

Principal Sabbatical Report

Peter Hansen

**Kereru School
R.D. 1
Hastings**

Summary

I spent a month in Finland in April/May 2006 investigating reasons for the success of 15 year old Finnish students in the reading section of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) tests in 2003. I attempted to find out how programmes running in primary schools contributed to this result and identified other factors which may have helped.

Introduction

In August last year I read a *Dominion Post* article by American journalist Robert Kaiser (reprinted from the *Washington Post*)¹ which outlined the success of Finland's reforms and their part in reviving Finland's society, economy, social welfare systems, education and medical care. Kaiser's observations about Finland's educational reforms and the subsequent success of their 15 year olds in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) tests in 2003 made me wonder how they had achieved this. "Finland's education system prior to the reforms," wrote Kaiser, "was conservative and divisive: children were selected for an academic track at the end of fourth grade. Those chosen had no chance at higher education. Universities were few and mostly mediocre."

The reforms, led by Erkki Aho director –general of the National Board of Education, took place between 1972 and 1992, aimed to make the system fairer. Aho and his colleagues wanted schooling to be comprehensive, keeping children together in the same schools for nine years without tracking them by ability. The reformers believed the key to their proposals was teacher training. Teachers would be required to complete Masters' degrees which included both education courses and comprehensive work in subject areas with a powerful emphasis on literacy. Once trained, teachers would then be trusted to teach to the best of their ability without external checks.

I felt the Finnish success warranted further investigation so after some email exchanges with our newly married Finnish friends (I'd taught the bride, a New Zealander, for five years at our little Hawkes Bay country school; she went on to marry a Finnish man) who gave me contacts and assured us that we would love Finland, be welcomed by Finnish educationalists and would be able to communicate with them in English, I decided that Finland would be the place to visit for a sabbatical and some educational research.

When I submitted my proposal for a sabbatical I outlined how I wanted to identify:

- the factors that enabled Finnish 15 year olds to top the OECD triennial PISA test reading tables
- how reading programmes in Finnish schools are structured to enable children to become lifelong readers
- the methods of reading instruction and the materials used to teach reading
- how teacher training is structured in Finland
- how teacher training contributes to the success of Finnish students in the PISA test reading tables
- relationships between schools and their communities in rural areas
- how learning programmes are implemented and organised in multi-level classes

¹ Dominion Post August 22, 2005

The Reading Department

The beginning of Finnish literacy and their education system grew out of long years of being part of a Scandinavian kingdom dominated by Sweden for 300 – 500 years, then being linked to Tsarist Russia for over 100 years during the 19th century. During the Swedish period a certain level of literacy was demanded by some members of the clergy. They had “the power to refuse marriage to couples who could not read a catechism. This custom helps to explain why Finns became one of the most literate nations in the world long before mass literacy became the norm in later 19th century Europe.”²

Later, in the period of Tsarist rule, the Kalevala, the national epic of Finland including thousands of verses of the old tales, poems and songs which had been sung for many centuries, was first published. This helped feed a growing sense of national identity which coupled with the establishment of sawmills, a fledgling textile industry and the development of a working class who established schools in their villages, led prominent Finnish leader and nationalist JV Snellman (1806 – 1881) to declare “that the strength of a nation lay not only in its material strength. Education is also power...not the least because it makes a nation an integral part of a civilised world.”³ Snellman was an enthusiastic and influential promoter of Finnish national interests in language, culture, politics, economics and administration and was integral in the spread of the Finnish language through the education system in the 1850's and in Finland gaining virtual independence from Russia towards the end of the 19th century.

