnish education system is valued. Is it really that good? What's the biggest difference in comparison to the Indonesian system? These two questions and many other similar queries are common, coming from Indonesians, including journalists, and my answers have always been based on the experiences of my two children studying in Finnish public schools in the small town in Finland, Jyväskylä. As a researcher, I lean towards observation. Whenever something about the children's school appears interesting, I always seek answers from the teachers or the school leaders. Things that are probably normal in the Finnish school system are interesting and new to me, such as discussion that takes place between the students, parents, and class teachers. In Indonesia, students and parents only receive a school report at the end of the school year term or semester. Discussions are simply for students in trouble. Another example is support for Finnish lessons, which is crucial as my children learn Finnish as a second language, not as native speakers. Furthermore, all students, both boys and girls, learn woodwork and textile handicrafts. During my time in Indonesia, handicraft was gender based, and as a female, I would study textile handicraft and boys would study woodworking. Today's Indonesian education system has even dropped handicraft from the curriculum. The home economics lessons where my daughter learned how to cook, to clean the room, do her laundry and organize her monthly allowance were also valuable. These are future-orientated lessons for improving daily life skills, and I admire them. That was why I decided to write about our family's experiences of the Finnish education system in Indonesian, to put it in a popular format for a general audience.

The topic of reviewing the Finnish educational system is still popular in Indonesia¹, and thanks to that, I found little difficulty in proposing my manuscript, and in December 2019, the book entitled "The Finnish Education System: An Indonesian Perspective" (Adiputri, 2019) was published. Since the book launched in early 2022 (Penerbit KPG, 2020), I have been invited to speak and discuss as a keynote speaker in multiple webinars in relation to Finnish education, the PISA test, and also educational reform that encompass sustainable future. The webinars ranged from events with 50 participants to a nation-wide audience of 700 participants, and were usually attended by school teachers from all corners of Indonesia. In September 2020, I also aired a weekly series on Instagram Live hosted by the owner of a private school in Indonesia, M. Kurniawan, who has networks with civil society organizations related to educational issues and teachers' empowerment programs. Thus, on every Friday afternoon in 2020, and on every Saturday afternoon in 2021, we discussed different sections of my book and the Finnish educational system in general. The series ran for 39 episodes until July 2021, and again, mostly school teachers in Indonesia attended. The recorded Instagram Live sessions had around 150 viewers in the first week (and the number grew after that). I learned that Indonesian readers liked the book. Around 3000 copies had been printed initially, and the book was reprinted in June 2020.

The book is descriptive. It outlines every educational level in Finland, from early childhood to higher education, highlighting the Finnish practices that differ from Indonesian ones. It is based on my personal perspective as an Indonesian academic and mother of two school-children living in Finland. The audience appreciates that the book is written by an Indonesian, in Indonesian language. Readers know that plenty of information about the Finnish education system is available in English, but it is not accessible easily and it is unlikely to fit the Indonesian context.

In this paper, I aim to show the Finnish educational system from an Indonesian perspective, which can benefit citizens—especially school teachers, academics and policy-makers—notably of middle-income countries. I believe that education is a part of a country's culture, it is a reflection of society. The Finnish educational system cannot be reproduced exactly as it is in another place, as one teacher on the Finnish Education System course at the University of Jyväskylä, Pasi Ikonen, tells his students. However, some elements or best practices from the Finnish educational system can be replicated and adapted to Indonesian local contexts. Yet, only by adapting can the replication be meaningful. To show this, I first compare the model of Finnish education with the general "Western" model that is partly used in Indonesia. Secondly, I highlight the differences in practice by outlining particular content in the book. Thirdly, I explain what the main concepts of the Finnish educational system are from an Indonesian perspective. Finally, I sum up

with lessons for a country that seeks to adapt the essence of Finnish education system.

Different Education Models

Kupiainen, Hautamäki and Karjalainen (2009) present a table where they compare the general “Western” model of education with the specific Finnish system, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Difference of education between the Western model and Finnish system.

