

The Atlantic

When Finnish Teachers Work in America's Public Schools

There are more restrictions to professional freedom in the United States, and the educators find the school day overly rigid.



Charles Rex Arbogast / AP

TIMOTHY D. WALKER

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“I have been very tired—more tired and confused than I have ever been in my life,” Kristiina Chartouni, a veteran Finnish educator who began teaching American high-school students this autumn, said in an email. “I

am supposedly doing what I love, but I don't recognize this profession as the one that I fell in love with in Finland.”

Chartouni, who is a Canadian citizen through marriage, moved from Finland to Florida with her family in 2014, due in part to her husband’s employment situation. After struggling to maintain an income and ultimately dropping out of an ESL teacher-training program, a school in Tennessee contacted her this past spring about a job opening. Shortly thereafter, Chartouni had the equivalent of a full-time teaching load as a foreign-language teacher at two public high schools in the Volunteer State, and her Finnish-Canadian family moved again. (Chartouni holds a master’s degree in foreign-language teaching from Finland’s University of Jyväskylä.)

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In Tennessee, Chartouni has encountered a different teaching environment from the one she was used to in her Nordic homeland—one in which she feels like she’s “under a microscope.” She’s adjusting to relatively frequent observations and evaluations of her teaching, something she never experienced in her home country. (A principal or an administrator in Finland, Chartouni noted, may briefly observe a teacher’s lesson, but not on a regular basis.)

Already this autumn, she’s had a couple of visitors in her American classroom: a representative of a nearby university, where she’s completing studies to receive a local teaching license, and her “professional learning community” coach. A district administrator will come to visit her

classroom, too. According to Chartouni, these three evaluators will make a few unexpected visits throughout this school year.

Chartouni misses that feeling of being trusted as a professional in Finland. There, after receiving her teaching timetable at the start of each school year, she would be given the freedom to prepare curriculum-aligned lessons, which matched her preferences and teaching style. “I wanted to do my best all the time,” she said, “because they trusted my skills and abilities.” I encountered something similar when I moved to Finland from the U.S., where I started my teaching career.

According to a [National Center for Education Statistics \(NCES\) report](#), teacher autonomy is positively associated with teachers’ job satisfaction and retention. And while most U.S. public-school teachers report a moderate amount of control in the classroom, many say they have little autonomy. In fact, the percentage of U.S. public-school teachers who perceive low autonomy in the classroom grew from 18 percent in the 2003-04 school year to 26 percent in the 2011-12 school year. In general, U.S. public-school teachers report that they have the least amount of control over two particular areas of teaching: “selecting textbooks and other classroom materials” and “selecting content, topics, and skills to be taught.”

“If you asked me now, my answer would be that most likely I would not continue in this career.”

Marc Tucker, the president and CEO of the [National Center on Education and the Economy](#), suggested to me that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which he called “the inauguration of [America’s] accountability movement,” significantly affected how U.S. public-school teachers

perceived their level of autonomy. According to Tucker, NCLB embodied the first concerted “effort by officials in the United States to hold teachers accountable for student performance on a wide-scale.”

Given the significant investment in education programs that served America’s underprivileged children, Tucker explained that U.S. policymakers had grown exasperated by “the lack of return” (evidenced by mediocre student achievement on nationwide assessments). Under NCLB, America’s public schools needed to make [adequate yearly progress](#), decided in large part by student performance on state standardized tests, or face serious consequences, such as [school closures](#). For U.S. officials like George W. Bush, this kind of test-based accountability could be framed as a simple matter of social justice, an effort to give all of the nation’s children access to decent schools with quality teachers; that virtuous sentiment can be [heard](#) in his declaration to address “the soft bigotry of low expectations.”

But as NCLB aimed to hold schools more accountable and U.S. public-school educators felt squeezed to prepare students for state standardized tests, it appeared to encourage a push for more standardization in the nation’s classrooms in teaching guides, student textbooks, and so forth—and, ultimately, many U.S. teachers perceived a diminution of autonomy. (Today, that law has since been replaced, but the NCES report on teacher autonomy suggests that limited flexibility in the classroom is still felt by a large number of teachers, as America’s test-based accountability movement continues to exist.)

* * *

As a public-school educator in Tennessee, Chartouni is seeing how some accountability measures—ones that are unobserved in Finnish schools—have reduced her level of professional freedom. For example,

she and her U.S. colleagues must refer to rubrics and lesson-plan templates to prepare effective lessons. “Everything needs to be written down,” Chartouni said. “It is a great habit,” she recognized, but she had developed her own routine over a decade of teaching in Finland, in which she’d craft a brief plan and then make sensible adjustments during a class period. “I can’t do it that way here because it would look like I hadn’t planned anything,” she said.

According to Chartouni, even the beginning of each lesson is prescribed. “Students need to get busy with bell work immediately when they step into your classroom,” she said. “They have five minutes to go from one location to another, [and] they have seven periods of intensive teaching.” So, occasionally, Chartouni decides to assign easy bell work as she greets her exhausted students: “sit down, relax, and breathe.” (In Finland, students and teachers typically have a 15-minute break built-into every classroom hour.)

With only a couple months of teaching under her belt, Chartouni wonders whether she wants to remain in the teaching profession in America. “If you asked me now, my answer would be that most likely I would not continue in this career,” she admitted. “I am already looking into other options.”

With Chartouni’s permission, I shared her reflections with two other Finnish teachers working in U.S. public schools, both of whom graduated from Finnish teacher-training programs in the ‘90s, taught in Finland for seven years, married Americans, and have U.S. citizenship. I received their responses over email.