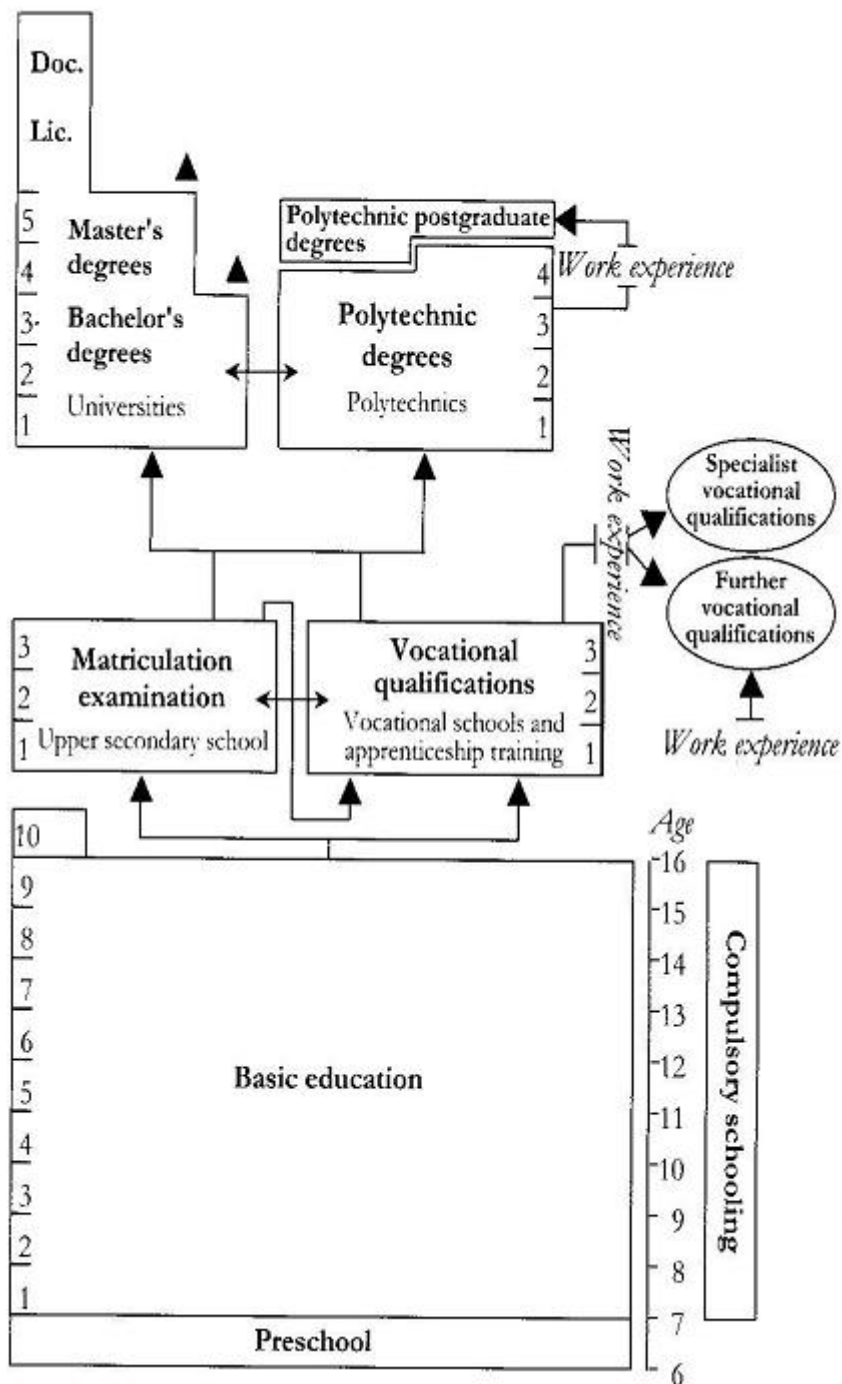
His legacy is reflected in the emphasis and importance Finns still place on literacy.

Since the reforms of the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's, the Finnish school system is designed to give equal opportunities to everyone regardless of the social background, location or mother tongue (Finland is officially a bi-lingual country with Swedish being the other official language). Education is financed almost entirely through public funding. Contributions from the state average 57% while municipal contributions account for the other 43%. At a local level the municipalities play a prominent role as education providers. Areas of the curriculum which they see as important can also be given emphasis. There are no school fees, textbooks and other learning materials and equipment are provided free of charge, as is the daily school lunch, and children who live further than three kilometres from school are transported free of charge. Comprehensive, free pre-school education is available to all six year olds before they begin school at age seven. Basic education lasts for nine years before children enter general upper secondary education or vocational upper secondary education and training.

