

## CHAPTER 1

# THE TWO TEACHERS

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Tim Walker never wanted to leave America. But ever since moving to Helsinki in 2013, he has suspected that many have assumed the opposite about him: that Tim fled the perils of teaching in the United States and found refuge in Finnish utopia. Truth be told, this young first-grade teacher had no other dream but to work for 40 more years at a school in Arlington, Massachusetts, and then happily retire from the classroom—if he ever did retire.

At 26 years old, Tim had found everything he had hoped to find as an educator: purpose, community, autonomy, and steady professional growth. Although relatively inexperienced, Tim understood such a school was precious anywhere in the world, and he felt fulfilled at work.

For this reason, when his Finnish wife, Johanna, initially suggested moving to her home country in early 2013, he refused to even consider it. But the obvious problem—one he didn't like to dwell on—was that he and his wife felt stuck. For several years, Tim and Johanna lived in a basement apartment, an arrangement that hinged on their providing childcare to their neighbors. (It was the only place they felt they could afford in the pricey Boston area.) While Johanna completed her full-time

undergraduate studies, Tim's teaching salary provided them with just enough money to cover their basic monthly expenses, but not much more.

Life became especially difficult when their first child, Misaiel, arrived.

As Tim worked full-time as a teacher, held several part-time jobs, and finished his master's degree coursework, Johanna worked full-time as a stay-at-home mom while nannying on the side. When they switched to the health insurance plan for families, they watched one-third of Tim's teaching salary disappear. Tim and Johanna could only dream of paying off their student loan debt one day.

As a young Finnish mother living in America, Johanna began waking up to several key differences between living in her home country and the United States. Out of necessity, she had returned to her part-time job just a week after giving birth. Meanwhile, her mommy friends in Finland could spend up to three years at home, receiving leave from their work and parental allowance from the state. Her Finnish friends didn't need to worry about health insurance either, since every person had the right to affordable universal health care. Not only that but universities were also tuition free, so Tim and Johanna's mountain of student debt would have been unheard of in this Nordic country. Tim should have seen his wife's suggestion to move to Finland coming from a mile away.

In 2010, *Newsweek* had called Johanna's home country the best in the world, a conclusion based on their study of five major factors: health, quality of life, economic dynamism, political environment, and education. In 2020, Finland was recognized as "the happiest country," and it continues to lead the globe in a variety of domains, including well-being, governance, and human rights (Statistics Finland, 2019). "If you want the American dream," quipped Ed Miliband, the leader of the U.K. Labour Party, "go to Finland" (as quoted in Ripley, 2013, p. 193).

Tim and Johanna weren't keen on pursuing the American dream, but they did aspire to climb out of debt and have more children. More than anything else, Tim hated how little time he

spent with their baby boy, Misaiel. That year his most dreaded days were the ones when he was unable to spend a single waking hour with his son due to full-time teaching, a second job, and graduate studies. In the United States, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2019a, p. 427), primary school teachers, on average, teach just over 1,000 hours each year, whereas their peers in Finland have much lighter teaching loads, 677 hours per year. Converted into daily teaching hours, this means that American primary school teachers teach about 330 minutes (or 5.5 hours) per day compared to 210 minutes (or 3.5 hours) in Finland.

Since Tim felt such a strong commitment to this small American school, he struggled to entertain the idea of teaching anywhere else despite his family's challenges. Tim had visited and taught at other schools in America, and he knew that the culture of a school could vary significantly from one place to another. Like other educators he had met, he didn't want to teach just anywhere—he wanted to teach where he felt respected, supported, and trusted.

Tim's strong conviction stemmed from his initial efforts as a Massachusetts educator in an ethnically diverse working-class city near Boston. Fresh out of college, 21-year-old Tim landed a job as a computer teacher in January and spent half a year working at two public elementary schools. As a computer teacher, Tim went back and forth between these two schools. For one week, he would settle into one school's computer lab, where he would teach several lessons each day, then switch over and do the same thing the following week. Over a two-week period, he would teach more than a thousand children in grades one through four.

