



PRIMARY PRINCIPALS' SABBATICAL REPORT

John Armstrong

Term 3 2018

1. Title and Focus of the Sabbatical:

The effective elements and strategies of high performing education systems – implications for Kāhui Ako (Communities of Learning).

2. About the Author:

I commenced working at Henley School in Term 1, 2009. Prior to this I was principal of Sumner School in Christchurch for over 3 years. I have also been a principal of other schools in the region including Foxhill (1998-1999) and Upper Moutere (2000-2005). In 2005 I worked as a full-time school reviewer for the Education Review Office and continue to work for them on short term contracts.

Henley School is contributing primary school and is the largest primary school in Te tau ihu o te Waka a Maui (Top of the South) with a roll of around 550-600. The school was opened in 1962 and currently has an enrolment scheme in place.

Henley School, Waimea Kindergarten, Maitai Satellite School, Waimea Intermediate and Waimea College make up a unique educational complex that is sited on an extensive area of unfenced land. The Waimea campus has over 3,000 students from pre-school to Year 13 attending daily and all institutions co-operate to share facilities whenever possible.

In 2017 and 2018 I also took on the role of Kāhui Ako Co-Leader for the Waimea Community of Learners. Henley School is one of 12 schools in our local Kāhui Ako. www.waimeacol.org/

3. Acknowledgements:

I would like to acknowledge first and foremost the Henley School Board of Trustees for supporting my application for sabbatical leave and contributing to the travel associated with the study. Thanks also to the Nelson Principals' Association for the opportunity to visit Finland through the ASB Study Award.

I also acknowledge my two experienced Deputy Principals, Leeanne Kyle and Natalie Doty, for the exceptional job they did in taking on the leadership role in my absence. I also recognise that a sabbatical gives many staff an opportunity to 'step up' and it tests the succession planning in a school – thanks to staff members who took on additional responsibilities for the term. Special thanks to the Office Manager, Tracey Aindow and her staff, for ensuring the school administrative side kept moving forward and for helping with the logistics.

I acknowledge the New Zealand Ministry of Education for making sabbatical leave available to principals. The opportunity to be able to take time out and look in depth at an aspect of our practice, to indulge in uninterrupted reflection and to have a period of refreshment is invaluable.

A huge thanks to the schools I visited with the principals and teachers giving me a large amount of their time in a generous and open manner. They took the opportunity to share what their schools were doing with passion and pride.

Thanks to Melanie Ryan and Tony Rampton (China) for hosting me and making me welcome in their respective schools. Thanks to the Reinert family in Solingen, Germany and to the Collier family in Hamburg, Germany for hosting me and showing me around.

Special thanks to Jeff and Ai Ling in Singapore and to Compassvale School, Sengkang, Singapore (Henley School and Compassvale School are partner schools in the Asia NZ Foundation Global Schools Programme).

Thanks to Natalie Doty and Caroline Clarke and who proof read my various drafts of this report to ensure it was readable for the range of audiences.

Finally, thanks to my wife Rebecca, for keeping things ticking along at home while I was backpacking my way around Asia and Europe.

4. Executive Summary:

Rationale

This sabbatical involved learning and experiencing in depth some high performing education systems (Singapore, Shanghai and Finland). This was achieved through professional reading from a literature search along with school and institutional visits in each of these countries.

5. Purpose:

These three education systems fascinate me as they consistently score highly in global measures of successful education models. My investigation will therefore focus on what they do differently from the New Zealand education system and any learnings we can implement at school level. With many of us now operating in Community of Learners/ Kāhui Ako, are there ways we can further develop these to improve outcomes for our students?

Singapore scores incredibly highly in the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) tests, which aim to measure and compare the performance of students across different countries.

Shanghai's approach has been to try to narrow the gap between the best and worst performing schools through school partnerships, clusters and principals taking over more than one school. There is also a relentless focus on professional development throughout a teacher's career that begins with serving an apprenticeship to a 'master teacher'.

Finland routinely tops rankings of global education systems and is famous for having no banding systems – all pupils, regardless of ability, are taught in the same classes. As a result, the gap between the weakest and the strongest pupils is the smallest in the world.