² Singleton, Fred (1989) *A Short History of Finland* Cambridge University Press

³ *ibid*

The Education System of Finland



In the pre-school year Finnish children are exposed to an “emerging literacy” programme which lays the foundations for learning to read and write. This involves children in opportunities to listen and speak in a wide variety of situations all designed to enhance children’s linguistic awareness. With 98% of six year olds (2002) participating in pre-school education and the close co-operation between pre-school and basic education, children are given every opportunity to develop a grasp of literacy skills.

As children begin to read and write at the commencement of their basic education at age seven, seventy percent of the lesson hours they receive at school in each of their first two years are devoted to the teaching of mother tongue and literature. From the third year at school (which starts at approximately nine years of age) the number of hours can be reduced step by step but schools have a right to distribute these lesson hours as they wish because the hours are viewed as a minimum requirement.

DISTRIBUTION OF LESSON HOURS IN BASIC EDUCATION PROVIDED TO PUPILS IN COMPULSORY SCHOOL AGE

Subject groups, subjects	Minimum weekly lessons									total / year	
	per year ¹ from the date of commencement of instruction or the preceding point of lesson-hour determination Grades										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9		
Mother tongue and literature	14		14			14				42	
Language starting during grades 1-6 (A-language)	-		8			8				16	
Language starting during grades 7-9 (B-language)	-		-			6				6	
Mathematics	6		12			14				32	
Environmental and natural studies	9									31	
Environmental studies						3		7			
Biology and geography						2		7			
Physics and chemistry											
Health education						3					
Religion or ethics	6					5				11	
History and social studies						3		7		10	
Arts, crafts, and physical education	26					30				56	
Music	4					3					
Visual arts	4					4					
Crafts	4					7					
Physical education	8					10					
Home economics						3				3	
Educational and vocational guidance	-					2				2	
Optional subjects						13				13	
Voluntary A-language						6			6		12

Interestingly, although no formal instruction in reading is given during the pre-school year, approximately half of Finnish children are able to read on entering school. Children have acquired this skill from various sources: exposure to reading at home, pre-school, Finnish language captions on television etc. Prior to pre-school education being emphasised and freely available, only one third of children entering school had this skill. At the completion of the first two years of schooling children are expected to be able to read "rather fluently", to be able to understand easy and clear text, to find facts in material written for their age group, to follow and understand the plot of a story, to find answers to "what" questions and some "why" questions and to make conclusions based on the text.

Finnish children are aided by the fact that, as Bill Bryson points out in *Mother Tongue*, “in some languages such as Finnish there is a neat one to one correspondence between sound and spelling. A “k” is always k, an “l” eternally and comfortably l.”⁴ The consistency of this grapheme-phoneme correspondence assists Finnish children to get a quick start both with reading and spelling. However as Bryson points out, “Finnish has 15 case forms so every noun varies depending on whether it is nominative, accusative, allative, inessive, commutative or one of ten other grammatical conditions. Imagine learning fifteen ways of spelling cat, dog, house, and so on.”⁵ So, as Finnish children’s language skills grow, the challenges increase too. An example provided by Pirjo Sinko of the FNBE (Finnish National Board of Education) illustrates the challenge. The English phrase “also in our house” becomes talossammekin (kin = also, mme = our, ssa = in, talo = house) which she classes as one of the “long bending words” found in the Finnish language.

When children reach the end of fifth grade (eleven years) it is expected that they will have learned the fundamental skills in the language and become fluent readers with deeper reading comprehension and information-gathering skills. They will have had exposure to a wide range of reading experiences and had opportunities to discuss these and to use their reading skills for “both benefit and fun” as well as developing a raft of other reading-associated language skills.

Information about learning achievements is gathered through sample surveys, one of them being the PISA tests. In every other year since 1999 there has been a national survey for 6th graders. Recently a survey to be done at the end of the second year of schooling has been instituted.

Schools are made aware of their standing so they can look at ways of improving their performance but no league tables or ranking lists are compiled.