General Western model	The Finnish system
<p>Standardisation Strict standard for schools, teachers and students to guarantee the quality of outcomes.</p>	<p>Flexibility and diversity School-based curriculum development, streeting by information and support</p>
<p>Emphasis on literacy and numeracy Basic skills in reading, writing, mathematics and science as prime targets of education reform.</p>	<p>Emphasis on broad knowledge Equal value to all aspects of individual growth and learning: ersonality, morality, creativity, knowledge and skills.</p>
<p>Consequential accountability Evaluation by inspection.</p>	<p>Trust through professionalism A culture of trust on teachers’ and headmasters’ professionalism in judging what is best for students and in reporting of progress.</p>

Source: Kupiainen et al., 2009, p. 12.

This comparison table highlights that the general “Western” educational models, which are adapted in Indonesia, emphasize standardization, literacy and numeracy, and are based on consequential accountability.

Teachers and students are often evaluated by results from nationally standardized tests to assess students’ learning. If the schools, the teachers, and the students are not achieving a certain standard, there are consequences, and this is evaluated by inspection. The prime targets of education are basic skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and science. At a later stage of education, a program of studies or work is considered strong if it emphasizes literacy and numeracy, like natural sciences and accounting. These subjects are more appreciated on the labour market than arts or sports. This model emphasizes accountability, which is based on “fear”, while the Finnish model emphasizes responsibility, which is based on “trust” (Walker, 2017).

In the Finnish model, the system guarantees “flexibility and diversity”, focusing on “broad knowledge”, and relies on “trust through professionalism” (Kupiainen et al., 2009). Such diversity of education stems from the aspect of trust, which gives teachers flexibility and autonomy over their own classroom. The national core curriculum provides broad guidelines and allows the autonomy of local regions, even schools, to have various subjects and different content in their education programs (Kalalahti & Varjo, 2020). The Finnish system gives equal value to broad knowledge as it does to literacy and numeracy, and thus students learn and develop “personality, morality, creativity, knowledge, and skills” (ibid., p. 6).

Indeed, Finland’s success in the PISA tests placed Finland as a reliable example for global education (Doyle, 2017). Free compulsory primary education of good quality ensures that all children attend schools with equity. All students, despite their differences in social, financial, racial, and geographical backgrounds, can access education equally. Such aspects of the Finnish model, equity and education for all, but also the aspects I have discussed above: future orientation, sustainability, daily life skills, responsibility, and trust, are particularly interesting to me. How to replicate such education in Indonesian schools?

Educational Practices: Finland from an Indonesian perspective

I start my book with a personal story concerning my experience of registering my daughter in a famous kindergarten in Jakarta, the Indonesian capital. I chose the kindergarten as it was the nearest one to our home. As the kindergarten was of high status and was intended specifically for high-income families, it depended on parents' finances to support a packed program of activities for a whole day (from 7 am to 5 pm). Lessons included learning computer skills, English, music, and swimming. This was considered a good beginning for a 5-year-old student. I did not get satisfactory answers to my questions about pedagogical activities, other than *social* programs sponsored by big companies in the country to provide fun activities and teachers' uniforms. I contrast this experience in Indonesia with the one I had when I came to Finland to register my daughter. In Finland, I was informed right away about daily activities and the well-being of the children in the institution. I was asked questions such as: was the kindergarten near home or the parents' workplace, what was the language at home, and what habits or activities did the child like. I was surprised, as I had never known a system like this before.

In the book, I explain differences between Finland as compared to Indonesia including the size of the school budget and the need for teachers to hold at least a Master's degree with qualifications and experience in a particular grades at the school level. Thus, teachers in Finland are familiar with research and accessing reliable sources for information to relay to their students. Another key difference is that in Finland assessments are performed for the personal development of each student instead of focusing on competing with other students. Not being compared to one another is seen as an important component of the learning process. In Indonesia, schools and society are obsessed with ranking and competition. It is important to show who is the best among members of a group; competition is common, and those in the top ranks will be highlighted in public news or on television shows. The important message is that the winner who is most likely to succeed, is the best, the most capable, and often has financial support. This is a clear contrast to Finland's aspiration to achieve education for all, equity, celebrating the diversity of students at nearby schools (Kalalahti & Varjo, 2020).

In the section of my book that discusses the importance of students' opinions and voices, I noted that political education is introduced as early as third grade, when each class nominates student representatives. Sometimes, students even need to campaign to be chosen. This shows democracy is applied in practice. Indeed, since kindergarten, Finnish students are used to having their opinions conveyed and heard.