Investigating how we might introduce any initiatives to reduce the gap and tail of under achievement based on what is working well in Singapore, Shanghai and Finland will be central to this investigation.

Our Kāhui Ako also has a number of challenges that directly relate to enhancing outcomes for Māori, Pasifika, those with special education needs and low socio-economic learners. This sabbatical will look at any innovative ways that Singapore, Shanghai and Finland have used in order to address under-achievement. If suitable, these initiatives will be given full consideration in my role as leader of the Kāhui Ako for inclusion into addressing our achievement challenges for priority learners in the Waimea catchment.

6. Background Information:

- **The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA Reports)**
This is an international study which began in the year 2000. It aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15 year old students in participating countries and their respective economies.
- **Literature Search**
A literature search on articles relating to analysis of the education systems of Singapore, Shanghai and Finland will be considered. There are also sabbatical reports from other educators who have personally visited and observed these school systems.
- **Study Tour**
I used a Nelson Principals' Association ASB study award to take part in a study tour of Finnish schools run by Learning Scoop <http://learningscoop.fi/> out of the University of Tampere, Finland. This tour provided a balance of lectures and background information on the schooling system along with visits to a range of learning institutions. There were 3 other school leaders who also took part in this programme.

7. Methodology:

To achieve the purpose of the sabbatical I visited schools and/or other educational institutions in both Singapore and Shanghai where I had already established contacts. Some of these were principals, teachers and educational consultants who I have hosted or have developed connections with through the Asia New Zealand Foundation.

In addition to the visits, I conducted a literature search of relevant material and reading on Finland, Singapore and Shanghai. I met with education officials in the various countries along with the Principals' Academy of Singapore.

Finally, I attended a study tour in Finland run by Learning Scoop held at the University of Tampere, <http://learningscoop.fi/>. I also attended an evening with Finnish Educator, Pasi Sahlberg, organised by the University of Auckland.

8. Findings:

I have grouped the findings and my general observations under the specific countries I visited where applicable:

a) Shanghai

China has in recent years joined the international community in realising the importance of overcoming disparity and inequality in education (and indeed in society at large). Schools in Shanghai have been able to create their own curriculum and outside groups such as museums can become partners in education. Part of the new curriculum includes an emphasis on inquiry-based education. Students independently explore research topics of interest to themselves in order to promote social wellbeing, creative and critical thinking, and again, learning to learn.

To support the new education changes, certification processes for teachers were implemented. All primary school teachers now must have a sub-degree diploma, and all teachers in secondary schools are degree-holders with professional certification. Many teachers have Master's degrees. Shanghai was the first district in China to require continuous professional development for teachers. Teacher professional development requirements also increased – teachers in Shanghai must now complete 240 hours of professional development in five years. An online database provides help with design and implementation of curriculum, research papers and best practice examples. Teachers are now encouraged to allow time for student activities in classrooms rather relying solely on presentations.

The education system is also divided into 'key' schools and 'ordinary' schools. The formation of key schools was needed to accomplish two purposes; the first was to 'quicken' the pace of modernisation in the country and the second was to 'set up exemplary schools to improve teaching in all schools'. In contrast with these schools, ordinary schools, have problems in lack of funding, teacher education and student selection. One interesting strategy employed by Shanghai to improve weak schools is the commissioned education program. Under this scheme, top performing schools are assigned a weak school to administer. The "good" school will send a team of teachers and a principal to lead the school and improve it. This has been happening within the city but also as a type of exchange program with poor rural schools. Such a system assists the poor schools and benefits Shanghai schools by allowing them to promote teachers and administrators.

Teachers in Shanghai focus on the group as opposed to on the individual. If one student is lagging behind, the class will stop and help the student, and bring them as quickly as possible to the level of the rest of the group. It is believed that every student has the ability to achieve in every subject, although some students need to work harder than others to achieve the same results.

