



Nat Damon:

Welcome to another episode of “Reach, Teach, Talk”. I am thrilled today to have Pasi Sahlberg, professor of education from Finland, from Helsinki. Dr. Sahlberg is somebody who I have known, or known through his work, over the past five years.

Nat Damon:

As I mentioned, he is really a guru and a real shaper in education reform in Finland, in his native country. What he has been able to do, in terms of giving articulation to why the Finnish education system is as successful really spoke to me. Not just in my mind, but also in my heart, because so much of what Dr. Sahlberg focuses on in his book, *Finnish Lessons*, right here, as well as in his instruction as professor is this idea that teaching is not simply something that can be learned. While it is a profession and it is a craft, there are other elements that come into play when one is a teacher, and when one is a successful teacher.

Nat Damon:

In Finland, 10% of the applicants to ed school are accepted. That is along the lines of Harvard and Yale Law School here in the U.S. And this is for teaching. It's a 50/50 male female teaching force. Once these teachers have gone through their grad school, their graduate program, both theoretically and practically, they are in the classroom, and from day one, they are given this respect. And they're given this respect for what they do.

Nat Damon:

But a lot of what we're going to talk about in this episode, actually, is not going to be something that Dr. Sahlberg has spoken of a thousand times, which is why the Finnish Education system is so excellent, in terms of reform and in terms of structure, but really, this being a podcast about relationships. What I really want to focus our conversation on today is how relationships impact the teacher student connection and how, according to Dr. Sahlberg, relationships really form part of the central thread, in terms of why Finland has been so successful.

Nat Damon:

I visited several schools in Finland for research, for my book. Primary schools and secondary schools. And I certainly can speak anecdotally for how students and teachers have this way of connecting in these schools. We can talk about schedule. We can talk about the time to have sidebar conversations with students. The time for teachers to have unstructured time, to lesson plan, to bond with their colleagues, but also, to connect with their students.

Nat Damon:

This idea of learning being not just cognitive, but also emotional and social. What really turned my head when I learned about, when I was first learning about Finland and Finland's education system was not

just the fact that they scored highest on the PSIS scores, but more this idea that they, Finland is a country that's undergoing rapid change, demographically. There's a lot of immigration in Finland now. There's a lot of diversity to the student body.

Nat Damon:

In order, and it's this collective responsibility that is palpable in Finland, where every student, regardless of where they come from, whether they are Helsinki natives or whatnot, it is up to the adults to educate all of them, and to bring all boats. To have the tide raise all boats.

Nat Damon:

How does Finland do this? What makes Finland so magical? Is what we're going to talk about today. And how do relationships factor into this Finnish magic, this Finnish way?

Nat Damon:

So, without much further ado, Dr. Sahlberg, thank you so much for being here, from Australia, actually, and speaking to me here today.

Pasi Sahlberg:

Thank you, Nat, very much. It's a pleasure. And also, honor to be in your series of podcasts. I've been listening to some of your previous guests, and I must say that I'm very humble before the fact that there has been so many bright people, including yourself, to run this wonderful thing that you do. So, thank you.

Nat Damon:

Thank you very much. I think that we are in an age of quantitative metrics and data, and all of them serve a purpose, in terms of assessing student performance, and even in terms of assessing teacher efficacy. Yet, there's something about Finland and something about the Finnish education system that I'd like you to share kind of your observation and your expertise on, Dr. Sahlberg, which is the relationships that I saw in the hallways. The relationships I saw during this 15 minutes for every hour where teachers can talk with students unstructured.

Nat Damon:

What can you share with my audience about the way that the Finnish education system supports and nurtures relationships in schools?

Pasi Sahlberg:

Yeah. It's a great question to start with. But let me go a little bit backwards. You were talking about the Finnish magic, and this is really something that most people who are interested what is happening in Finland, what the Finnish schools do, that they kind of wonder, what is this magical thing? What is the secret or miracle of Finnish education?

Pasi Sahlberg:

I don't think that any of those terms really capture what the most important thing, because the Finnish system, in the end of the day, is a very simple, basic, common sense way of thinking about, what is education for and what should the school look like that is designed for children's point of view? Not for the system, or parents', or teachers' point of view.

