

# Education in Finland Rules the World of Education

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# **Introduction**

This paper shows my observations and recommendations as a consultant to Minister of Education in Finland. This paper is a response to the course assignment to write 500 word, 2 page summary on the topic for the Masters level American Education Course. This paper is only scratching the surface on the observations and recommendations.

This paper has two sections. In the role of consultant to Minister of Education in Finland, I will first discuss findings that make Finnish educational system excellent and second suggestions that would make it outstanding.

## **Introduction to Education in Finland**

Education in Finland is ranked highest in the world (PISA). McKinsey report places Finnish education excellent on their scale. McKinsey does not have suggestions for improvement, but I will present a few improvements to move from excellent to outstanding.

Finland scores highest in PISA math and science, although it does not conform with national standard testing approach adopted by US. Businesses and conservative politicians used to criticize the Finnish educational system for creating overall mediocre population. PISA results prove these concerns wrong, and all we hear is praise after that.

This paper investigates where the success originates. As one origin, Finns have a special connection with nature. That has infuses lots of common sense in the population compared to other societies like those in the US that seem to be less connected with the nature. The country has a strong cultural integrity that supports learning. Nature and culture supports natural learning methods in the school system, discussed in this paper.

There are learnings that can be implemented to other areas of the world, including USA.

Next we will look at what Finland is doing to achieve such good results in the international standardized tests (PISA).

## **What is Finland doing right**

During my research, it has become evident that virtually everyone agrees that good teachers get good results in getting students to learn. All complex observations and solutions offered in the world, boil down to this. Thus the teacher is the starting point for discussion and build the rest from there.

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### **Teachers**

Teachers in Finland are required rigorous Masters degree (6 years) to which 10% of the applicants are accepted. Quality of training is significantly higher than in the US where Bachelors degree and state exam are sufficient. (School law)

Teachers and students are rarely evaluated. Focus is on making teachers better and giving them freedom to excel and turn their students to bright stars. (How Finland became an education leader)

In Finland dignity of the teaching profession is high. Teacher's position is positioned in terms of respect and salary nearly as highly respected as Medical Doctor, and around the same respect level as engineer. Teachers salary is 102% of salary of other university graduates. This is high, compared to US where it is 65%. Working conditions are attractive and professional. This makes the profession desirable and attracts professionals and good educators to the profession.

### **Leadership made of professionals that understand teachers**

Personnel in the Finnish Ministry of Education, the National Board of Education, the Education Evaluation Council, and the Helsinki Department of Education, all had been teachers for at least four years. This ensures that those who make policies and decisions regarding funding know what teachers go through every day and what their needs are. This eliminates the disconnect between policy makers and students that is clearly observable in the US. As a result, standards can be set very high, but the implementation is left to the teachers, backed by good resources.

### **Different testing paradigm**

Finnish teachers have realized that standardized testing as implemented in the US would create stress and reduce learning. Instead of testing all students every year, like in the US, Finland leaves most of the testing to the school teachers. School teachers know what the requirements from the national curriculum are. National curriculum is used as a guideline, not as a blueprint like in the US. Students are tested for their learning, not for their compliance with the rigorous standardized tests. Students are prepared for developing as a complete person. Higher thinking, arts and physical education supports the basic skills of mathematics and reading abilities and other goals. Good test results are a side-effect of proper comprehensive and holistic education.

Teachers take care of the testing for each course and grade. The standardized testing appears only for the high school matriculation exam, which takes lots of studying. All studying before that has been building for it. Study for the matriculation exam is just a review.

When students are applying for a university, that's the second time testing is heavily in the picture. Universities are free for students and fully funded by the state government. There is field specific test to get into the universities, depending on the major. The time of high school graduation is the time when Finnish students are the smartest, so it makes sense for them to prepare thoroughly for the field they choose to study for in the university.

For testing the quality of education, the Finnish statistics department sends a standardized test to a

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statistically significant and statistically unbiased group of students. This will give an accurate assessment of the educational advancement of the system and it does not burden the students or skew the curriculum like it does in the US. (Ravitch)

### **Progressive working and learning environment in the schools**

As the national curriculum is a guideline for the teachers, teachers create their own classes and collaborate with their colleagues. Instead of punishing slow learners, they are tutored. As a result there is no division between talented and slow learners. All students are in the same classes.

Each week, besides basic skills, classes include real world life skill classes like: art, music, cooking, carpentry, metalwork, and textiles. Students learn by doing, science being a good example. Science classes are gaped at 16 people, so that everyone does labs in school every time. Language learning starts on the 3rd grade (usually English), more languages starting 7th(usually Swedish), 8th and 10th grades. Non-mandatory languages can be chosen from a variety of languages such as Germany, French or Russian. To keep the school healthy and least stressful children have 75 minutes of recess per day, in comparison to the US counterparts who have 27 minutes. Children are meant to be children and play. (Children must play article) This is understood, respected and encouraged.