One of these educators, a veteran ESL teacher at a Maryland public elementary-school, said her own teaching experiences, regarding the high-level of trust bestowed on Finland’s teachers, are similar to

Chartouni's. While teaching in Finnish schools, she had plenty of leeway to plan with colleagues, select curricular materials for the principal to consider purchasing, and influence decisions about schedules and responsibilities.

Today, with 16 years of teaching in U.S. public schools under her belt, this ESL teacher feels that she lacks a career in teaching. She described it as a rote job where she follows a curriculum she didn't develop herself, keeps a principal-dictated schedule, and sits in meetings where details aren't debated.

“I feel rushed, nothing gets done properly; there is very little joy, and no time for reflection or creative thinking.”

The other Finnish teacher, Satu Muja, received a U.S. master's degree in the teaching of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in 2014, and feels that she has “a reasonable amount of autonomy” at her Maryland public high school. She also believes the school's administrators and the ESOL supervisor trust her. (She's in her third year of teaching in the states.)

However, Muja finds that her level of professional freedom is often restricted by the structure of the school day and a long list of teaching responsibilities in America. “I teach six classes a day with a one 45-[minute] ‘planning’ period,” she said. “My classes are at three different proficiency levels, and I have four minutes between classes to prepare for the next class. At the same time, I am expected to stand in the hallways to monitor students as [they] transfer from class to class, and to

check my email for last-minute updates and changes because of ongoing testing or other events.”

All of those tasks, and several others, wear her down: “I feel rushed, nothing gets done properly; there is very little joy, and no time for reflection or creative thinking (in order to create meaningful activities for students).”

Muja concluded her response with a quote from one of Pasi Sahlberg’s articles for *The Washington Post*, “[What if Finland’s great teachers taught in U.S. schools?](#)”

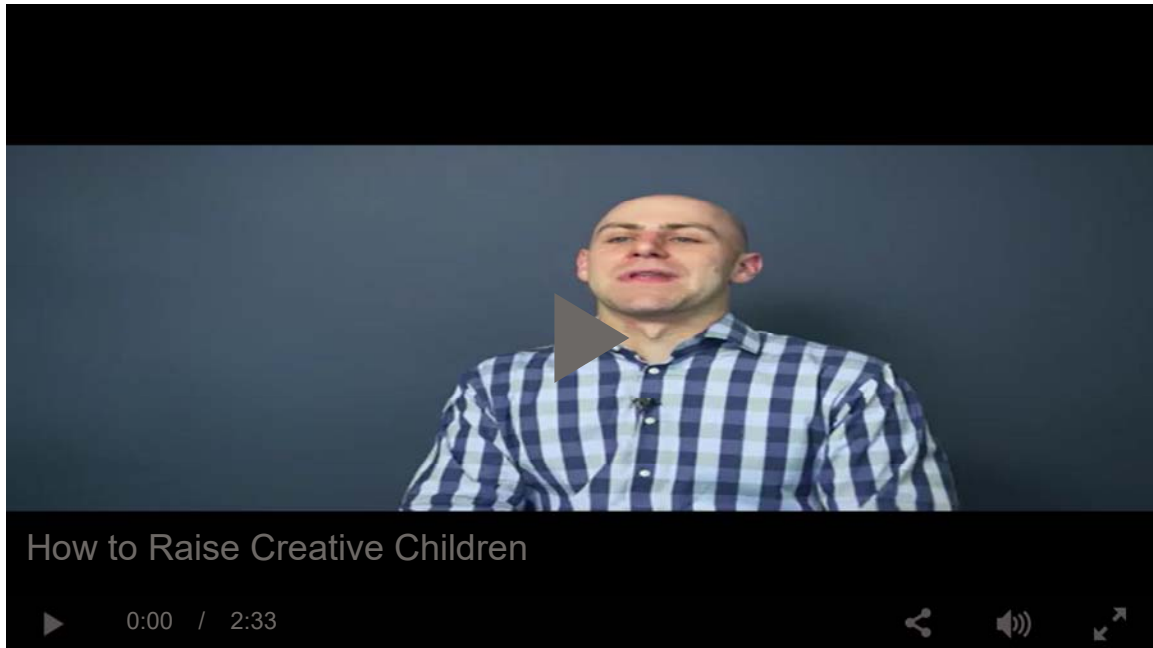
Sahlberg, an education scholar and the author of *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, answers the theoretical question in his article’s title, writing in part: “I argue that if there were any gains in student achievement they would be marginal. Why? Education policies in Indiana and many other states in the United States create a context for teaching that limits (Finnish) teachers to use their skills, wisdom and shared knowledge for the good of their students’ learning.”

While it might be tempting to conclude that simply increasing teacher autonomy would dramatically improve American public education, Tucker, from the National Center on Education and the Economy, assured me it’s not a silver bullet.

“You give people more autonomy when you’re confident that they can do the job if they have it,” he said. “And the countries that give [teachers] more autonomy successfully are countries that have made an enormous investment in changing the pool from which they are selecting their teachers, then they make a much bigger investment than we do in the education of their future teachers, then they make a much bigger investment in the support of those teachers once they become teachers. If

you don't do all those things, and all you do is give more autonomy to teachers, watch out."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Walker is a contributing writer for *The Atlantic* and an American teacher based in Finland. He writes regularly about Finnish education at [Taught by Finland](#) and is the author of the forthcoming book *Teach Like Finland: 33 Simple Strategies for Joyful Classrooms*.

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