Pasi Sahlberg:

So, for me, the more I explore and think about Finnish education system from the distance here, and I must say that I'm 100% product of the Finnish system. I went through all the school levels. I was a teacher in Finland for many years. I was a teacher educator there. I think it's a too simple system to really understand the beauty of it. It's all based on this thing that your whole series here is focusing on. It's about relationships.

Pasi Sahlberg:

If you ask, and you probably heard this when you went to Finnish schools, if you ask them, what is the most important thing in your school? And many Finnish teachers say there are three things. They are relationships, relationships, and relationships. That's how it's built.

Pasi Sahlberg:

I'm saying this, also, because I think that many, especially foreign observers who travel to Finland, often for a couple of days or three days to try to kind of figure out what's going on, they do not get into this level of simplicity of the system. They kind of ask questions like, "What is this effective method of teaching that the teachers are using? What does the curriculum look like? How much technology is used?" The answer to these question is not there. The answer is really how people relate to one another.

Pasi Sahlberg:

The key thing that most people, including you, Nat, probably, when you Finland, you probably realized that there's a whole lot of trust within the society as a whole, but in what the schools are doing. Everybody seems to trust one another, starting from the system leaders, like a minister and the politicians, that they trust what the schools are doing. And it falls down to all levels of the system. Parents trust the teachers' professional wisdom and ability to design the schools that way that is good for the kids.

Pasi Sahlberg:

But probably most importantly, within the school, that the school principals, administrators fully trust the teachers' way of thinking and doing what they do in the classrooms. When that is kind of a strong defining culture in Finland, then, of course, the teachers, they trust the kids, and the children trust the teachers.

Pasi Sahlberg:

I think it's this really strong element of trust that kind of makes it possible to build these relationships in the schools and leave teachers room and freedom to really design their work, and design what is best for the kids.

Pasi Sahlberg:

So, the relationships is not the only thing. I think it's all driven by this idea of thinking that the people, when they are given freedom and autonomy to decide what to do and trust that they know the best what to do, including the children. That's something, the cultures are very hard to understand. You rarely understand another country's culture by spending a couple of days there, or even the week. And it's the same with the school cultures. And it's the same in America.

Pasi Sahlberg:

I've lived almost 10 years in the U.S., and I still think that I don't quite understand all the, why some of these things are taking place in American schools. And the Finnish school system is very hard to

understand. But my kind of bottom line here is that, when you do more work on the Finnish system, you begin to kind of realize how simple and basic it is. It starts from this trust and children's perspective, what they need, and then, builds through relationships, and autonomy, and respect, the kind of a system that we have.

Pasi Sahlberg:

Now, the good question, of course, is how sustainable is this? You refer to the increasing diversity, and now we have, we are just in the early phase of the Coronavirus thing that is really shaking and shaping up the school system in Finland and everywhere. How sustainable these basic elements in Finland are actually going to be, that's something that remains to be seen.

Nat Damon:

This concept of trust, Pasi, is on two levels to me, based on what you just shared. One is organizational trust, I guess, which is, and you speak about professional capital, at some point. It's Hargreaves' professional capital theory. But this idea of organizational trust. This idea of, you have been through this graduate program. You have been selected in this 10% crew, this elite crew.

Nat Damon:

Yet, from what I understand, these 10% who are selected, Pasi, they are not necessarily, and correct me, or maybe you can share, who are these people who are accepted into these programs? Because it might not be what we, as Americans, particularly would think of, you know, who they are.

Pasi Sahlberg:

Yeah. Absolutely critical question. And I remember, during my time, I spent three years as a visiting professor Harvard, and the rest of my decade as education specialist at the World Bank. I often came across people who kind of said that we need the same, similar systems in the United States, where we can select the future teachers from the best and the brightest, as the saying in America goes.

Nat Damon:

The best and the brightest.

Pasi Sahlberg:

Yeah. That's why, kind of an ideal in America, for example, [inaudible 00:12:05] for America program was to go and recruit the future teachers from the Ivy League schools and the best universities in the country, hoping that when the so-called smart people enter the classroom, they will do what a superman would do. Do miracles there, and do what the average teachers wouldn't be able to do.