### **Government support and funding**

All schools in Finland provide high quality teaching and learning, even in the rural areas. Some teachers are paid more to move into a rural area or minority language area in order to provide a high quality education for all citizens. Even in a small town or in an inner city school one can get a high quality education and continue in academic career or get a high paying job. Supporting schools that require more attention is analogous to tutoring students that are about to fall behind, instead of firing teachers and closing schools. As a result we do not have dropout factories like in Washington D.C. (Waiting for superman – movie)

Most of the schools are public and follow the same guidelines and enjoy same freedoms and results. Only 1% of the elementary schools and 6.5% of secondary schools are private. Out of private schools Steiner (Waldorf in the US) schools are the most popular. Whether the school is public or private, they receive funding from the state.

Besides funding schools, society is built to support most of Maslovian basics of life. Health care and dental care are free for all. Lunch, and breakfast in some schools are served as part of the normal school day. This releases attention of children from survival to the main purpose of the school: to play as a child, learn as a student, develop holistically as a human being and become a contributing member of the society.

### **Results of Finnish educational system**

This example of well working educational system produces 100% literacy in the country, and graduation rate is 99.7% on primary level, comprehensive school's 9 grades being mandatory.

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Strong proof is found in high-tech sector: Nokia in telecommunications, Orion in medical diagnostics and pharmaceuticals, Polar in heart-rate monitors, Vaisala in meteorological measurement, and VTI in accelerometers. Many companies like Ericsson, IBM, and SAP choose to have their research centers located in Finland.

### **Comparison**

One might question whether results are due to Finland being small and a homogeneous country. Finland has 5.3 million people, only 4 percent of whom are foreign-born. As a comparison, Norway is also small (4.8 million people) and nearly as homogeneous (10 percent foreign-born). Norway adopted US style testing and masters degrees are not required for the teachers to teach. Norway is not as high in the results as Finland. According to McKinsey Norway is placed in fair category, three categories below Finland. This shows that Finnish education has something unique that is not dependent on the size and homogeneity of the country. As a result we can assume that successes of Finland can be applied to other countries independent of size and constitution and get similar results, even in the US.

As a second comparison, South Korea is high on the math and science, but in lower part of good according to McKinsey report. Koreans also work hard long hours and they generally don't like school.

### **From Excellent to Outstanding**

Progress never ends, thus the question also comes up: can Finland be risen from Excellent to Outstanding. Standards for outstanding should be defined and examples found from specific schools and districts that have achieved that. Although there is lack of that research and definition, we can still identify some needs of improvement and suggest a few tools that have been shown to bring change in that area.

### **Needs for improvement**

Although education contains real life skills and develops different aspects and skills of the student, there is still a problem of fragmented knowledge, holistic development of the consciousness and personality of the student and some specific life skills such as social skills, personal finance skills and goal setting and achievement.

### **Tools for improvement**

Finland is known to implement specific nationwide educational campaigns to eradicate antisocial behaviors and to meet health goals. Examples are ending school violence, stop trashing, stop stealing, better sexual education, and increased dental health and hygiene. These are some examples I remember from my school years.

Like in above examples, when there is a good reason and demand from the society, educational system

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can bring in relationship experts to help with the social skills, teach personal finance and teach how to set and achieve goals. Signs for need are showing as Finns are known to be quiet and need better social skills to work in the international circles. Personal finance also has shows its needs in form of students getting into financial trouble with quick and easy 100e loans using text messages. Nokia being in crisis, goal setting and achievement is a skill that need to be taught to get ex-Nokia employees i.e. new entrepreneurs to ensure success with their new way of life. These are some examples how current success of the educational system can be expanded. Improvement of any of the above skills will further remove stress unrelated to school and improve academic achievement. As seen before with the right things done section, developing whole person results in better score in the basic skills tests also.

The last point that is not yet covered is the personal development aspect and fragmented knowledge problem. There must be many solutions for these problems, but the closest, most documented and certainly one of the most effective methods is the consciousness based education (CBE) with Transcendental Meditation (TM) as its core. TM develops the person as a whole and answers that need. Other tools from CBE, such as main points, sci points, unified field charts for connecting knowledge with the whole with eliminate the problem of fragmented knowledge. Results of these programs on academic achievement has been clearly shown in scientific studies. Introduction of these programs to the schools is not quite as straight forward as the need has not been recognized by the society as clearly as with the previously mentioned matters.

If these reforms were implemented when I was in school, I would have enjoyed growing up in Finland much much more.

## **Conclusion**

Finland clearly rules the education in the world as documented by McKinsey & Co. For any country, no matter its size or composition, there is much wisdom in minimizing testing and instead investing in broader curricula, smaller classes, and better teacher training, teacher salary, respect and work environment of teachers. However, even perfection can evolve further. Many of the improvements can be plugged into the existing system, as it has learned to use its nature-born common sense to implement what works and responds to the needs of the society.

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