Pirjo Sinko, Counsellor of Education at the Finnish National Board of Education and co-ordinator of the Reading Finland (2001 – 2004) project, states that the main factor contributing to the success of Finnish children in reading is due to the school system. “The school system,” she says, “is not a testing culture but one of trust.”⁶ Finnish schools have teachers with a high level of competence because of their theoretical knowledge and their practical, research-based training. Teachers are also held in high esteem by the wider community. They are trusted to do their job with a high level of competence. As there is no form of school inspection, schools devise their own methods of self evaluation and improvement and establish objectives for the growth and learning of their pupils. An Evaluation Council for Education and Training has been operating in conjunction with the Ministry of Education since 2003. It is responsible for co-ordinating, managing and developing the evaluation of basic education and upper secondary education and training.

⁴ Bryson, Bill (1991) *Mother Tongue* p.78 England: Penguin Books

⁵ Ibid p.26

⁶ Sinko, Pirjo (2005) *Early Reading and Writing in the Finnish School System* Helsinki: Finnish National Board of Education

Sinko also identifies the fact that Finland has been called a land of readers as a factor in its high levels of literacy. This is borne out by the fact that daily newspapers are heavily subscribed to; the number of books published annually is high compared to the population and parents know the importance of reading to children and discussing stories with them. Finland is reputed to have one of the world's best library systems – each Finn borrows 21 library books on average, every year⁷. The cold, bleak winter with its long nights is also cited as a reason why Finns read so enthusiastically. Another fascinating assertion is the fact that television helps reading. Many programmes broadcast on Finnish television are foreign in origin. Instead of dubbing, Finnish sub-titles are used. Anecdotal evidence suggests that quick reading is encouraged along with comprehension, and that watching television with Finnish subtitles is assisting children to become better readers.

Most of the reading programmes in the five Finnish schools I visited were based on textbooks. Schools choose their own textbooks designed to fit the core curriculum which gives basic guidelines and main elements of subject syllabi which can be modified by municipalities and schools. The National Board of Education works with the Ministry of Education to develop the educational aims content and methods for all levels of education. Each of the six Finnish provinces has an Education and Culture Department that deals with these issues. Study materials are chosen by the schools. Publishers participate when curriculum guidelines are prepared so that the materials they publish will be in line with the guidelines in the core curriculum.

Finnish methods of teaching reading appear to be similar to those used in New Zealand. I saw class lessons based on a particular text; role play based on a novel the class had read and discussed; information gathering for a topic; and analysis of language and how it is used. Teachers gave me this information before and after the lessons which were in Finnish. Teachers were generally enthusiastic about getting children interested and confident about reading and raising their awareness and appreciation of literature.

Some projects currently underway in Finnish schools are:

- upgrading school libraries
- integrating computers and the internet into school library systems
- visits of authors to schools
- teachers sharing new ideas and good practice
- using more effective learning methods like reading in pairs, reading portfolios and desk top publishing of children's own books
- transforming texts into pictures, comic strips, drama or video

Early intervention programmes for children struggling with reading and writing are important in Finnish schools. Diagnosis of children with learning difficulties is done early and the co-operation of parents, teachers and other experts is enlisted to provide support programmes which may be run by classroom teachers or teachers trained in special needs education, Professor Jarkko

⁷ Ibid p.22

Hautamaki Dean of Special Education in the Department of Applied Sciences of Education at the University of Helsinki told me. As well as reading, writing, mathematics and speech are the other areas highlighted for extra support in the primary years. Providing help for learners with extra needs is seen as fulfilling the strong Nordic sense of equality. "Also," the professor said, "it doesn't matter which school children attend as there is only a maximum 6-7% difference between schools and most differences are due to the pupils, not the schools." He pointed out that a small immigrant population, the homogeneity of Finland's population and that the absence of huge disparities between rich and poor apparent in many Western countries also contributed to Finland's educational success.

Teacher Training

"Teachers, teachers, teachers," proclaims the headmistress of a school near Helsinki giving her explanation of why Finland has the best education system in the world. This pronouncement was made in the Charlemagne column of *The Economist* (25 March 2006).