Pasi Sahlberg:

Now we know, from research, that this is not happening, and it doesn't happen like this. And, interestingly, many people made references to Finland. They said, "This is exactly what Finland does, and this is exactly what Singapore does." People told me that you have a luxury in your country to select the future teachers from the best and the brightest. And I said, "How do you know that?" And people say then, "Well, isn't it true that only 10% of your teachers are successful when they are entering in the initial teacher education?" And I said, "Yes, that's true in the primary school teacher education. But how do you know that they are actually the best and brightest?"

Pasi Sahlberg:

And the reply comes that, "Who else would the universities recruit? Why would they recruit somebody who doesn't have the high GPA scores of high school leaving scores?" I say, "Well, let's take a look at this." I've done, and my colleagues have done analysis every year when we are selecting these new teachers into initial university level master's degree programs to become teachers. And they never are, Finnish universities never choose their students, their future teachers, from using just the academic criteria for the best and the brightest or just looking at the test scores. Just to give you an example for-

Nat Damon:

What's behind that?

Pasi Sahlberg:

For many years, because if you have a luxury to have a large pool that is often 10 times bigger than your intake, that you have all kinds of people there. One thing that Finnish people understand, and this is again partly due to work and research by my good former colleague and good friend, Howard Gardner, who dedicated his life and still continues to work on this idea that people come with different types of talents, and intelligence is that you are not just academically talented or gifted, and that's it, but you have different talents.

Pasi Sahlberg:

The Finnish universities, and especially teacher educators have, since the early works of Gardner, understood that we have talented people who have gifts in, can be in many different areas. Somebody can be socially talented, or somebody can be good in arts, or sports, or something like this.

Pasi Sahlberg:

So, that's why, when the Finnish teachers are selected, still, the selection criteria is really looking kind of the whole student. Not just how good any particular student in a school, academic subjects.

Pasi Sahlberg:

And that's why it's very common, and it still happens, I reported this is Finnish Lessons that you showed, that about, for example, at the University of Helsinki, there is a major institution to prepare the primary school teachers in Finland. Only about one quarter of those who are selected, and the candidate pool is huge. So, in Helsinki University, only one out of 15 or one out of 20 of those who apply there will be selected. And only one quarter of those belong to what, in the United States, people would consider to be the best and the brightest.

Pasi Sahlberg:

And one quarter of those who are successful getting in actually come from the bottom half of the so-called academic talent pool. Which means that those people, they must come to these programs with something else that is equally important than how good you have been in school in English, and Mathematics, and something else. And they're often people who have been intensively working with young people as sports coaches, or music instructors, or community workers. So, they already have those relational skills, if you wish, that are needed to be a successful teacher.

Pasi Sahlberg:

So, I think it's very important. That's one of my main kind of calls for people who are doing things based on what Finland does, is that, please, really try to understand how the teacher education preparation system works, because it's very important that we have an understanding that people can be gifted, and

talented, and the best and the brightest in many, in a number of different ways. Not just in what you do in the school.

Pasi Sahlberg:

That has been one very smart idea in Finland already, 35 years ago, to select the teachers. I often tell my colleagues and audiences that the Finnish teacher selection system is so demanding that my dream, when I was leaving high school, my dream was to become a primary school teacher. I tried to get into the university twice, and I failed both times. So, I ended up being a professor at Harvard, and now, at the University of New South Wales instead, because I couldn't become a primary school teacher in Finland.

Nat Damon:

That's a great anecdote. That's a great anecdote, because truly, like, oh, your plan B is to be a professor at the Harvard Ed School, when really, your plan A was to be a lifelong primary school teacher.

Nat Damon:

I just love this, because you're really forcing me, and our listeners and viewers, to stretch and broaden our idea of what teaching truly is. Because, my gosh, what you're saying is it's not, we're just cutting, we're cutting the top 10. We're doing Jack Welch at GE. We're skimming from the top 10%, and we're going to put them in the classroom because the theory is that if you are academically superior, you will make a great teacher.