Just a few days into his teaching stint, he found a note on his desk. In this handwritten letter, a veteran educator welcomed him to the school and suggested how Tim might assist her second graders during their next computer lesson. She even recommended an interactive math website, which Tim ended up using with her young students. As a "technology integration specialist," he was expected to support classroom teachers in exactly this kind of fashion. This second-grade teacher had provided him with a solid

first impression, leading Tim to believe he could excel in helping teachers integrate technology. But this 21-year-old teacher learned that not everyone was interested in this sort of teamwork.

Although each teacher was required to participate in Tim's biweekly computer lessons, this responsibility seemed too heavy for some. Several of his colleagues simply dropped off their students and returned to their own classrooms, or they hung around in the back of the computer lab where they restlessly completed prep work for their own classes. On his first day at one school, an assistant principal assured him he only needed to abide by the learning standards to succeed at his job, but this basic expectation seemed insufficient to Tim. As the computer teacher, he was supposed to specialize in integration, but, as time passed, he found himself teaching stand-alone computer lessons, divorced from the ongoing work of students and teachers in their classrooms. The situation bothered him.

Reaching out to one principal, Tim asked if he could join this administrator and his colleagues for their grade-level planning sessions. He hoped this gesture would improve their collaboration and, ultimately, lead to more relevant computer lessons for students. The principal liked the idea, so Tim participated in their meetings one morning, hearing from several groups of teachers and taking notes on what their students were studying in their classrooms. He began to imagine exciting possibilities for integrating technology at this school. But something happened later that day that completely extinguished his enthusiasm.

Just before exiting the computer lab, Tim heard two teachers in the hallway whispering about their grade-level meeting. Bitterly, they mocked the computer teacher's desire to learn from them. When he stepped into the hallway, these educators whirled around and returned to their classrooms. Tim felt crushed.

Had he trespassed some unwritten rule? He didn't know. He had only invited himself to their planning sessions in the hopes that he could support them and their students better. That was all. But those two teachers had made it seem that Tim was an idiot

for making this kind of request. They had questioned his motives, showing that they didn't trust him.

That day marked a major turning point in Tim's budding teaching career. Teamwork seemed like the best way forward, but it wasn't possible without trusting relationships. Hearing the ridicule of two teachers had exposed his naïveté about collaboration; he had assumed that his colleagues would automatically trust his integrity, and maybe some did, but clearly some didn't. In response, Tim found himself distrusting his colleagues, and his motivation to collaborate with them quickly disappeared. Even more, Tim felt a sense of desperation about working closely with someone he could trust at school and who would trust him in return.

Some educators, he figured, view teaching as something you struggle with on your own. These teachers see the job as an individual competition rather than a collaborative endeavor—and to ask for their help, as Tim had done, was to cut corners in this rat race. Tim had a sense he wouldn't last long as a teacher if he adopted this mindset. As proof, he only needed to consider one of his struggling first-year colleagues. One afternoon, Tim delivered a message to this teacher and, upon entering her darkened classroom, he saw her in the corner, sobbing uncontrollably. Meanwhile, her students zigzagged around the classroom, acting as if she didn't exist. Tim did not want the same thing to happen to him. He knew he needed a mentor teacher.

Tim remembered the second-grade teacher (let's call her Amy) who had left a note on his desk. She seemed like someone he could trust. Even before meeting him, Amy had communicated her desire to collaborate. When Tim approached her with the idea of mentoring him, Amy gladly agreed to meet on a regular basis.

While Tim lacked opportunities to observe Amy's classroom that spring, he could clearly see her strength in the way she conducted herself around her second graders. Amy was both the warmest and the sternest teacher that he had ever encountered. While some teachers talked to kids as if they were talking to babies, she used the same authentic voice she used with adults. As far as

Tim could tell, she treated every child as if they were her own, modeling civility and responsiveness. During Tim's computer lab lessons, she often raised her hand to offer her insights and help her students make connections to the subject of the computer lesson. While most classroom teachers were aloof during these sessions, Amy remained attentive and present with her students.