As foreigners in Finland, my children and I also shared our experience of learning the Finnish language and coping with the Finnish weather. When I shared the Finnish saying that "there is no such thing as bad weather, only bad choice of clothing", most of the Indonesian audience appreciated this attitude of not "blaming" nature but trying to cope with it. Our difficulty in learning a new foreign language is also appreciated, but we are also supported by schools.

Indonesian people, including the President, the Minister of Education, and most policymakers, think highly of the PISA test and admire Finland's high scores in reading, mathematics, and science. It seems that Finnish schools handle the PISA tests without sweating too much. The attitude is that PISA is simply a global test for all 15-year-old-students. Finnish students who are taking the PISA test are not specially prepared to get good results; the test runs as naturally as possible for students, like the usual tests in their school classes. The situation is very different in many East Asian countries—including Indonesia but also notably China, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan—where students are expected to excel for good results in education. This concept encourages students to prepare, before taking the PISA test to get a higher score. It is common in these countries to have intensive after-school tuition and study for many hours, usually in the evening (theconversation.com, 2016).

An Indonesian perspective on the Finnish education system

Finland and Indonesia's education systems are indeed different. Indonesia has followed the common Western model described above in emphasizing standardized test and focusing more on literacy and numeracy. Tragically, in Indonesia, while literacy is emphasized, reading activities are not encouraged in schools. Public libraries are not common places to go to (shopping malls are). Meanwhile, while Indonesia tries to promote the idea of having a diverse culture and embracing traditions from many different ethnic groups, these cultural aspects are not taught as school lessons. This is different from Finland, which adopted local culture. I share a story about my friend in Finland: during her high school time, her skills in taking care of horses (how to clean, feed and tend the horses when they are sick) were acknowledged by her school with 10 lesson credits (Adiputri, 2019, p. 150). Also locally valued practices, such as students learning forestry in Central Finland, fisheries in Åland island, and reindeer husbandry in Lapland, are encouraged by the schools and local government. This ensures the sustainability and legacy of passing down knowledge from one generation to another.

As stated before, in Finnish education, equity is emphasized. The quality of schools is similar from one school to one another, with teachers having a master's degree qualification. In Indonesia quality schools are available only to those high-income families who can afford for their children to attend private high-quality primary schools. The curriculum is urban-centered, and the "best" schools are in the country's big cities, mostly in Jakarta, the capital. Local public schools, notably at the primary level, are considered backward and to be schools for poor people. Middle-class families prefer to send their children to private schools that have a good reputation, even if the schools are often in the cities, sometimes far away from home. Geographical and social diversities mean that students in remote and rural areas face difficulties in addressing the centrally standardized curriculum. Often, in remote areas, schools have an insufficient basic infrastructure, with a lack of seats, tables, and books; school buildings do not even have proper toilets, roofs, and walls. The gap between those who have and have-not is really stark in Indonesia, and the situation is exacerbated by having unqualified teachers educate students, especially in the remote areas.

Repeating from earlier, even activities at the kindergarten level of Finnish schools are future-oriented, sustainable, and address daily life skills. Students in early childhood education as well as in early primary schooling learn about good habits when eating together at the dining table, finishing their food, and sorting their own garbage, and they are taught to respect one another while playing together. Students learn from daily activities, as well as by playing and interacting with other classmates, not just from sitting in the classroom. Activities like cooking, planting tomatoes or peppers from seed, and folding the milk or juice carton before recycling are all useful in daily life. During discussion in school, the students' views are also acknowledged. In all, students learn to be responsible in their conduct and this creates trust among their peers and towards adults (parents and teachers).

Another interesting aspect of the Finnish education is that knowledge is understood not merely as literacy and numeracy, but also extended to creativity, morality and ethics, personality, and social skills. This means that the arts, sports, religions, and handicrafts—to name a few—are appreciated as school subjects. Explaining this to an Indonesian audience, I present this as well-being or balancing life as a human being. Students are trained to be a better person individually, for their families, for their close environment, and for the whole society. If students are exposed to a balanced variety of subjects, not merely literacy and numeracy, they will develop fully as human beings, with a well-being suited for life. I experienced such a balanced life myself while living in Finland. I noticed that my own children had four hours of daily activities at the kindergarten, mostly motoric activities, with around three hours of being or playing outside. Primary school students spend between three to seven hours per day learning at school, according to their age. Hobbies are appreciated and activities are usually finished by eight pm for children under ten years old and no later than ten pm for all ages. This shows that while the school studies are important, they are not everything, and there are other aspects in life than studying.