Nat Damon:

Where instead, what you're saying is 50% of the teachers who are in this 10% acceptance are artists. They're athletes. They are coaches. They have worked with kids. In a sense, I don't even know if this is truly even explicit, in terms of when one is applying to be a teacher, or to go the grad school in Finland, but it sounds to me that they are looking for, they being those who are the gatekeepers, are looking for the relational. Or, at least, they have this understanding that, as you just articulated, teaching is, yes, it's about mastery of content. But it's also a lot about who you are. What do you bring to the classroom that is your unique lens that kids can hook into?

Nat Damon:

Do you mind, if you can, speak a little bit more to that. The idea of, when we're talking about learning, what truly do you believe, Dr. Sahlberg, attracts kids, engages kids with a teacher? What have you seen, in terms of effective engagement that comes from the person, the teacher as a person?

Pasi Sahlberg:

I often tell this story that I think is also in the Finnish Lessons book. It's one of my favorite stories. It's about my niece, who was really a prize student, and she was not successful in the first time. Which, again, speaks for this fact that, in Finland, it's not enough that you have been good at school. You also, you have to come to the program, if you want to become a teacher, you have to have at least some early qualities of something else.

Pasi Sahlberg:

The kind of killing question for her, in the very tough entry examination in the university, was when the panel was asking her to reflect a little bit on the fact that she wants to become a primary school teacher with the, what Americans would call the straight-A student. She was told that you could become a lawyer, a doctor, or economist, or anything you like. Why do you want to become a primary school teacher?

Pasi Sahlberg:

This was one of those questions that she was really not thinking about too much. So, the only thing she could say that, "Because my uncle is a teacher," And that, of course, is a wrong answer, especially in a panel like that.

Pasi Sahlberg:

The universities, when they prepare teachers, and this is not only in Finland. There are some other places, as well. Are really increasingly looking for these early signs of skills, and attitudes, as well, in these young people, that points very strongly to this relationship-building thing. Seeing education, teaching and learning, as a kind of a relational thing, rather than an act of transfer or transmission that is often the case in these other cases when, for example, if you believe that somebody who is good in mathematics and science will be a good science and math teacher.

Pasi Sahlberg:

And certainly, these people know their content. They know their concepts, and laws, and ideas of science and mathematics. But it's a long way from there to understanding how children actually learn those things. And this is exactly what the Finnish system has been paying attention to. That if somebody doesn't have these early signs of understanding how to work with people and how to teach, how to build these, establish the relationships, and how to build trust between you, as a teacher, and your students, the universities understand it's going to be hard work to try to teach those people those skills.

Pasi Sahlberg:

It's much easier to teach the content, the history, and English, and mathematics if somebody doesn't know everything. But it's much harder to change people's minds if somebody is not really looking at what teachers do and students do in schools that particular way. Even in Finland, we, sometimes, we have those people. It's actually very uncommon that these people would find their ways into the teacher education programs, but every year there kind of are a few, small number of those who happen to get through but will not graduate, because the universities kindly tell these students that, "I think that your job would be somewhere else. Not in a school."

Pasi Sahlberg:

So, that's how important this kind of a relational aspect is, and understanding what learning really is about. I think we pay a lot of attention to helping young teachers and people to understand how children learn. And that's only one example where American science of, the learning scientists have been very influential in Finland. We have learning scientists in Finland, of course.

Pasi Sahlberg:

But, for example, when I went to study to become a teacher, 90% of my readings were American literature. We were reading about what the American scholars and scientists said about how learning happens. So, I learned this American way, but then, went into the Finnish school. I kind of often shake my head, because I don't understand why these same lessons that have built a great school system in Finland from the United States are not taken seriously in American teacher education, or education system, or let alone the federal and state level education policies.

Pasi Sahlberg:

To simplify this a little bit, I often say that what you see in Finland, if you look at the Finnish education system, is actually what American education system could have been if the own learnings and own

theories and practices in the United States had been taken seriously there. But, unfortunately, that's not the case.

Pasi Sahlberg:

So, now you see these new American education systems blooming around the world, including Finland.

Nat Damon:

May I ask about, whenever I find myself an apostle for the Finnish education system in America, the number one kind of pushback I get is, "But America is a country of 300 million people. You can't scale that up." Do you have anything, you've worked in Washington. You've been in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Professor at Harvard Ed School. Is there anything that you can say to that that would be a good response to this idea that, well, you can't scale it in the U.S.?