Before meeting Amy, Tim hadn't quite considered teaching to be a profession like medicine or law, but this second-grade teacher changed his perception. When she referred to her work, she used terms like "craft" and "practice," as if teaching was a discipline she was actively learning to master and research. While many teachers seemed wary of working too closely with school leaders, she maintained collegial relationships with all educators at the school, including administrators. On some early mornings, Tim found Amy exchanging insights with the principal in their computer lab. Amy wasn't just a model to her students. She was a professional exemplar to Tim and other faculty members.

With the help of Amy's mentorship and example, Tim's enthusiasm for teaching only grew during that spring. He overcame the derision he heard from two of his colleagues, and he resolved to make teaching his career. Tim wanted to become a teacher like Amy one day.

At the end of that school year, the former computer teacher returned and Tim was out of a job. Teaching computer lessons had been gratifying, but what Tim really wanted to do was run his own classroom. Even though he lacked formal training, he believed his passion for the profession and his experiences as a computer teacher would make up for this shortcoming. Without a teaching license, it would be nearly impossible for him to find a job at a public school in Massachusetts, so Tim contacted several independent schools in the Boston area about openings. Just one place, a school in Arlington, gave him the opportunity to teach a trial lesson.

Before the audition, Amy coached Tim and helped him to think through the particular lesson. But even with Amy's help, Tim should have been much more nervous than he was. That

morning a handful of educators observed his trial lesson, and yet he felt remarkably calm in that unfamiliar classroom—probably because he didn’t have much to lose.

Given his inexperience and lack of training, it was a small miracle that he had received the opportunity to audition in the first place. Nevertheless, the trial lesson went better than he would have imagined, and Tim received an opportunity to teach first grade in the fall.

Midway through that year, Tim burned out (see his book *Teach Like Finland* for more details; Walker, 2017) and he took an embarrassing leave of absence for one month. But with the support of gracious colleagues, he returned to the classroom, grew professionally, and remained at the school. The thought of moving to Finland pained him, because it felt like giving up on fellow teachers who had given him so much.

After much consideration and soul searching, Tim sided with his wife and agreed to move to Finland for the sake of his family’s well-being. When he shared the decision with his U.S. principal, this administrator called it a “career move,” but it felt like a turn in the opposite direction. He wasn’t even sure if he would find a classroom teaching job in Finland. There were only a few schools in the country’s capital area where he could teach in English. With the summer only three months away, Tim and Johanna knew they needed to act quickly. Tim emailed the principals of all the English-speaking schools he could find around Helsinki and waited. Expectantly, they purchased one-way tickets to Helsinki. They were moving to Finland in July, regardless.

By early June 2013, Tim had largely given up on the idea of continuing his career as an elementary school teacher in Finland, at least for the short term. When he visited his parents in Connecticut that month, he still hadn’t heard from any of the Helsinki principals he had contacted months before. Joining his family for dinner one evening, he wondered out loud if their move would prove to be a huge mistake.

The next morning, Tim sat down at the same kitchen table, checked his email inbox, and found a message from a Finnish

principal at a bilingual public school in Helsinki. She mentioned there was a vacancy at the fifth-grade level and wanted to speak with him about it. The two chatted over Skype and, after a brief interview, the Finnish principal offered him the job, which he gratefully accepted.

In the days leading up to their move, Tim wanted to read as much as he could about Finland's approach to education. He purchased Pasi Sahlberg's *Finnish Lessons* (2011) and learned how this small Nordic country had built the world's premiere school system over the span of just a few decades. In early 2012, *Finnish Lessons* started to get an unexpected tailwind among education communities in the United States and around the world. First, CNN featured it in its popular series called *GPS*, which explored ways to fix American schools by looking at two successful education systems, South Korea and Finland. The host of the show, Fareed Zakaria, called Finland the education world's ultimate slacker, underscoring the fact that this country produces impressive academic results without spending amounts of time, effort, and money on schools similar to those in the United States and elsewhere. A few months after that, the *New York Review of Books* published a double feature of Pasi's *Finnish Lessons* by education historian Diane Ravitch (2012), immediately making the book known around the world. Soon *Finnish Lessons* was translated into 25 languages, and interest in discovering the secret of Finnish schools exploded.