The Indonesian context is very different. The school day is longer, even for kindergarteners, and usu-

ally after-school time is also dedicated to studying either at home to manage abundant homework, or in other reinforced activities that most students in East Asian countries do to prepare for their PISA tests. Indonesian society, which appreciates hierarchy, competition, and ranking, tends to acknowledge the culture of working harder to achieve better results. Thus, well-being or a balanced healthy life is not encouraged. School-aged children are supposed to be studying and learning all the time, preferably by a conventional method, at school or in a classroom with teacher guidance. This applies to all levels of education from early childhood, primary schools to higher education. At every education level, except for early childhood and at the higher education levels, students are regularly evaluated through national standardized exams, the results of which determine which schools students can attend for the upcoming education level and this is stressful for students (Go, 2020). In contrast, the only national standardized test in Finland occurs in the matriculation exam at the end of high school. Thus, students are reading in preparation for the tests when they are ready.

Lessons learned

The differences in education models between Finland and Indonesia should be a bit clearer now. What can Indonesia learn from Finland to make its education better? This will be beneficial for other countries as well. I stress that Indonesia cannot replicate the Finnish model of education, but can learn from its best practices, that is the qualification of teachers, a system which adopts local curriculum with a geographical cultural approach that strives to implement the changes in the local school districts, cities, or at the regional levels, while opening many opportunities for students to learn, including handicraft and music.

Indonesia and other countries could invest in teacher qualification and competency first², with a campaign offering incentives to enter teaching as a respectable career. After qualified teachers are available, autonomy in curricula and assessment can be given to the teachers at schools to ensure that students receive a similar standard of education. The local government and schools may collaborate together to adapt local culture in their lessons. Indonesia is known to be rich in culture, but skills such as the rice irrigation system, batik-making, traditional and religious practices, animal husbandry, traditional music (like *angklung* and gamelan orchestra), dancing, and local heritage are not taught in schools. Because schools only emphasize mathematics, literacy, and science, these local cultural riches could soon disappear and only be sustained sporadically and for touristic purposes, rather than as something to be learned, preserved, and renewed in the modern world. These traditional skills can be accredited as school lessons, as in Finland. By qualified teaching and by emphasizing the local, the students' learning will be more meaning and sustainable for the local culture, and culture can be preserved for future generations.

Conclusion

With the example from Indonesia, other countries, too, can learn from the Finnish education system and use insights from Finland in their plans to reform education. Perhaps the initial idea for looking at the Finnish education system was to reach a higher ranking in the PISA test, but education must aim towards learning and sustainability in the future. Education is not only about getting a better ranking, but also about opening personal potential, cultural interaction and economic opportunity for the future (Robinson, 2011), thus students need to learn skills for the future as well as sustainability. Finnish education has shown this and proven to have better preparations for students for learning and life skills. While all aspects of the Finnish education system cannot be copied, we may learn some good elements like investing in teachers, adopting local values in the curriculum and focusing on the local government. With these goals, diversity can be celebrated. In Indonesia, such action would require a great deal of effort from many actors, on both the regional and at the national levels. But the enthusiasm of the readers of my book, of the audience at

webinars and lectures, and the participants in discussions about the Finnish education system shows that good education offers hope to a country like Indonesia, even when the society differs from Finland.

Endnotes

- ¹ The book “Teach Like Finland” by Timothy Walker (2017) was so popular when translated into Indonesian language, and has been reprinted ten times already in 2021. I did not acknowledge this book when I wrote my book in 2019, but now I combine the content of this book with my book during the book discussion about Finnish education.
- ² My upcoming book about improving the teachers’ competences (Learning how to teach) in the review process from the same publisher. It is another contribution based on my experience in Finland, studying Professional teachers’ program at the Jyväskylä University of Applied Science (JAMK). The manuscript is written in Indonesian.

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Author biography

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