Pasi Sahlberg:

Sure. Yeah. But, you know, anybody who says that America has an education system for 320 million citizens, or 50 million people, is wrong. Because there's no such thing as American education system. There are 50 states and almost 15,000 districts. And it's a very localized system.

Pasi Sahlberg:

So, even in America, if you look at the 50 education systems that are very different there. I lived in Massachusetts, and it's a very different system than in Mississippi, for example. Or, just across the border to New Hampshire. About 30 of those 50 states would be about the size of Finland or smaller. There are some states, like California, or New York, or Florida that are larger. But most states in the United States would be in kind of the size of putting things in the scale, if you think like this.

Pasi Sahlberg:

So, I never accept this idea of taking a huge country, how are we going to do what Finland is doing, because we are so much bigger? Because you're actually, at the level of the states, you are not.

Pasi Sahlberg:

But then, the other question I often hear is that, let's be serious here for a moment, that America has much more diversity, and the history of the countries are very different, because of the slavery, and human rights issues, and many other things than Finland. It's easier to do in a country that is younger and more homogenous, culturally, than America. And I think that that's a fair thing to say, because that's where, really, the differences begin to emerge.

Pasi Sahlberg:

But my overall response to anybody who wants to get into this conversation of, we should ignore Finland or some other countries because they are so different, that's fine. But, you know, there are many things that we can learn from those, and that we should never try to emulate or imitate the whole system. But, in the end of the day, this type of conversation gets really serious, I say, "Okay. It's fine. You can ignore all the other countries. But do not ignore Canada. Just go and see the Canadian systems that are much close to what America, what Finland and many others, the Singapores and those are."

Pasi Sahlberg:

They speak the language. They have the same TV, and pretty much, the same kind of a history. But the school systems are very different, and the outcomes and results are very different, including how the teachers experience their work in a school. Canadian, I've been doing a lot of, during the last 20 years, a



lot of cooperation with the Canadian schools, and teachers, and school systems, and I can tell you one thing. That when the, for example, the teachers from Alberta, Canada and Finland, when they meet and collaborate on the same issues, they are like sisters and brothers. Like, soul brothers with one another, because they find so many similar things in [inaudible 00:28:55] attitude, including this relational aspect of teaching and learning.

Pasi Sahlberg:

But the big difference is, when you cross the border and come to the many parts of the United States, not all, but kind of if you take the typical American situation, is that the culture is so different. The good question is why you, in the United States, why you couldn't be a little bit more like Canadians in this respect? If you don't want to learn from Finland, learn from Canadians, because they are doing, we, and the Canadians, and some others are doing really, many things in a similar way, including how we see the role of teachers and students in school.

Nat Damon:

That's fantastic. Using this relational lens that, circling back to the beginning of this conversation, relates so much to trust, and so much to building trust, and having teachers that are trusted from day one. They've been through a program of theory and practical implementation. They have worked hard, and now we trust them unconditionally.

Nat Damon:

Is it true that every principal in Finland is still, has been a teacher?

Pasi Sahlberg:

That is true, yes. You cannot be a school principal in Finland unless you have a positive, not only that you have to be a teacher, but you have to be a good teacher. That's part of your selection criteria.

Pasi Sahlberg:

Unfortunately, in some other places, and it used to be like this in Finland, as well, that if you are not successful in a classroom, you will be promoted as a school administrator teacher. But, that's not the case anymore. And it's a very important aspect of this trust building, because that's one reason why Finnish teachers, in general, they trust their principal in the school, because they know that this person has been in the classroom, does understand what's going on there. When they have a conversation between the principal and the teacher, that there's always this common understanding that we know what we are talking about.

Pasi Sahlberg:

Just imagine having a principal who has no experience in teaching in a type of school or no teaching experience at all who is trying to give advice to a teacher who has been a classroom teacher for 20 years, to kind of tell what you should do in a classroom. I wouldn't believe a word that a person like that would tell to me, even if it's a textbook, if it doesn't come from the experience and understanding what goes on there. So, that is a very important part of the overall culture in Finnish schools.