Educationalists and teachers I met, strongly agreed that Finland's teacher training system was undoubtedly the key to Finland's exceptionally high ranking in the education world.

The respect for, and importance of teachers, was a recurring theme throughout my sabbatical. The two professors I spoke to at the University of Helsinki affirmed this and it was reiterated by teachers in the schools I visited. Teachers, they all agreed, are seen as the embodiment of the Finnish ideals of duty and obligation where the communal good is seen to override individualism. Teachers have the trust of the community, the education system, the education hierarchy, their pupils and their parents.

The high status of teachers starts with the process of selection for teacher training. This year's (2006) intake of 150 trainees into the teacher education training programme run by the University of Helsinki was selected from approximately 1300 applicants, Professor Matti Meri, the Director of the Department of Applied Sciences of Education told me. Other university teacher training programmes are also very selective. "Approximately 12% of applicants are selected for the teacher training programmes of the seven universities across Finland," the professor added.

Applicants face a rigorous selection process. After sitting a paper which tests their thinking, applicants are interviewed by a panel which assesses the suitability of the candidate for a teaching career. The third part of the selection process sees groups of five applicants solving a pedagogical problem over a timed period. During this time observers monitor interaction in the group, look at how well people listen, how arguments are put and responded to, their tolerance and ability to reason, and the cognitive schema that evolves.

Generally, teacher training takes five years. Teachers emerge with Masters' degrees. During their training they have completed extensive academic training with an emphasis on educational practice and educational psychology as well as observation of teachers and classes in action. They will have had approximately six months teaching practice in a wide variety of situations in the training schools linked to the university's teacher training programme. All facets of the programme place emphasis on the teaching of literacy which ultimately contributes to the success of Finnish children in the PISA tests.

The thirteen teacher training schools in Finland are all attached to the faculties of education at the universities which provide teacher education training programmes. These schools are the only schools where teachers train. The teacher training schools have five primary duties:

- Providing teaching for the comprehensive and upper secondary levels
- Supervision of teacher trainees
- Teaching experiments
- Research
- Continuing education

The publication *Teacher Education and Teacher Training Schools* explains that the teacher training schools ensure teacher trainees receive the best training by having higher qualification requirements for teachers at these schools than in ordinary schools. In addition to their Master's degree and general teaching requirements, teachers in the training schools must have completed at least thirty five credit units worth of studies in education or the equivalent, and have a minimum of two years full-time teaching experience. Sometimes, applicants for jobs in teacher training schools are required to give a demonstration of their teaching skills.

Teacher training schools are also responsible for the continuing education of teachers. While the teacher participates in the teacher education programme the teacher trainee will replace that teacher at his or her school and be supervised by the teachers there while gaining some practical experience.

In the teacher education programme at the University of Helsinki, Matti Meri told me, they strive to achieve a balanced development of the teacher's personality in which the teacher's thinking is essential. "In the programme," he said, "we research what we teach and we teach what we research." Research findings are fed back through the teacher training and education networks to help children in Finland's schools. Teachers and children benefit with current research on reading and literacy being readily available and able to be implemented into school programmes.

The Department of Applied Sciences of Education's introductory publication explains that the core aspects of the teacher degrees are knowledge and understanding of the nature of children and young people, and in-depth knowledge of their own field as well as social and global consciousness. It goes on to point out that the bases of teachers' expertise are study skills, skills for researching and developing own work and skills for producing new knowledge. Emphasis is also put on general skills such as co-operation,

communication and ICT skills as well as language skills, cultural knowledge and international openness.

Teachers who train to teach in the first six years of education (7-13 years) and become class teachers are known as generalists. During their training they develop a versatile expertise which includes a collective working culture and action culture, different working methods and argumentation skills. At the next level teachers are subject teachers and have completed their Masters degree in the subject they teach as well as the pedagogical studies.

Teacher training schools also conduct experiments and carry out research designed to foster analytical and innovative attitudes. Teacher trainees participate in these areas in addition to curriculum planning, student evaluation, student counselling, administrative duties and other everyday aspects of school life. At present, emphasis is being given to research into different learning environments, individualisation of teaching, science and technology education, environmental education, foreign languages, communication studies and international education. The structure of the school system is also under scrutiny with projects investigating non-graded schools with no year divisions and flexible admission to primary education.

