

Sabbatical Report: Peter Knowles

Early Education in Finland

As most New Zealand educators, I was aware of the amazing educational outcomes Finland are achieving; Finland's results in various educational and student rankings, play based learning, children starting school at seven years of age, the huge respect for the teaching profession and so on.

The opportunity to experience first-hand the Finnish education system, especially the early childhood and primary equivalents was exciting, with a view to use aspects of their system to enhance the educational outcomes for the students in the school I was principal of in New Zealand.

Over the week I spent in Helsinki, Finland, I interviewed Early Childhood and Primary Teachers and spent two days in Drumso Lagstadieskola school situated in Luttasaari, a suburb of Helsinki.

New Zealand and Finland have many similarities. Our populations are similar (NZ 4.794 million, Finland 5.503 million), in some areas our physical landscapes are similar and also similar amounts are spent on education. According NCE Condition of Education May 2018, New Zealand spent \$9100us FTE student for elementary and secondary in 2014 and Finland spent \$9800us.

Where New Zealand is multicultural, Finland could be described as mono cultural. The majority of the population are Finn speaking, with a sub group speaking Swedish Finn as well as a small percentage of Sami, in the North from the original Inuit inhabitants.

Finland has cold, harsh winters, with heavy snow and long periods with very little sun. Rivers, lakes and even the seas freeze over.

Reported crime rates in Finland, especially aggravated crimes such as violence or rape are far lower than New Zealand, although homicides are little higher. (Maybe due to long the winters?)

Alcohol consumption in New Zealand and Finland per capita is very similar, but with major difference in outcomes. New Zealand has 1.82% of its population with alcohol use disorders whereas Finland has 2.86% (Our World Data April 2018). Death rates from alcohol use disorders show New Zealand were .94 per 1000 and Finland 7.4 per 1000 (Our World Data April 2018). These figures support the popular belief that Finland has alcohol consumption problems, but it should be noted that New Zealand has far more crimes related to alcohol, 30% compared to Finlands .8%, and more road traffic deaths attributed to alcohol with 31% to Finland's 22% (Our World Data April 2018).

Although the average monthly after-tax salaries are similar (Finland \$2547 us, NZ \$2454 us (NUMBEO)), Finland has an extremely high personal taxation rate of 51.6% compared to New Zealand's 33% (Trading Economic Dec/18).

Finland has a higher unemployment rate of 5.4%, compared to New Zealand 4.5% (Trading Economic Dec /18).

I found it interesting that the Finnish people still support National Conscription. In a National referendum held recently, the continuation of Nation Conscription was upheld by a large majority. All men between the ages of 18 to 60 are liable for military service, while it is voluntary for females. Between the ages of 18

and 28, men must complete their basic training at a time that suits them. Once trained, they attend regular exercises.

Finnish culture builds upon heritage, traditions, egalitarianism and the ideal of self-sufficiency. It is understandable to see how these beliefs are necessary, with a history of warfare, being invaded by neighbouring countries, the long hard winters with little sun and constant sub-zero temperatures and the ever present fear they have in sharing a boarder with Russia.

The Finnish people work for common goals and believe everyone must play their part, have huge national pride, are extremely self-reliant and self-motivated. It has an extremely high trust model of life, which can be seen as very conformist. The people have an acceptance of rules and regulations and tend not to push them if they see there is a common goal for their good.

With this in mind, their education system reflects their cultural attitudes.

The Finnish Education System is public funded and designed to select and track (stream) students during their basic education.

- Day Care
- Pre School: Compulsory for one year from 6 years of age.
- Comprehensive: Compulsory for 9 years from 7 years of age.
- Post Compulsory Secondary (Academic or Vocational): Non-Compulsory for 3 years
- Tertiary (University or Polytech): Non-Compulsory

After their Comprehensive Education the students set National Exams, which dictates the course the students take from then on.

As my area of study was, Pre School and Comprehensive School to Grade 6. I will discuss these in more detail.

Pre School

Pre School or Pre-Primary education is compulsory and free from the age of six years until the age seven years. Children start their Pre-Primary Education in autumn of the they turn six and will start Primary education in autumn of the year they turn seven

Class sizes, on average, are 8 students to a teacher and their school day is usually from 9am until 1pm. Content varies but is based on a local curriculum drawn up within the framework of the Nation Core Curriculum.