Because Shanghai teachers and parents expect that all students have the ability to succeed in all subjects, students themselves tend to believe that they can succeed as well. When teachers and parents expect more from their students, students succeed more. Teachers are also held in high regard in China – the status of the profession is high. Chinese parents and students place a high value on overseas education, especially at top American and European institutions. International schools cater for the large population of ex-pat students in the main cities.

b) Singapore

A multicultural country which has topped the PISA ranking is Singapore, where the Malay population represents a similar proportion of the total to Māori in New Zealand. Singapore places a huge emphasis on education as the only natural resource available to its people. Like New Zealand, Singapore has a British colonial background and consequently it has adopted a British-based education system. The number of Singaporean students seeking a university qualification remains high. The local education system in Singapore is rigorous and highly streamed. Singaporean students sit primary school leaving exams when they are about 12 years old, from which they will be streamed before entering secondary school. The streams are express (more able students), normal-academic and normal-technical (being the least academic).

It became clear that the education system in Singapore is largely successful due to the investment and selection of the teachers. Bilingualism is also a key feature of the Singapore system (with students learning English and their official mother tongue language) along with an investment in ICT.

One advantage of the Singapore system is it is not as geographically dispersed as New Zealand. I think this enables them to have greater consistency in their policy initiatives and implementation. They invest heavily in the selection, recruitment and retention of their teachers. Those with potential for leadership are identified and put on the pathway to management with appropriate support. Likewise, those with potential in the classroom are also supported on a career pathway for Master Teachers. Only the top third of secondary-school graduates in Singapore can apply for teacher training. Each year, teachers take an additional 100 hours of paid professional development and they spend substantial time outside the classroom to plan with colleagues. Teaching is seen as an honoured profession in Singapore.

However, parents will also tell you that tuition has become a non-optional part of getting an education in Singapore; school alone is no longer enough. In Singapore, there are tough examinations at the end of primary education and it also streams students largely according to academic ability. Such a system adds to parent's anxiety and they turn to the tuition market to give their children the extra push in mathematics, science and languages. Many children attend these after school and evening lessons to supplement learning at school. In the state system classes are often large and the syllabus too unrealistic, parents say, that it is impossible for teachers to possibly get through the whole thing.

Parents' status in the society is influenced by which high schools and colleges their children are able to get into. Children's failure to achieve high education goals reflects not just on the child, but on their parents as well. In this society, children are obligated by law and custom to provide for their parents in their old age, and so, when parents look at their children, they are also looking at their retirement fund. The ability of that retirement fund to take care of them in their old age depends more than in any other country on success on their high school and college entrance exams. For all these reasons, parents work very hard to assure their children's success in school and children work hard in school to please their parents.

Singapore's system, however, is not working for Malay students. Their achievement rates lag behind Singaporean Chinese and Indian students in much the same way Māori students fall below national rates in New Zealand <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/2018/06/07/114822/four-hours-a-day-in-class-and-success> .