Much thought is being given to teachers taking a class right through the first six years of education (7 – 13 years). Researchers and educators can see many benefits arising from this, the main one being continuity of instruction and the detailed knowledge of children in their care that teachers take with them from year to year. Already in some schools this is an option which is taken. It is seen to be particularly beneficial in reading programmes where teachers build an intimate knowledge of children's learning needs from year to year. This mirrors my own experience where children at Kereru School have two teachers as they progress through the school. Both teachers develop an intimate knowledge of each child's learning during the eight years the child is at our school. Individual learning needs can be catered for readily because of the body of knowledge and understanding about the child's learning built up over a period of time.

I visited five schools of varying sizes in Finland. The largest of the schools was Helsinki Normal School, a teacher training school with approximately 900 pupils from 7 – 16 years. In Rovaniemi, on the Arctic Circle, I visited another teacher training school, Rantivitikan Peruskoulu, and a five teacher school, Vurinkankaan Koulu. I spent two days in different classes at Sarkola School a medium sized (200+ children from the ages of seven to thirteen) school in Kouvola, a city of thirty thousand, three hours east of Helsinki.

The teachers in the five schools I visited were all enthusiastic and knowledgeable about their work. They were conscious of the trust the community has in them to do their job to the best of their ability. They were committed to doing the best for the children in their care. Collegiality and co-operation were evident and there was no obviously hierarchical structure. Principals had their leadership role but were very much part of the team in all areas of school life.

Generalist teachers also swap classes for different subjects. At Sarkola School one of the teachers taught children how to play the kantele (Finnish traditional harp), took physical education classes, taught computers and had his home class. Other teachers swapped classes for history, music and religion.

There is a big emphasis on manual/technology/craft training. Each of the five schools I visited (bar the two teacher school) had a very well equipped workshop for woodwork and metalwork, a textile room with the latest computerised sewing machines and associated equipment, and a similarly well equipped room where children learn “how to live” doing tasks like cooking, ironing, cleaning and washing. Children begin this part of their learning at 9 or 10 years of age.

Although I had no direct involvement in observing teacher training or investigating it in a detailed manner, the teacher training schools I visited in Helsinki and Rovaniemi were vibrant, well-appointed schools with a clear sense of direction and purpose. This reflects the clarity of purpose of the whole teacher training system where the connection between the teacher training schools, the departments of teacher education and other university departments is all geared to assisting trainees to apply theoretical knowledge to practice right from the start.

With the emphasis given to Mother tongue and literature in the new curriculum, teacher training programmes stress the pedagogy underpinning this area of teaching. Programmes contain specific sectional objectives, core contents and a description of good performance for each of them. Well-equipped teachers are then able to put their knowledge into practice in the classroom and assist children to reach high levels of achievement in reading. This is an important key to the eventual success of Finnish fifteen year olds in the PISA tests. Clear goals of key competencies for teachers, a well structured programme to achieve this, and the support and trust of the community at large all contribute to the success of 15 year old Finnish students in not only the reading section of the PISA tests, but also in mathematics and science, and are testimony to the effectiveness of Finland’s teacher education programme and the teachers it produces.

Rural Education

Funnily enough, the only rural school I was able to visit in Finland was threatened with closure.

Sorkka School, a two teacher, 34 pupil school, was one of six schools in the Rauma area which the municipality was considering closing. The reasons for this sounded eerily familiar. Too many schools in the area, falling rolls and the lack of funds were cited as reasons supporting the plan to close the schools.

Sorkka School had arrived at a novel approach to support its retention as a functioning school. It is 120 years old and unique because all of the exterior and much of the interior is still in original condition. The community had decided to attempt to have their school listed as a World Heritage site arguing that it would fit well with the wonderful UNESCO historic Old Town site in Rauma, twenty minutes away by road.