While Tim enjoyed reading *Finnish Lessons*, he found himself wondering if Pasi Sahlberg—this Helsinki-based scholar—had sugarcoated the key features of Finland's school system. To his American eyes, the list of highlights appeared too good to be true:

- Short school days for students and teachers
- Frequent recesses during school days from preschool to high school
- No census-based standardized testing
- No punitive accountability for teachers or schools
- A balanced whole-child curriculum, emphasizing the arts and life skills for holistic growth and learning

- Zero external classroom inspections by Finland's educational authorities
- A collaborative teaching and leadership culture
- Low teacher turnover and high social prestige of being a teacher
- Equitable school funding and resourcing
- No tracking students by ability or home background
- Research-based teacher education as a basic requirement for all qualified teachers

Before starting the school year in August 2013, Tim launched a blog called *Taught by Finland*, which would document his experiences as a U.S. teacher working in a Helsinki public school. Pasi Sahlberg saw one of his early dispatches, a short post about the hardships of learning Finnish with his fifth graders, and he suggested that they meet up for coffee.

At a café in downtown Helsinki, Tim shared his initial experiences inside the Finnish school system with Pasi, and this seasoned Finnish educator helped him to reflect on his journey thus far. That conversation started a dialogue they have sustained since then.

While Tim adjusted to life at a Finnish public school in the fall of 2013, Pasi landed a job as a visiting professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and prepared to move his family to Cambridge, Massachusetts, just a few miles from where Tim had lived and taught in Arlington, Massachusetts. As it was his first time teaching in America and considering education for his son in the United States, Pasi would soon have stories to share with Tim about encountering a different culture of education.

What these two teachers came to understand is that venturing beyond your homeland to experience another school system challenges you. Your thinking shifts. You begin to see the purpose of education differently. You start to question long-held assumptions about best practices in education. You learn to appreciate the things you can easily take for granted in your native land.

While Tim and Pasi highly recommend the idea of moving to another country for a season, they know it is not for everyone.

This is one of the reasons why they wrote this book. They wanted to give readers a window into a unique school system that pushes foreigners out of their comfort zones. These two educators conclude that, compared to the United States or most other countries, the Finnish school system is built on widespread trust in teachers' work within the education system.

Educators around the world are hungry for a similar model. Consider the email Tim received from his teacher-friend Martha Infante, who messaged him in the middle of a Los Angeles teacher strike in 2019. She lived and studied in Finland as a Fulbright scholar in 2018, and this is what she wrote:

It has been a hectic week in L.A.! Our school system is based on mistrust of teachers and students. Rules, policies, initiatives, and attitude towards teachers is all about monitoring them to ensure they are following mandates. There is little room for independent thought or autonomy in the subjects that get tested, Math and English. Those classes are the hardest to infuse with creativity and innovation.

Probably the most talented teacher I know who teaches English and Social Studies has to issue a test every 6 weeks and is removed from class to analyze results for one day each cycle. Because her students have such low reading skills, it takes them between 2-4 days to read the long passages and answer the question. This means 1 out of every 6 weeks in her class in [*sic*] lost to testing. She wonders when she will ever do fun stuff with them like fairy tales, and science fiction.

The testing system is all about accountability. Politicians get to dictate school policy, so when No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top were passed, we knew we were doomed. It seems they wanted a number, an easy formula to judge schools and teachers. As if an algorithm could solve all of our problems.

Signed into law in 2002, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was George W. Bush's landmark legislation that led to higher standards, more standardized testing, tougher teacher accountability,

and more charter schools. NCLB aimed to combat chronic under-performance in American public schools (specifically, it hoped to raise academic achievement among children of color). In 2009, Barack Obama continued the same logic with his Race to the Top initiative that brought the Common Core State Standards to many schools and insisted on more standardized testing, increased test-based accountability, and further deregulation of charter schools. Donald Trump's administration has adopted all of the above features and encouraged cyber-charter schools, home schooling, and voucher programs in support of parental choice. All of these education reforms in the U.S. since the early 2000s have shared the same assumption that frequent standardized testing is the best way to fix the deficits in American public schools and that—in some mysterious way—politicians and administrators are the best people to decide how to make all American kids proficient in school.