c) Finland

Overview

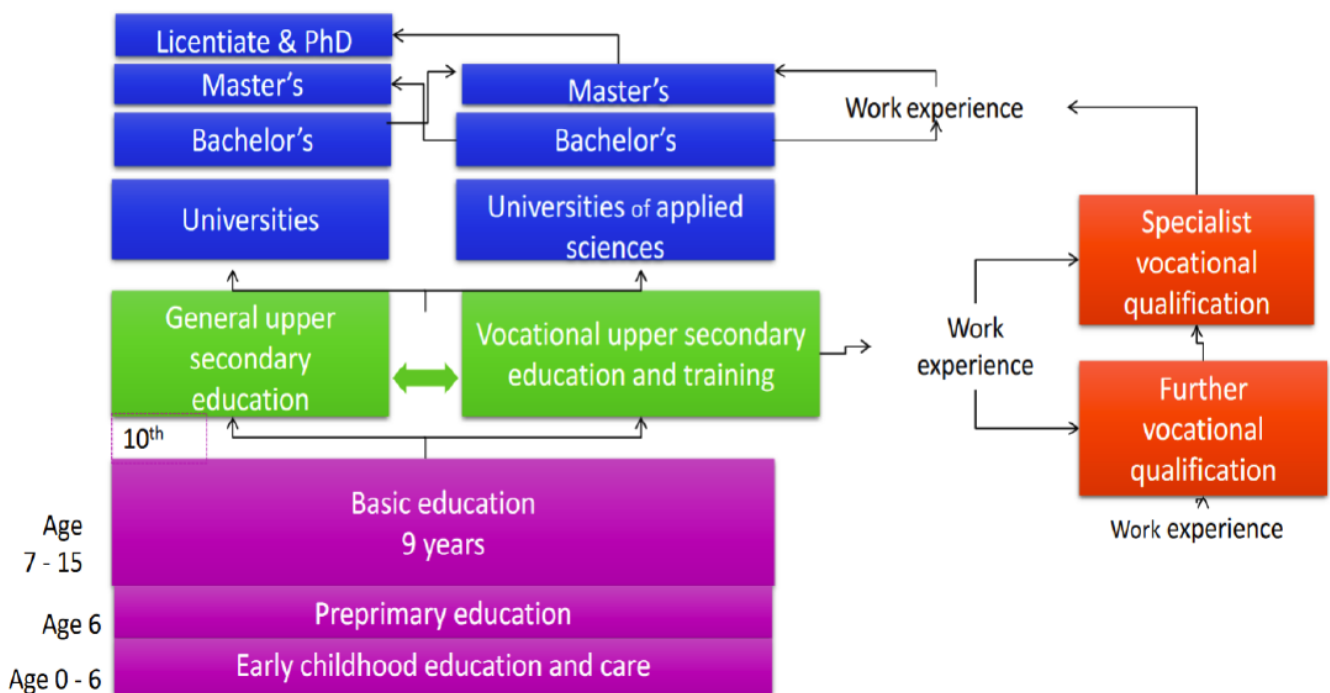
Finland is a high tax country with a cradle to the grave social welfare system. Finland's education reforms are based on the principles of equity, and wellbeing. Some features of Finland include:

- Independent from 1917 (previously part of Russia and Sweden)
- Heavy wars against Soviet Union and Germany during WW2
- Has large area with few people (5.5 million),
- Remote location with a language unique to the country
- Natural resources: forests and some minerals
- Is routinely identified as being one of the most stable and safest countries in the world
- Low level of corruption (voted 3rd least corrupt country)
- Education has always been important
- Equality and trust are key words in the society
- Finns read more books from the library than anywhere else
- Finland has the best overall education system in the world

Finland has transformed their education system from excellence to equity. Every child has equal access to a free public education delivered by highly qualified teachers at local public schools. There are very few private schools in Finland. There are no 'dead ends' in the pathway of a learner in Finland. It is consequently hard to drop out of the education system as there is early identification of at risk learners with welfare and support teams in each school.











Taking away the competition of getting into the 'right' schools or universities has allowed Finnish students to enjoy a less pressured youth.

Overview of the Finnish Education System



Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Results

The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows that Finland has the best PISA results compared to the money spent on the education.

THE MOST EFFICIENT EDUCATION SYSTEMS			Efficiency points	PISA-RANKING (Mathematics 2012)
Source: GEMS Education Solutions				
1	FINLAND		87,8	5
2	SOUTH KOREA		86,7	1
3	CZECH REPUBLIC		84,4	14
4	HUNGARY		84,1	24
5	JAPAN		83,9	2
6	NEW ZEALAND		83,3	12
7	SLOVENIA		83,3	10
8	AUSTRALIA		81,2	9
9	SWEDEN		80,6	23
10	ICELAND		79,4	17

Finland has scored very well in PISA assessments

Years 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015:

- Reading: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 6th, 4th
- Mathematics: 2nd, 2nd, 6th, 12th, 12th
- Science: 1st, 1st, 2nd, 5th, 5th
- Problem solving: 2nd (2003), 9th (2012)