Literacy flows through all activities and with knowledge and use of their 'Mother Tongue' as well as formation of social skills through craft and physical activity are core.

Pre Schools prepare the children for Primary school by fostering a joy for learning, developing self-confidence,

The skills of concentration, ability to focus, when and where to ask for help, self-confidence and socialisation, especially forming and sustaining relationships are paramount.

There is no pre-requisite that the children must be able to read and write when they enter Primary School. Many can, and many can't.

There is large a amount of collaborate planning in the Pre-Primary area, between the teachers and parent, within the constraints of the curriculum. Individual programmes are common and continually reviewed. The child's development is at the heart of all they do in their aim for the child to be prepared for their Primary Education.

The play, although seeming loose, is planned and every opportunity is taken to relate it to knowledge, especially scientific, at a level suitable for the age of the children, as well as that literacy is everywhere.

Comprehensive School

Children enter Primary Education in the autumn of the year they turn seven years of age.

The school day is made of periods of learning and play breaks, with these periods increasing in number as they get older.

Lesson per week during Comprehensive School.

Grades	Ages	Lessons per Week
1-2	7-8	19
3	9	22
4	10	24
5-6	11-12	25
7-8	13-14	29
9	15 +	30

The teachers have freedom on how they facilitate teaching of the objectives of the Finnish Curriculum and usually there is less cooperative planning with parents than is found in Pre-Primary education.

New entrants start school with highly developed social skills and are keen to learn. Their academic knowledge varies. From my observation, the new entrants in Finland were similar to entrants in New Zealand academically.

Most schools offer parents the opportunity for their children to be taught in Finnish, Finnish and Swedish or Finnish and English.

In basic education all children study following subjects:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mother tongue and literature (Finnish or Swedish) • the other national language (Swedish or Finnish) • foreign languages • environmental studies • health education • religion or ethics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • history • social studies • mathematics • physics • chemistry • biology • geography 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • physical education • music • visual arts • craft • home economics • optional studies
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The lessons I observed were well planned, topical and fast paced. Each set period of work was of about 45mins duration and followed by a play break or free cooked lunch. This system was used from the new entrants to the Year 7 & 8 children. The teachers do not plan the lesson to be 'fun and exciting' for their students, but topical and meaningful, with the belief that certain skills or knowledge needed to be taught was the overriding opinion.

Play at the Primary schools is seen as high priority. At all levels the students have many play breaks where they all leave the classroom and are involved in some sort of physical activity. Although there are no organised games set up for the children, they are expected to be active. It was interesting to note that the students continue this play routine throughout the winter months even in sub-zero temperatures and very heavy snow. The students only stay in class during play times due to heavy rain, as it affects the insulation qualities for their clothing.

All classes or blocks have areas for changing into outside clothes and the children are very proficient at changing quickly to and from their outside clothes.

The School doors were unlocked and opened at 8.10am and the class lesson started at 8.15am. At the school I visited the students had varying timetables. Most classes started at either 8.15am or 9.00am. Within a class, the teacher would organise who started when based on needs. Some of the class may start at 8.15am for reinforcement or focused teaching on a certain curriculum area, while the rest of the class would start at 9.00am. Over the week all students had two days that they would start at 8.15am and two when they would start at 9.00am. The teacher monitored this start times closely, with groups changing on a regular basis depending on subject and topics evaluations. On certain days the different classes started at different times depending on their timetable or school and class specific events. For instance, in a Year 7&8 class the students and teacher did not start until 10am on Friday.

In the area I was in, Helsinki, I shared the underground trains with children as young as seven on their way to school with no parent support.

Also, with varied finishing times of the schools, children would find their own way home, through the underground system or public buses, or to the afterschool care facility.

Due to differing finishing times of ages at schools, there are many 'After School' providers for the children. Many are privately operated and provide facilities for children to participate in organised activities, free play and revision or reinforcement school work.

Asukaspuistots are run by the city or municipality and are free. These are usually associated with large residential areas, and provide adult supervisors, food and areas for play both indoors and outdoors. Many of these operate in the morning before school as well.

The two important transition areas, Pre School to Primary and Primary and to Secondary have high priority in the Finnish system.