I'd made the two and a half hour trip from Helsinki to Rauma with Pekka Elo, a senior adviser with the Finnish National Board of Education who also has responsibility for UNESCO World Heritage sites as part of his job description. Pekka was liaising with the school community and World Heritage authorities and offered me the opportunity to visit the school and, as he described it, "a living World Heritage site, for Old Rauma is the largest wooden town preserved in original condition in the Nordic countries."

On arrival at Sorkka School we were greeted warmly by the principal, Jyrki Aikko, members of the local community and a reporter and photographer from the local paper. While the latter two interviewed Pekka, Jyrki took me into the school for a tour and a discussion about how his school works.

I immediately felt at home. The parallels with Kereru School were soon apparent. The principal was strongly committed to the benefits of education in small schools citing the continuity of education, the community support and the family atmosphere as positive factors at Sorkka School.

There are many similarities. Their approach to multi-level teaching is nearly identical to New Zealand's. Grouping is used in most subject areas. He told me that a large part of the success of their Mother tongue and literature programme was the on-going training he had received through the teacher training schools. He felt that the continuity of instruction children receive through having the same teacher for several years plays a large part in the success of Finnish fifteen year olds in PISA reading tests. He also agreed that the strong reading culture in Finnish society allied to sound teaching programmes and well informed research were integral to the high level of literacy found amongst Finnish children.

Children at Sorkka School have many learning experiences where there is a whole school focus. One of these was the school garden where children and staff work together to raise vegetable and flower seedlings in a glasshouse then grow, harvest, cook and eat the resulting produce. The day we visited, the other teacher had taken most of the school on an educational visit which would be followed by a unit based on their learning and experiences.

Integrated learning is an important part of children's education at Sorkka School. The curriculum, as in other Finnish schools, is designed to fit the needs of the children and the local community and follows the national guidelines for the allocation of lesson hours. The principal told me that their funding is provided by local and national sources as outlined earlier in this report. He also mentioned that there is a degree of local financial support from

the school community but I was unable to find out the level of this or how it was gathered.

There is strong community support for the school. Parents are involved in maintaining the property and buildings, and in many of the out-of-class learning experiences. In Finland they have a system called “talkoot” which is similar to a New Zealand working bee. Talkoot is a group of people gathering to work together. The work is done voluntarily and Jyrki said that because of the unspoken commitment implied by a talkoot, participation is very high and failure to attend and contribute can lead to damage to a person’s reputation and honour. He said the neat and tidy appearance of the school and grounds and the strong support to retain the school attested to the success of this system.

Later, over the lunch they provided, I met one of the parents leading the campaign to keep the school open. He said he was an “electric man” (electrician), a former pupil, and his father had also attended the school so, like New Zealand, strong family ties are often evident in small schools. He explained, through Pekka, how the community were pressuring the municipality to keep the school open and then showed us the placards, made by the parents and children, that were going to be taken to the “keep our schools open” demonstration in Rauma the following day. On the trip back to Helsinki Pekka reckoned that although the school would not be declared a World Heritage site the people had demonstrated sufficient positive evidence about their school to convince the municipality to leave it off its list of schools to be closed.

Both the parents and Jyrki, the principal, extolled the virtues of small schools, their sense of community, the vital social and academic learning that takes place and the sense of belonging and worth children receive from being part of a well run, community-supported small school. It sounded very similar to the chairman of our Kereru School Board of Trustees applauding the virtues of our school in his annual report to parents.

Summary

Below are the factors which help Finnish 15 year olds to top the OECD triennial PISA tests –

- Finnish society’s strong reading culture
- High rates of library membership and borrowing coupled with high rates of readership of daily papers
- Subtitles on foreign television programmes expose children to reading from an early age
- There are many bookshops in Finland which stock a variety of publications mainly in Finnish, but also in English. A vast number of books are translated into Finnish. Bookshops are well patronised by buyers and browsers. Stockmann’s in Helsinki was full of people on all my visits which reflect, I would think, a society thoroughly steeped in the habit of reading.