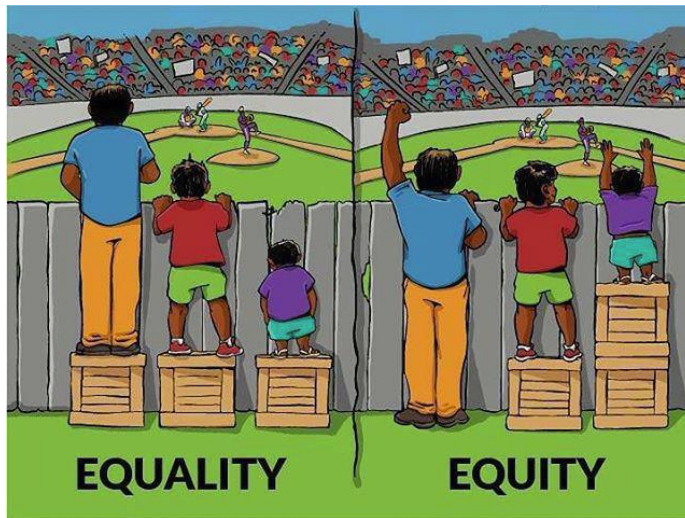
My observations in various schools highlighted the positive relationships that exist between the teachers and their students. Teachers and principals appeared to be less stressed and they were all enthusiastic and knowledgeable about their work. The schools appeared to be less hierarchical and consequently schools seemed more relaxed. Schools were also 'lean' in terms of management – often with only a principal and deputy principal as compared to the numerous middle management positions we have in many New Zealand schools.

Observations of basic education in Finland

- Education lasts nine years, between 7 and 16 years
- No gender-based schools: all schools have both boys and girls as students
- All schools follow a national core curriculum
- All schools are publicly funded, no tuition fees
- Only a few private schools, same curriculum, they also get public funding
- Schools do not select their students, no 'school shopping' - they attend local schools
- Learning results between schools do not differ significantly
- Strong respectful relationships between the teacher and students
- Second language learning is a feature - Finnish, Swedish, English
- Principals share ideas and support each other - 'The rising tide lifts all boats'
- Some teachers may 'follow' a class for the first 6 years

Equality and equity

Education is free at all levels, from pre-primary to higher education. Every pupil and student has a right to educational support. Special needs education is generally provided in conjunction with main stream education (inclusion). Efforts are made for supporting language minorities and migrants.



Less is more – child centred – focus on well being

School starts at the age of seven and there are relatively short school days. Homework is only for purposeful educational homework and takes no more than 10 – 15 minutes to complete. Schools have long vacations (13 weeks yearly). Education is based on the child’s development with the view that the potential of every individual should be maximised – learner centered pedagogy. During the first school years it is important to play and pupils are encouraged to work together. There is a clear focus on well being in Finnish schools with all children being served a free nutritious lunch at school and enjoying free access to health services until they turn 18 (dental, medical, psychologists and social workers). After every 45-minute lesson there is a 15-minute break. There is also at least one other 30-minute break every day.

The following is a typical timetable from a 4th Grade class (11 year old students):

	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI
8.15-9.00	Science		Finnish	Gym	
9.00-9.45	Math	English	Science	Gym	English
RECESS 30 minutes					
10.15-11.00	Finnish	Math	Math	Religion	Social studies
RECESS 15 min					
11.15-12.00	Finnish	Finnish	Finnish	Math	Music
SCHOOL LUNCH + RECESS 15 min					
12.30-13.15		Gym		Art	Optional subject
RECESS 15 min					
13.30-14.15		Crafts		Art	
14.15-15.00		Crafts			

The bulk of the teaching time is in the areas of mother tongue and literature. Strong emphasis is also given to arts, crafts, music and physical education. The next major areas are in the teaching of mathematics, environmental and natural studies. There is a big emphasis on hands on technology or

craft activities with schools having very well-equipped workshops for woodwork, metalwork and sewing. Home economic tasks such as cooking, ironing, cleaning and washing are also covered in school from 9 or 10 years of age.

The teaching profession in Finland

Teaching is seen as a high-status profession and an attractive career choice in Finland. It is rated in the top 10 happiest professions in Finland. Approximately 800-850 students apply each year to enter primary school teacher education programmes and only 5-10 percent of those are accepted into the post-graduate programme. Finland aims to accept applicants for teaching from right across the board, so that amongst the teachers there is a good mix of values, qualities and capabilities, making all schools great. Teachers are required to hold a Master's Degree. Teachers in the first six years of basic education are usually generalists, class teachers. At upper secondary level teachers are subject specialists or subject teachers.