Detailed reports of each child are written by teachers, which are transferred to the new institution, usually in conference form. Students who have been identified as having 'Learning Needs' or 'Struggling' to achieve have the opportunity to get education Psychologists to work with the them and the schools to ensure a smooth transition. This is State funded and involves observations and conferences. The Psychologists are involved in the transition meetings and help formulate individual education plans for the students which are regularly monitored and reviewed.

Teachers are highly qualified and well trained. Due to the limited number of Teacher Training Positions available each year, there is great competition, with only the most suitable and academically capable being granted positions. The training consists of a minimum Master's Degree, but there is opportunities to gain further qualification. Once qualified, the teachers must gain employment in yet again another highly competitive market. Only the best become teachers. This system is very important as teachers in the Finnish Education System are very autonomous professionally. There is no appraisal or evaluation systems for teachers, but it is expected (trusted) that they will deliver the curriculum in a way that suits their learning, ensuring they will meet curriculum goals and objectives. It is expected that teachers continue their studies while teaching in areas that will benefit not only them but the students. At the school I visited, many of the teachers had gone to obtain PhDs and were continually engaged in further study. These studies were self-funded and school time was not given.

Teachers in Finland are highly respected in society, but not paid much more than their counterparts in New Zealand.

Although it is true that Finnish Students only sit one National Exam when they are 15 or 16 year of age, the teachers in Finnish schools are continually assessing, evaluating and planning for their students needs, more so than in New Zealand.

Findings:

The Finnish Education system has been designed over many years, with intense research to meet the needs of its population and is based on the Finnish culture of trust, self-reliance, conformity and self-motivation. Our New Zealand culture does not mirror this, therefore will our Education System.

One of the most interesting observations I made was the self-reliance and trust placed on the children, teachers and those around them. The Finnish System relies on children being where they should be at the right time, but also enabling parents/ caregivers the opportunity to work with looking after their children. To see 7 year old children catching subways to school, going on unsupervised studies within the City, catching buses to their afterschool programmes, then returning home at the appropriate time is unfortunately totally foreign and impossible to achieve in our society.

The children, through cultural conditioning, accept their responsibilities and outcomes and have a drive to achieve and learn.

The Finns have proven that starting formal schooling at 7 year of age, leads to interested and motivated students who have the social skills needed to be taught and have a desire to learn. The whole purpose of the preparatory school before they start school is to ensure they have the skills needed for this. Both New Zealand and Finnish children entering school had the same academic capabilities, but the Finnish students were ready to learn and had the social skills to concentrate, work in groups, understand etiquette and seek help when need. Most of our students do not.

The importance placed on “play’, both physical and academic is one aspect we can to bring to our schools. I believe it is better for our students to have short, well planned, relevant and meaning full lessons, followed by intense play. The emphasis based on play based learning in Finland can also be attained here. This will require pedagogical professional development, and also school wide agreement and systems to implement it. Play based learning is not just free play (although there is need for that to some degree), but a planned unified approach, with opportunities for set outcomes.

The two biggest impacts on students learning I observed was the skills and attitudes of the teachers and the curriculum that gave them autonomy to deliver the best for their students in an individualised way, suited to their learning needs. Finnish teachers, as well being highly respected are on average passionate, proud, feel valued and most of all highly educated and skilled. The curriculum they use has set objectives for each subject specific to grade but gives the teachers freedom to plan and deliver the curriculum in their own way in order to meet the objective. This leads to meaningful assessment and data collection and individual plans. It can only work in high trust model, which is part of the Finnish culture

The Finnish Education system cannot be replicated in New Zealand due to cultural behaviour and differing attitudes.

It would take huge reforms and changes in systems form Early Childhood to Tertiary institutions, with a unified agreed view on outcomes and needs. New Zealand would need to change form a low trust, individualistic society.

Aspects of their system can be adapted to enhance our children's learning, with out major reform to overall systems and working within our current curriculum and regulations could be:

- An emphasis on play between short well-planned meaningful lessons.
- The importance of play-based learning for all, but especially our younger children.
- Shorter more intense learning times and maybe days.
- Increased P.D. for our teachers, with greater emphasis placed on developing their skills.
- Reviewing out Teacher Training system.

I have appreciated the opportunity to experience the Finnish system and see the amazing things they are doing and hope to introduce some of the finding into my own school.