Nat Damon:

I think that is a great example of the importance of trust, and trust breeding empathy. Trust breeding this shared understanding between administrators and teachers. And I definitely saw that when I was visiting schools in Finland.

Nat Damon:

One time, I was visiting and it was the wintertime, one last anecdote here is, and it was snowing, and it was so cold out, and it was just one of those dark, and snowy, and blustery days. And everybody was outside. This was primary school. And they were all out in the park, and not only were they all outside on a day where, you know, it was really cold, but they had freedom to run and freedom to move.

Nat Damon:

And then, you go back to school, and they're in this industrial arts class, and wood shop, and they're lighting burners. These are eight year olds with fire. I'm thinking about how a teacher must be so entrusted, because I asked the principal of that school, "Do you have any parents who raise questions about this, when their kid comes home and says, 'Yeah, we played with fire and we ran out in a blizzard?'" And they don't really get much pushback from parents.

Nat Damon:

I love that example, because it just seems to, in terms of wrapping up this conversation, it seems to really indicate how important trust is as an, in a sense, I guess, how trust is an offshoot of strong relationship building. Teacher, student, parents and school.

Pasi Sahlberg:

Yeah. That's very true. But, you know, Finland seems to be also one of those countries where parents trust their own children much more than in many other countries. Overall. Not just in education, but things like going to buy groceries alone, or taking care of cleaning your own room, or making sure that you have all the stuff in your school bag.

Pasi Sahlberg:

It's a very common way, in Finland, the parents not to intervene. I've been here in Australia now for a couple of years, and I can see that in this country, and in the United States, the families, the parents are much more taking the responsibility of the things that should be kids' own responsibilities. And that comes, responsibility always comes with trust.

Pasi Sahlberg:

So, I think the Finnish parents, overall, they trust much more, and they kind of insist that the kids have to take care of their own things. And they trust them to try, and fail, and make mistakes, and come back, and then, let's learn about those things. It's the same in school. Accidents happen. Things sometimes go wrong. But the culture of the Finnish school is built in a way that, you know, failure is good, and it's sometimes beautiful to fail and then, get back and say, "So, what went wrong? What can we learn from this?"

Pasi Sahlberg:

And those systems, like here, or in the United States, or England, where the failure of anything is the worst thing that can happen to you. If you fail in any things that you do in the school, you become immediately a loser, or you get a bad mark, and that's kind of a wrong thing to do. The whole Finnish society is much more closer to understand that if you really want to succeed in your life, if you want to succeed in school or in your work, success often is something that you need to fail before that. And that failure and success are very close to, almost coupled rather than, in many other countries, where failure is here, and the success is here, and people kind of try to avoid those things.

Pasi Sahlberg:

So, many of those things that you probably saw, and I see every time I go to Finnish schools, is that there's a lot of kind of risky things going on. Finnish teachers understand that if you engage yourself in teaching children, or teaching anybody, you are immediately in the world of really risky business. You have to accept that things don't always go as planned. But we have to learn those things.

Pasi Sahlberg:

And I see so many systems, education systems around the world, they're design in a completely different ways. They kind of try to keep all the elements, all the aspects of making a mistake, of failing away, and just do the kind of middle road, sure, safe things, according to the standards, and regulations, and all this. And that's not what the Finnish way is all about. It's something else.

Nat Damon:

Safety cannot be found in standards alone. Standards can be a straitjacket, actually. I just love the example you gave about failing. And I know we've got to wrap this up, but I wanted to just draw your attention, the listeners, too. There's an American teacher in Finland named Megan who I interviewed for my book, and she speaks on this, Pasi.

Nat Damon:

She talks about how, one day, it was her first year of teaching in this Finnish primary school in Helsinki, and her principal called her in. Her principal, who was a phenomenal teacher during her years of teaching, so she had that built-in respect from Megan. She calls her in, and Megan's like, "What am I doing wrong? What's the matter?" And her principal says, "You're not failing enough. You're so focused on being perfect here that there's actually a disconnect with your students that I am observing."