Teachers have high autonomy in their work and based on the curriculum, teachers can decide:

- What they want to emphasise in their teaching
- When they teach certain topics
- How they teach them
- Where they teach them
- What methods they use in teaching
- Which subjects and topics they decide to integrate
- How they evaluate and assess learning
- How they want to collaborate with other teachers

There are no national tests with assessment being part of daily work. School inspections were removed in 1990. The teacher can decide the methods used in evaluation and assessment. Any assessments are for learning and teaching and the results of these assessments are not shared outside of the school. Pupils are encouraged to work together and help each other - competition has no big role in school work or between schools.

Principals' require the following qualifications:

- Higher academic (Master's) degree
- Teacher qualification
- Work experience as a teacher
- Certificate in educational administration

A Finnish principal's core task is to ensure that everything possible is done for the promotion of learning. The principal is seen as the pedagogical leader (leader of learning) and responsible for the development of school curriculum, self-assessment, school culture, human resources and the developing of a learning community. The principal liaises with the local municipality (who oversee schools) and is expected to be a future visionary by strategic planning and leading school development.

Once a teacher or principal is qualified, they retain that status for life unless dismissed.

Special needs in Finland

Finland's journey of inclusion started in the 1990s. It passed legislation in 1997 which revamped special education by allowing students with the most significant disabilities to join mainstream education. More than 95 percent of students with special needs, including those with severe conditions such as cerebral palsy, are in publicly-funded regular schools, also known as comprehensive schools, which take in students from the ages of 7 to 16. The number of students in special schools have fallen from

8,300 2007 to 4,400 last year. The percentage of students in segregated special schools in Finland is 0.8 percent. The Finnish system aims to provide equal opportunities for all children through three ways. At least 12 percent receive general support, while another 10 percent get intensified support, such as pull-out sessions, and another 8 per cent of pupils receive special, or more targeted help, like individual education plans. In addition:

- Each school has access to a special education teacher.
- Schools with over 300 pupils have a full-time teacher, while smaller schools share the services of a special education teacher.
- They work closely with class teachers to identify students in need of additional support and to provide such support.
- Each comprehensive school has a multi-agency care group comprising the principal, the special teacher, the school nurse, the school psychologist, a social worker and the teachers whose students are being discussed.

The focus on early identification begins long before children start school – there is a network of child health clinics (“neuvola”) providing regular assessments of the social, physical and mental development of babies and pre-school children. Multi-disciplinary teams comprising a nurse, doctor, speech therapist and psychologist make evaluations with the aim of identifying development risks. Finland has a commitment to inclusion:

- The emphasis is on early diagnosis and intervention to enable most students to succeed in mainstream schools and classes.
- Municipalities and schools must aim to include pupils with special needs in mainstream education and, if necessary, provide teaching for special needs education in small groups.
- Schools may only consider education in a special class or school where these approaches have not worked.

In Finland there are six state-owned special basic schools, primarily intended for young people with hearing or visual impairments or with a physical or other impairment. The schools act as national development centers providing expertise to other schools, and also offer temporary education and rehabilitation to pupils from other schools. Finland also has seven separate vocational special schools intended for students with the most severe disabilities or chronic illnesses.

Finland puts great emphasis on guidance and counselling with all pupils having access to it throughout their basic education. Guidance and counselling support those children in particular who have study difficulties or who are in danger of being excluded from education or working life following basic education. Guidance and counselling cover study skills and school life, self-knowledge, education and training options, occupations, occupational sectors and the world of work. Guidance practitioners at schools need a teacher’s qualification (Master’s degree) plus the guidance counsellors’ education and training.

Finnish schools have a student welfare group comprising of the principal, school psychologist, the school nurse and the special education teacher, class teacher/s, social worker and a student advisor. The group may meet weekly or monthly. This group integrates information about students and the school from different sources. It includes a focus on students who receive part-time special needs services, monitoring their progress in relation to their individual education plan.

