

Education and Budget Cuts: Time to Start Using our Brains?

Heli Alarotu (2000)
AV3F English Public Speaking
Department of Translation Studies, University of Tampere

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon.

I would like to talk to you about an unfortunate aspect of the educational system in Finland. That is, the cutting of educational budgets and the laying off of teachers. This subject is important to me for two reasons. First, my home municipality, Vesanto, is one of the few places where teachers are still laid off, in spite of the fact that it has been prohibited by the teacher's trade organization. Second, I come from a family of teachers, and in fact I have studied to be a teacher myself, so issues concerning teaching have always interested me.

I will now discuss the effects that the teacher lay-offs have had, and will have, on our education system and society in general.

People who are not closely connected with education often have difficulty in understanding the problems that arise if teachers are laid off. Unfortunately even the policy-makers of municipalities are not really involved in the education; they merely make decisions concerning it. A common claim among policy-makers is that it is as harmless to lay off teachers as it is to lay off cleaners. Five teachers can easily do the work of ten; it just requires a little more work. In fact, teachers are not doing that much for their salary anyway: five or six hours of playing a day and a three-month summer vacation. What's all the fuss about then?

When a teacher is laid off, the responsibility for his classes and pupils has to be taken by another teacher. The main problem that arises is that the teacher has to either teach two classes as one group, or run between these two classes.

Let us now consider the first alternative and the problems it causes. The ideas of learning and teaching, as well as the methods of teaching, have changed a lot during the last few decades. The ideas of learning have become more child-centered, and based on the needs of each individual pupil. The children are no longer simply 'taught' things. Instead, they are guided to form their own world of knowledge based on their previous experiences and conceptions of the world. Taking this into consideration, one can hardly expect teachers to be able to support each pupil individually if they have fifty or more pupils to teach at the same time.

Why have the ideas of learning and the methods of teaching changed then? As we all know, our society has been undergoing enormous changes during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. As a result of this, also the demands society sets on people have changed and grown, in order to keep up with the development of society. It is no longer sufficient that children just learn to read and write at school; they must also learn other skills that are required in the highly developed society we are now living in. They must learn to be critical and independent citizens, who are competitive, not only in Finland, but also in the rest of the world.

How about teaching two separate classes at the same time? Children should be able to work independently while the teacher is running between these two classes, shouldn't they? Of course there are those pupils, who do their work and study, no matter what the learning conditions are like. However, this is not the case with the majority of pupils. Children notice very quickly, if the teacher is not really paying attention to them and properly evaluating their learning. This is not a question of laziness, but a question of noticing that nobody really cares whether you learn things or not. Adults often falsely assume that children are motivated to work and learn regardless of the amount of support they get.

How about the teachers then? The teachers are constantly under stress because of the greater amount of work and responsibility they have to deal with. Stress is often accompanied by mental and physical malaise, which in turn results in more sick-leaves and more loss of money for the municipalities. The children are in an even more vulnerable position than the teachers, since their whole future depends on their first years of education.

There are, of course, those multi-talented pupils, who learn all the required skills, regardless of the quality of the learning conditions. However, most elementary school pupils are merely average learners, or weaker. In order to learn properly, these pupils need all the support they can get from their teacher and their parents. If these pupils are left without attention and proper guidance, they will not learn even the basic skills, like reading and writing, or they will learn them poorly.

Another important factor concerning the lay-offs is the lack of authority and role models for the children. Children usually get their first experiences of authority outside their homes from their teachers at school. Especially during the first school years, children should have a safe role model at school, somebody to tell them the social rules and limits of behavior. If these role models are taken away from the children, the children can experience feelings of insecurity, which in turn can lead to serious behavioral problems.

What worries me most is how the cuttings of budgets will affect the structure of our society as a whole. Already at the moment schools are becoming more and more divided into "good" and "bad" schools. As the level of teaching in public schools declines as a result of the cuttings, people start selecting schools even more critically and rich people start sending their children to private schools. Finland does not yet have a clear class division or a great distinction between the poor and the rich. However, schools can be a significant factor in enlarging this division: rich people can afford to provide their children with education of good quality, whereas poor people cannot.

Schools should be the providers of equal learning opportunities for all children, regardless of the children's social status. If the deterioration of public education continues, schools are in danger of becoming the separating element between different classes of people. People have been neglecting the importance of good-quality equal education for too long. The society we live in is becoming so materialistic and money-centered that we tend to forget the effects that the saving of money in the wrong places can have on our children and our future. I think it is time that people stop thinking with their wallets and start using their hearts and brains instead.

Thank you.

[Top Page](#)