Martha went on:

So, our strike is our way of fighting back against all of this. We inserted demands into negotiations that we were not able to legally bargain for, such as green space in schools and less standardized testing. We knew those demands would get thrown out, but we wanted to show the public that teachers know what works best in schools and our strike is a righteous one, to preserve public education in a more community-based way.

We are fighting for smaller class sizes to increase personalization and deeper understanding of the students in our classroom.

The issue of trust is so bad in this strike that we don't believe the actual budget numbers presented to us by the district and the county. How decayed is the trust when we don't believe numbers? It doesn't help that past district leaders have admitted they hide funds in the \$1 billion budget for events such as these strikes.

The trust story that does seem to shine through is that of the parents towards the teachers. We have received overwhelming

support in the form of food, participation in picketing, honks by commuters, and social media comments in favor of us. It is heart-warming.

Trust in L.A. is completely different than in Finland. I know Finland isn't perfect, but they are worlds ahead of us when it comes to trust in the school system and especially its teachers.

Many educators, like Martha, both beginners and veterans alike, have told Tim and Pasi how disappointed and tired they are with the way their work is often perceived by others. All these stories have a strong personal side. There is a human soul behind these written lines. Sometimes these educators simply turn off the lights and shut the door behind them, leaving the teaching profession for good. Sometimes they ask for advice or support and try to hang in there, waiting for some kind of miracle to happen. One common element in all these personal accounts is this: these teachers wonder if what they do in school is valued by society. More than that, with these doubts come feelings that they are not trusted as professionals to do the right thing.

There were high hopes that K–12 education in America would find itself on the right track after a decade of George W. Bush's NCLB and Barack Obama's Race to the Top, but these major education reforms have been universally condemned as yet another succession of failures to improve American schools (Morrow, 2017; Ravitch, 2020). Looking for solutions to challenging educational issues, many U.S. educators, and even a few policy makers, have turned their eyes to other countries, perhaps most often to Finland. U.S. education stakeholders have been particularly interested to find out how the Finnish model could help American districts and schools to more effectively serve all children, regardless of what kinds of homes they were living in. Finland emerged as a global education leader in 2001, when it was announced that Finnish 15-year-olds scored highest on the first-ever Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)—a triennial exam that measures critical thinking skills in reading, math, and science administered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation

and Development (OECD). On the surface, Finland's recipe for success appears hard to understand. Many wonder how Finnish kids can achieve outstanding results on international student assessments without the stress, long school days, and rigid test-based accountability evident in countries around the world. People often suggest that Finland's success in education is because it is a small nation with less than six million inhabitants. Others think that it is easy to have great schools in a country that has relatively little ethnic diversity compared to a country like the United States. And then there are those who believe that a low child poverty rate in Finland is why the country consistently outperforms other nations. All these beliefs may be true to some extent, but they cannot fully explain Finland's strong educational performance over the last two decades. Interestingly, Finland is very similar to other Nordic countries in terms of its economic, social, and cultural features, yet its schools perform significantly better than those of its neighbors.

Indeed, the educational success of Finland involves many factors. However, one thing sets this Nordic nation apart from many countries, including its Scandinavian neighbors. Finland treats its teachers as trusted professionals—and this book shows what this trust-based school system looks like in action.

Those who follow international education issues closely have noticed that since 2010 Finland's rankings in the global rankings have declined. Students' test scores in 2012, 2015, and 2018 PISA surveys in all three subject areas—reading, mathematics, and science—have slipped, coinciding with Asian education systems ruling these global school rankings. Finland still remains one of the strongest performers in academic outcomes as well as having one of the most equitable school systems among the OECD countries. But it is fair to ask: What is going on in Finland that would explain this recent downward trend?

