

No grammar schools, lots of play: The secrets of Europe's top education system ^[1]

In Finland children don't start school until they are seven, but what happens before that is even more important

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Source: The Guardian

Format: Article

Publication Date: 19 Sep 2016

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

It's a warm September afternoon in the Kallio district of Helsinki. Out in the Franzenia daycare centre playground, groups of four- and five-year-olds roam contentedly. "Would you like an ice-cream?" asks one, having set up her elaborate "stall" on the edge of the sandpit. Kindergarten staff move among the children, chatting, observing and making written notes.

There is nothing outwardly distinctive about the centre, though with 200 children, it is the city's largest. It is a tall, somewhat dour former university building, built in the 1930s and converted to its present role last year. Yet it is in places such as this oddly homespun centre with its strange echoes of bureaucracy, walls plastered with children's art and piles of play paraphernalia, that the Finnish education "miracle" starts to take shape.

In Finland, whose comprehensive school system has sat at the top of Europe's rankings for the past 16 years, the narrow, heated debates on school governance and structure that obsess the UK – free schools, academies, grammars – do not exist. Schools ultimately deliver academic success, the Finns would agree – and there has been intense worldwide interest in how they manage it (see below) – but they would also argue that groundwork for good school performance begins earlier, long before children enter formal school, and arguably while their future pupils are still in nappies.

Central to early years education in Finland is a "late" start to schooling. At Franzenia, as in all Finnish daycare centres, the emphasis is not on maths, reading or writing (children receive no formal instruction in these until they are seven and in primary school) but creative play. This may surprise UK parents, assailed as they are by the notion of education as a competitive race. In Finland, they are more relaxed: "We believe children under seven are not ready to start school," says Tiina Marjoniemi, the head of the centre. "They need time to play and be physically active. It's a time for creativity."

Indeed the main aim of early years education is not explicitly "education" in the formal sense but the promotion of the health and wellbeing of every child. Daycare is to help them develop good social habits: to learn how to make friends and respect others, for example, or to dress themselves competently. Official guidance also emphasises the importance in pre-school of the "joy of learning", language enrichment and communication. There is an emphasis on physical activity (at least 90 minutes outdoor play a day). "Kindergarten in Finland doesn't focus on preparing children for school academically," writes the Finnish educational expert Pasi Sahlberg. "Instead the main goal is to make sure that the children are happy and responsible individuals."

Play, nonetheless, is a serious business, at least for the teachers, because it gives children vital skills in how to learn. Franzenia has 44 staff working with children, of whom 16 are kindergarten teachers (who have each completed a three-year specialist degree), and 28 nursery nurses (who have a two-year vocational qualification). The staff-child ratio is 1:4 for under-threes and 1:7 for the older children. Great care is taken to plan not just what kind of play takes place – there is a mix of "free play" and teacher-directed play – but to assess how children play. The children's development is constantly evaluated. "It's not just random play, it's learning through play," says Marjoniemi.

Play at this stage of child development can successfully engage them in the process of learning, says David Whitebread, director of the Centre for Research on Play in Education, Development & Learning at the University of Cambridge. Once engaged in a task they enjoy, whether acting out a story or constructing a building, children become motivated to constantly refine and improve on their task and to increase the challenge. "From a psychological point of view you can see how play can help children become powerful learners," he says.

Carefully organised play helps develop qualities such as attention span, perseverance, concentration and problem solving, which at the age of four are stronger predictors of academic success than the age at which a child learns to read, says Whitebread. There is evidence that high-quality early years play-based learning not only enriches educational development but boosts attainment in children from disadvantaged backgrounds who do not possess the cultural capital enjoyed by their wealthier peers. Says Whitebread: "The better the quality of pre-school, the better the outcomes, both emotionally and socially and in terms of academic achievement."

Importantly, early years care in Finland is designed and funded to ensure high take-up: every child has a legal right to high-quality pre-

school care. In Franzenia, as in all daycare centres, there are children from a mix of backgrounds. Fees, subsidised by the state, are capped at a maximum of €290 (£250) a month (free for those on low incomes) for five-day, 40 hours a week care. About 40% of 1-3-year-olds are in daycare and 75% of 3-5-year-olds. Optional pre-school at the age of six has a 98% take-up. Initially envisaged in the 70s as a way of getting mothers back into the workplace, daycare has also become, Marjoniemi says, about “lifelong learning and how we prepare young children”.

The time children spend in pre-school, with its emphasis on play and socialisation, are “the most important years”, says Jaakko Salo, special adviser to the OAJ, the Finnish teachers’ union. Finnish education is undergoing the biggest financial cuts in its history, with the latest round lopping €2bn, or 8%, off the budget, but early years and primary schools – the bedrock of the system and the point where learning skills can be most successfully embedded – have been relatively protected, according to the OAJ.

Daycare is not the only factor underpinning academic success. Hard-wired into Finland’s educational mission is the idea that equality is vital to economic success and societal wellbeing, as well as the belief that a small nation, reliant on creativity, ingenuity and solidarity to compete in the global economy, cannot afford inequality or segregation in schooling or health. Behind its stellar education ranking is a comprehensive social security and public health system that ensures one of the lowest child poverty rates in Europe, and some of the highest levels of wellbeing. Gunilla Holm, professor of education at the University of Helsinki, says: “The goal is that we should all progress together.”

How it works

The success of Finland’s comprehensive school system is a story now well-told. At the turn of the century, much to the surprise of the Finns, let alone the rest of the world, it emerged as a global leader in education. Pisa tests revealed Finnish pupils produced some of the world’s highest scores in maths, science and reading. In the three subsequent reports, the last in 2012, the country’s performance dropped slightly but it remains the highest-ranked in Europe.

Its success came under a system built resolutely against the grain of prevailing education fashions adopted by developed countries, including the UK, in the 1980s and 90s. In Finland, children do not start formal academic learning until seven. Driven by a commitment to equality (on both moral and economic grounds), it outlaws school selection, formal examinations (until the age of 18) and streaming by ability. Competition, choice, privatisation and league tables do not exist. “Teaching to the test” is an alien concept. Grammar schools, the UK government’s current obsession, were abolished decades ago. Free school meals, tentatively endorsed for younger pupils only in the UK, are universally provided.

Those elements of British schooling that cause most parental anxiety – will my child get into a “good school”, will they get into a top set, will they get a good Sats score – are largely absent in Finland. Differences in educational outcomes between individual schools in most areas are relatively trivial, meaning parents rarely send their children farther afield than the local comprehensive. Pupils are generally more content too: a quality-not-quantity approach means school hours are shorter and homework duties are light. After-school tutoring is rare. Finnish children are happier and less stressed than their British contemporaries.

As UK educational policy becomes more narrow and centrally prescribed, Finland devolves more power to teachers and pupils to design and direct learning. Teachers are well paid, well-trained (they must complete a five-year specialist degree), respected by parents and valued and trusted by politicians. There is no Ofsted-style inspection of schools and teachers, but a system of self-assessment. Educational policy and teaching is heavily research-based.

Worried that its sliding Pisa scores reflected a complacency in its schools, national curriculum changes were introduced this year: these now devote more time to art and crafts. Creativity is the watchword. Core competences include “learning-to learn”, multiliteracy, digital skills and entrepreneurship. At the heart of the new curriculum, the National Board of Education says unashamedly, is the “joy of learning.”

Region: Europe [3]

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