Nat Damon:

And, again, only somebody who's been a teacher can really have those words sink into another teacher as feedback. I've been observing you. You're not connecting with your students the way that, you're not building the relationships to the depth that you could because you're not trusting yourself to fail. I want to see you fail. I want to hear that you've failed in a lesson, and then, come back to me, let's talk about why. And then, we can learn about what makes a good lesson.

Nat Damon:

So, all of that just speaks to what you were just sharing about trust, and failure, and being authentic, and being selected not because you are the content expert, but because you've got a sense of relational acuity with your students. Maybe I can [crosstalk 00:37:33] comment on that.

Pasi Sahlberg:

Yeah. Exactly. I think, Nat, that the conversations and relations are much more interesting when we also talk about our failures, what didn't work and what went wrong, rather than, if you always praise your, what did you accomplish? And how great everything is.

Pasi Sahlberg:

That's why, when I did a big part of my work for many years in the United States, and people were kind of asking me, "So, what can we do in America to make this beautiful risk of failure a more understood and practical thing?" And I said, "You can do what Finns have been doing already for many years. Introduce a national day of failure, where you celebrate the power of failure, in anything you do. In the workplace, and at home, and at school, and in sports, and other places. Just take one day a year where

you pay attention to the importance of failing before you can actually come up with anything new, new ideas.

Pasi Sahlberg:

So, Finland has been doing, it's October 13th every year, when we celebrate. Once, I had an audience, where I was speaking about this in very concrete terms. Somebody in the audience, this was in Connecticut, I think, somebody said to me, "We have a failure day here in America, as well, but it's only every other year, and it's the first Tuesday of November." And I didn't quite understand that, why do you have it the second Tuesday of November? Before I understood that that's where people go, and the politicians go to the polls.

Pasi Sahlberg:

But, seriously, I think that if any school, anybody who is listening this, if you feel the same way that we do, both, here, that there's a lot of potential and energy stored in the failure of our efforts to try to do something. If you want to do something, just try this. Just introduce a day of failure in your school or in your district, and invite everybody. The parents, and the employers, and the sports people. Everybody, to, just for one day a year, to come up with their own stories, how the failure and mistakes have helped them to accomplish something. And translate in kind of a important thing to be learned in the school.

Pasi Sahlberg:

And the school will be a very different place, and the children will love it, because that's what they are mostly afraid of. When you turn this kind of a fear into something positive and something you can learn, it can be really a powerful thing.

Pasi Sahlberg:

Many of these Finnish model things don't cost anything. It's just kind of a way of thinking about these things a little bit. Being kind of brave to move forward. Brave to do things that we don't know exactly what's going to happen, and sometimes they are good. Like the day of failure.

Nat Damon:

Yes. Authentic reflection that opens the door for greater exploration. You're not going to explore broadly if you are fearing failing. I love that.

Nat Damon:

I want to leave you, Dr. Sahlberg, with just an opportunity to share what you're doing at New South Wales, because you're focusing on, well, first of all, you have a book that just came out recently about the importance of play, that I was thinking of in the back of my mind when I was talking about the blizzard and the kids out there playing.

Nat Damon:

And also, yeah, beautiful, let the children play. That's the book that I strongly [crosstalk 00:41:15].

Pasi Sahlberg:

Next time, Nat. Next time.

Nat Damon:

Yes. Next time, we will talk about play and the power of play, and the courage and confidence that comes out of play.

Nat Damon:

But also, your work with, you're also focusing a lot on the inequalities in education. I don't want to put you on the spot, but I will. The idea of, if you can sum up kind of what your work is about right now, at New South Wales, and what you're finding, if you can share anything about what you're finding, in terms of inequality in education in Australia.

Nat Damon:

Because, certainly, in the U.S., we're focused a lot on trying to bridge the achievement gap and bring it closer, as you know. And what have you discovered thus far, if you can share anything about this, on your research?

Pasi Sahlberg:

Sure. Yeah, I can say very briefly. I'm a professor at the University of New South Wales here in Sydney, and what we do, we have a little small institute called the Konskey Institute that is designed to address and try to help to fix the fairly serious inequalities and inequities, here in Australian education system.