It has been equally difficult to explain exactly why PISA scores in Finland have been dropping as it has been to explain what is behind Finland's world class performance to start with. You may wonder: has something happened in schools that is negatively

affecting the quality of teaching? Or has Finland adopted the wrong education policies in the 2000s that have derailed the work of their schools and led to worse outcomes? Or has something unexpected happened to that strong trust in teachers and schools that we claim in this book is the engine of good teaching and powerful learning in Finnish schools? Currently, these are challenging questions to answer. So far, not much has been written or researched about them. Whatever the reasons for Finland's downhill in PISA scores, there are no signs that teachers in this country are losing trust as professionals.

Today the need to trust teachers may be higher than it has ever been. In early 2020, COVID-19 spread swiftly and forced school systems to transform themselves within a matter of weeks, if not days. To curb the spread of the virus, scores of schools closed for the rest of the 2019–2020 school year. Most schools were closed for several weeks and, at the peak of physical lockdowns around the world, over 1.5 billion children were forced to learn from home as their teachers used various technologies or whatever other means they had available to them. Very few school systems had plans in place to shift rapidly from face-to-face teaching and learning in schools to distance learning from homes. Singapore and some other Asian countries had emergency procedures established from the previous SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) virus outbreaks in 2004–2005. But for all other education systems, COVID-19 tested how well schools and teachers were able to change, not just a little bit and for a little while, but to alter the entire approach to teaching and learning for an unknown length of time.

At the time of this writing, it is too early to say how education systems have succeeded in these transitions. In the United States, most school buildings closed in March and remained shut for the rest of the school year. In Finland, schools moved to distance education on March 18 and children returned to school in mid-May for the last two weeks of the academic year. The OECD (2020) and some other organizations have already collected data from

different countries about how they responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has changed education. One lesson is that those education systems that regard teachers as professionals and have more flexible structures, where their schools have more autonomy to design curriculum and adapt instructional practices, seemed to adjust faster to disrupted teaching and find better pedagogical solutions to keep children learning while school buildings were closed. In other words, where teachers are trusted, schools are more agile during turbulent situations.

This is what happened in Finland. On Monday, March 16, the Finnish government decided to close all school buildings and university campuses just two days later. Schools were advised to organize remote learning using alternative methods, including digital solutions and independent study. Educators had one full day to make plans so that no child would suffer and be left behind. While Finland's authorities were busy handling the emerging health and economic shock caused by the pandemic, local education officials and schools were encouraged to use their best professional wisdom to rearrange teaching and learning in the best possible ways in accordance with common laws and regulations. Trust shows its real power in unexpected and novel situations where no one knows what to do next. Trust must work both ways—authorities trust teachers and teachers trust authorities to do what they must.

Another interesting lesson from around the world is how the school closures during the pandemic have affected children. In countries where students are expected to be self-directed and take responsibility for their own learning, the shift to remote learning happened more easily. Finnish schools are known as places where students are intrinsically motivated and taught to take charge of their learning. Trust—both in teachers and students—is a key condition for self-directed learning in Finnish schools.

This book is divided into two major sections. The first part is about developing a holistic understanding of trust, the Finnish approach to education, and the evolution of trust in Finland's

teachers. The second part explores seven principles for building a culture of trust in schools:

1. Educate teachers to think
2. Mentor the next generation
3. Free within a framework
4. Cultivate responsible learners
5. Play as a team
6. Share the leadership
7. Trust the process

We start Chapter 2 with an illustration, a rather ordinary glimpse into one of Finland's classrooms that sheds light on the extraordinary trust invested in teachers and students.

## FOR CONVERSATION AND REFLECTION

1. How would you describe a low-trust school? How about a high-trust school?
2. Think about your current school community. How would you describe the general level of trust between its members? Would you call it a school characterized by high trust or low trust?
3. Why might trust in teachers and schools be stronger in Finland than in many other countries?
4. What are the perks of moving from a culture of accountability to a culture of responsibility? What are the downsides?
5. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a global shock in education. Has it changed the way teachers are perceived in our societies?