Reasons for success in Finland

- Equality and equity
- ‘Less is more’
- Child-centered, focus on well-being
- Highly educated teaching personnel
- Strong relationships between teacher and learner
- High teacher autonomy
- Trust at every level
- No national tests
- Co-operation/collaboration instead of competition
- Continuous, science and experiment based development
- Quality assurance based on steering rather than controlling

Challenges for Finland

- Differences between boys and girls in performance (girls are outperforming boys)
- Municipalities are providing educational support for students unevenly
- Socio-economic differences between students are rising
- Costs in secondary education for students and families have risen (due to digital devices and materials)
- Funding of education

There is no doubt that the status of the teaching profession in each of these systems is one in which teachers and investment in education is highly valued. This appears to be in stark contrast to New Zealand.

9. Conclusion:

The opportunity to visit a range of Asian and Finnish schools, engage with other principals and educators in discussions about innovative practices, share and reflect on my own experiences and view programmes in action has enhanced my own professional leadership practice. Despite the cultural and geographical differences, we face many of the same challenges in our education systems.

In particular, the Finnish approach to education had the biggest impact on me – they operate a high trust model from the policy makers through to the principals. I also believe they have a more rigorous selection process ensuring that only the best applicants are trained as teachers and as a result the public has a high degree of trust in the education system. At the classroom level I found that the relationships between the teachers and students were ‘authentic’. Teachers and principals are passionate about their job and value the autonomy they have to develop programmes that best meet the needs of their schools and students. They also have a clear focus as a country as to where they are heading in education – this is a focus that New Zealand desperately needs as we seem to spend a lot of time and energy heading in different directions depending on which political party is driving change.

All of these school systems have an emphasis on second language learning and I believe that our students should be learning a second language in primary schools. As our country becomes more diverse it is becoming increasingly important for our students to have an understanding of other cultures and languages.

Personally, I found the sabbatical an extremely valuable opportunity to mix with colleagues from both the primary and secondary sectors and across a diverse range of schools. I am convinced that many of

the contacts made whilst on the study tour in Finland will be sustained longer term. Hopefully this sabbatical will also benefit my leadership team and the staff and students at Henley School. I have grouped my suggestions into those to be considered at a national (MOE or Government level), local and/regional (Kāhui Ako), school level and classroom level.

10. Recommendations:

For consideration at the national level:

- Compulsory second language learning for Year 0-6
- Eliminate 'dead ends' in our student learning pathways – track students intensively from Year 1-13
- State provided daily hot meal for all students
- Need to focus on equity
- Overhaul teacher education so that we are attracting the best we can to the profession – no compromises
- Ensure children attend their local school and trust in the system – could zoning achieve this?
- Random sample testing of students' understanding
- Adequate resourcing for special needs

For consideration at the local/regional (Kāhui Ako) level:

- Develop a local curriculum
- Share teachers across the Kāhui Ako
- Sample based testing instead of whole class/syndicate/school testing
- Collaboration rather than competition
- Teacher exchanges across the Kāhui Ako to best meet needs
- Welfare team for the Kāhui Ako

For consideration at the school leadership level:

- Offering a teacher exchange to Singapore to broaden classroom teachers' experience
- Restructuring lesson delivery to no more than 45 minutes followed by a 15-minute break
- Greater trust in the teaching profession
- Shift from evidence based to value-based decision making
- Set up and formalise a school welfare team
- Sample based testing instead of whole class/syndicate/school testing
- Greater emphasis on the local curriculum
- Resource a dedicated special needs teacher
- Teacher 'follows' the class for 6 years

For consideration at the classroom level:

- Restructuring lesson delivery to no more than 45 minutes followed by a 15-minute break
- More 'hands on' learning where possible (technology opportunities from age 7 upwards)
- Teacher follows the class for the first 6 years where possible
- Greater focus on building relationships with students
- Greater connection to the local environment

I plan to share the outcomes of this sabbatical report with the following audiences:

- Sabbatical Award Committee / Educational Leaders website
- Local MP's

- Henley School Board of Trustees/Community/Staff/Parents
- Waimea Kāhui Ako
- Nelson Bays Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour
- Local Principals' Cluster
- The New Zealand Educational Administration and Leadership Society (NZEALS)
- Other interested parties

I would also consider sharing with a wider audience or presenting at a conference.

11. Contact Details for the Author:

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Lining up for lunch in a Finnish School



Hands on construction - Finland



Strong connection to the local environment – Finland



Being ‘outdoors’ and close to nature is important - Finland