- Pre-school literacy awareness programmes develop children's literacy so they are receptive when they begin formal instruction in Mother tongue and literature when they enter formal schooling at age seven.
- Finnish children's reading is assisted initially by a language that uses one sound for each letter and lacks the multiplicity of sounds and blends contained in the English language.
- The co-operation between curriculum designers and the publishers of instructional reading materials
- The key link to the high level of literacy is well-trained teachers. Teachers with a high degree of pedagogical competency translate into students with a high level of literacy.

Vital factors which contribute to the success of Finland's education system:

- The whole teacher training system had a clarity of purpose where the connection between the teacher training schools, the departments of teacher education and other university departments is all geared to assisting trainees towards the practical application of theoretical knowledge from the start of their training
- A rigorous selection process for candidates to be trained as teachers
- The continuing teacher education programmes run by the teacher training schools
- The research programmes run by the universities and teacher training schools and the dissemination of information from these to teachers
- Finally, the key link is the high regard for, and trust that the community at large has for teachers who have clear goals of key competencies, well structured programmes and use a high level of professional collegiality and co-operation to achieve these

Acknowledgements

I'd like to acknowledge the wonderful help I had from Lucy Laitinen and her husband Harri. They looked after Sally and me in brilliant fashion in Helsinki and made sure we felt thoroughly at home. Lucy did a fantastic job in finding people for me to meet and schools to visit and then arranging convenient times for me to visit these people and schools. Without Lucy none of my sabbatical would have been possible.

Harri's parents, Anita and Kari, provided us with superb hospitality in Kouvola. Anita let me observe in her classroom at Sarkola School and arranged for my visit there. The staff at Sarkola School, and the principal, Aino Karhos, made me very welcome and were kind enough to chat to me about their school, their work and education in general. As well as letting me observe lessons in their classrooms I was also able to play pesapallo (Finnish baseball) with the children during physical education lessons.

In Rovaniemi, Jorma Turunen at Vurinkankaan Koulu met us and made us very welcome. His principal Liisa Ketola, was happy to let me wander in and out of classrooms and talk about Finnish education. Jorma's wife, Tuija, from the Early Years Education Faculty at the University of Lapland, was informative about her specialist area.

Esa Pasma, the principal, and Anne Lastila were lively and helpful at Rantavitikan Peruskoulu. Thanks Esa for the opportunity to attempt to teach your maths class about area in english!

Pirkko Manner the principal of Viiki Teacher Training School in Helsinki was a charming and informative host.

Jyrki Aikko and his community representatives gave me a very warm welcome at Sorkka School near Rauma and were happy to meet someone else who shared their views on small schools.

Pirjo Sinko, Counsellor of Education at the Finnish National Board of Education, gave me an excellent insight into reading in Finnish schools and was kind enough to give me a copy of her paper Early Reading and Writing in the Finnish School System and a printout of her presentation to the 3rd International Conference on Reading and Writing in Morelia, Mexico, earlier this year. I am indebted to her for letting me draw much of my information from her two papers.

At the University of Helsinki Professor Jarkko Hautamaki gave me an eloquent overview of the development of Finnish education. I hope my recount is largely accurate. Professor Matti Meri was very helpful in outlining the principles which underpin teacher training at the University.

Pekka Elo, a Senior Adviser for the Finnish National Board of Education, very kindly took me to Sorkka School, and the two UNESCO World Heritage sites in the Rauma area. He was another excellent host with lots of information.

I'm grateful to the Ministry of Education for giving me the opportunity to have a sabbatical. It was a great experience. I'd also like to acknowledge the Kereru School Board of Trustees for their support with my application and their willingness to let me go for a term. Loti Hensman who was the Acting Principal during the term I was on sabbatical, did a tremendous job. Ray Mettrick who taught my class gets a vote of thanks too for his energy and commitment for the term he was at Kereru.

Finally I'd like to thank all of the people above for being so tolerant of my mono-lingual status. It made me feel very humble that I could travel more or less to the other end of the world and be understood because the people there had taken the trouble to learn a language other than their native tongue. I'm sure that I would have gained many more insights and developed better understandings had I been able to speak Finnish.

I'd also like to thank my wife Sally who came to the schools with me and helped me gather information and observe what was going on. She made many valuable contributions as well as being good company.

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