Pasi Sahlberg:

Australia has a similar structure than the United States. All the states and territories, they have their own systems. So, we are focusing here, at New South Wales, to try to help to change the system, or kind of direct the system in a ways that it would become more inclusive, and fair, and equal to all the students.

Pasi Sahlberg:

Inequality here, from my perspective, in Australia, is challenge number one in education. It's a big challenge in the United States, as well. So, in this way, things are similar here to, in many ways, that they are in the United States.

Pasi Sahlberg:

So, obviously, working at the university, the research we do is one of the main things. But we also, we try to find kind of a practical, new innovation, if you wish, to try to influence these change here, in the equity in education. Australia is interesting place, compared to Finland, is that here, the parents are basically running the system, not the profession. In Finland, that I left behind a couple of years ago, that's a system that is primarily run by educators. The profession. The teachers, and principals, and the education community runs the system. Just like the medical people, the doctors are running the hospitals, and the system, and that they are the main influators of the education policy, and reforms, and direction.

Pasi Sahlberg:

But not here. Here, the system is run by parents. So, in Australia, if you really want to change the course of education, if you want to improve, bring kind of new ways to improve the system, you need to influence parents first. Parents change the politicians, and politicians change the policies, and policies then change the schools. In Finland, it doesn't work like this.

Pasi Sahlberg:

So, that's why our kind of big interest here, in our research and advocacy work, is to try to think about, you know, how do we communicate these things with the communities, and parents, and schools, in a way that the parents would see education in a different way. They would see broader than just providing something for their own children. That seems to be a very common way of thinking.

Pasi Sahlberg:

Here, in this country, if you find a good school for your own child, you're done. You can switch off yourself from all the conversations and debates about education, because I'm good. I don't need to worry about that. In Finland, that would never happen, because in the Scandinavian countries, people see education as a common thing. It's not enough to have a good school for my own children. I also have to be concerned about having good education for everybody, because that's the only way when we can have a sustainable, peaceful, cohesive societies.

Pasi Sahlberg:

So, that's what we try to do here, by bringing in evidence, and experiences from other countries, and doing research. Now, we're doing a lot of research on play. We are doing a lot of research on technology, how it's shaping up children and teenagers differently, depending on what type of family backgrounds they come with.

Pasi Sahlberg:

So, just to have a conversation. Again, this goes nicely back to your initial theme. It's about relationships. It's about building a relationship with the communities, and in this case, pairing communities in a way that they would trust us, what we do, as academics at the university, and that we would have a good conversation about what we really need to do to have a good life for our kids, particularly in these times when nobody knows what's going to happen.

Nat Damon:

Dr. Pasi Sahlberg, I appreciate and am so grateful for the trust that you had in me to run this conversation, and to, the relationship that I feel we've built in the past 40 minutes here, in this conversation, is really quite profound. There are so many thoughts going through my head right now, talking about trust, talking about relationships, talking organizations and leadership, educational leadership. Talking about what makes an engaging teacher, and it might not be what we think.

Nat Damon:

What does 10% really mean? It's not what we think it means. Just skimming from this 10%. It's not skimming. What is the importance of play, and creativity, and exploration in a healthy child development, and in a healthy classroom? All of these topics we've covered and we've discussed today, and I just also feel like we could continue talking for a lot longer. But I'm not able to, and that's okay, because you have many videos online. Again, you've got these, both Finnish Lessons 2.0 and Let the Children Play. Your articles.

Nat Damon:

I'm just really, again, just want to say thank you. This has been an inspiring conversation. For any teacher who's listening, just know, here's, Dr. Sahlberg is Finnish taught and educated, and as a teacher and as a professor, and as an educational reformer. Then, also, working in the U.S., in Washington, D.C., Cambridge, Massachusetts, and now, in Sydney, at New South Wales. Really influencing all hemispheres here, of the globe, and really spreading what's just so important, in terms of bringing back, or at least swinging the pendulum from these quantitative metrics focused only to, yes, there's importance for

that, but also, let's remember that teaching is a human profession at heart, and this conversation has been a reminder of that. So, thank you.

Pasi Sahlberg:

Thank you. It's been a real pleasure, and keep on doing good job, Nat.

Nat Damon:

Thank you very, very much.