

How Finland educates the youngest children ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

I just returned from a week in Finland, where I went with several other education writers to learn about their education system. Finnish 15-year-olds lead the world on the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessments (PISA), and we wanted to learn how and why that's possible, and what the American education system can learn from Finland's example. While the answers to those questions are far from simple, it's clear that high quality early childhood education programs are a part of Finland's success.

This may surprise you. After all, conservative and libertarian opponents of increased early childhood investment have seized on Finland, where compulsory schooling doesn't begin until age 7, to bolster their arguments. Earlier this year, the Reason Foundation's Shikha Dalmia and Lisa Snell wrote that, "Early education in general is not so crucial to the long-term intellectual growth of children. Finland offers strong evidence for this view. Its kids consistently outperform their global peers in reading, math and science on international assessments even though they don't begin formal education until they are 7."

But, while Finnish children don't begin formal schooling until age 7, that doesn't mean they're lacking for education before that. In fact, Finnish children have access to very high-quality, affordable child care that meets most of the standards for what we in the United States would call preschool.

Since 1996, Finnish children under age 7 have had, by law, a "subjective right to child care," regardless of family income or parental employment. If a child's parents want him or her to attend a child care center (commonly known as "kindergartens" in Finland), the municipality in which they live (municipalities are the local government units responsible for the delivery of most education and social services in Finland) is obligated to provide them with a slot in either municipal kindergarten or a private child care program (including family home care). Child care isn't free for parents, but it is heavily subsidized: Parents pay according to a sliding scale based on income, with a maximum monthly payment of 235 euros per month (about \$3,850 a year, compared to over \$10,000 annual cost of center-based childcare for a 4-year-old in the United States). About 15 percent of municipalities' total spending on child care comes from parent fees.

Finnish 6-year-olds also have the right to free, half-day preschool programs, which place a slightly greater emphasis on academic preparation and language development than typical child care, and can be offered in child care centers to provide a full day of care that meets families' child care needs. Over 97 percent of Finnish 6-year-olds attend these programs.

Publicly funded kindergartens and preschool in Finland are of quite high-quality, with quality standards roughly on par with those universal pre-k advocates seek for publicly funded pre-k programs in the United States. Kindergartens must have at least one adult for every seven children over age three, for every four children under age three, or for every two one-year-olds (infants under age one are rarely enrolled in kindergartens because Finland offers generous parental leave supports for parents in their child's first year of life). One out of every three adults working in kindergartens holds a bachelor's degree as a certified kindergarten teacher (in effect, the lead teacher in each classroom). The other two adults must hold credentials as "licensed practical nurses," a vocational degree that is roughly equivalent to a high school diploma with specialized education and training to work with young children.

Kindergartens must adhere to the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland-comprehensive standards for child care environments and activities that address the developmental needs of the whole child-and with more detailed early childhood plans that each municipality must create to implement the national curriculum guidelines. These guidelines are aligned with the National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education in Finland, which is in turn aligned with the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education. These class size, teacher qualifications, and curriculum standards make the programs offered by Finnish kindergartens higher in quality than those offered by many state pre-k programs and Head Start centers in the United States.

More than 60 percent of Finnish children under age 7 attend municipal kindergarten programs, about 30 percent are at home with their parents, and the remainder attend a mix of publicly subsidized private and family home care centers. But these numbers understate the degree to which Finnish children participate in early education programs during at least some period in their early childhood. That's because Finnish children are more likely to stay home during the first three years of life-when stay-at-home parents can collect a "home care allowance" of 294 euros per month-than they are after they turn three years old. Over 80 percent of mothers with children over age three are working, and most of their children attend kindergartens. So the share of Finnish children who receive some form of center-based early education before age 6 is much higher than 60 percent.

Is Finland's strong early care and education system the explanation behind their PISA success? Unfortunately, it's not that easy to say. Finland's educational system (and Finns' intense aversion to comparing students and schools) can't provide the data we'd need to

rigorously assess whether Finnish children who did participate in early care and education perform better than those who did not. And there are plenty of other factors beyond early education that contribute to the Finnish educational system's success. There are, however, good reasons to believe that the Finnish early education system is part of the answer: First, the vast majority of Finnish first graders (7-year-olds in their first year of school) are reading mid-way through their first grade year, suggesting that the youngsters have a strong grounding in language and pre-literacy skills-which the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care rightly emphasize-before they enter school. Second, Finnish educators and officials we spoke with attribute the nation's success in international comparisons to their high-quality early childhood programs. An "absolutely important explanation behind these good results is the good early learning support," provided by child care centers, one official from the National Board of Education told us.

There are clear limits to the Finnish early care and education system as a model for the United States. For starters, some elements of the system-such as the fact that children as young as one year old spend up to three hours a day playing outside even in Finland's chilly winters-probably wouldn't fly with American parents. Moreover, creating a Finnish-style system of universal early care and education from infancy on would be hugely expensive. A system that works well in a country 400,000 children under age seven would be far more difficult-and costly-to implement in a country with nearly 21 million children under age five. Finally, while Finland does have poor children and a growing immigrant population, it does not have anywhere near the population of seriously deprived children and those with multiple risk factors that we have in the United States. While the largely play-based Finnish early childhood model, which involves little in the way of direct instruction, may work for most children, the most at-risk youngsters need more intensive early education services than it typically provides.

But, perhaps most important for the U.S. debate, Finland's quality early childhood education system means that "But Finnish kids don't start school until they're 7" is hardly a compelling argument against expanding access to quality, publicly funded pre-k education. If pre-k opponents like Dalmia and Snell want to offer Finland's system as an alternative to universal pre-k, I'd bet dollars to donuts that most early education advocates would be thrilled to accept that bargain.

Later this month I'll write a bit more about what we can learn from Finland's education system, as well as some of the challenges it faces.

Region: Europe [2]

Tags: quality [3]

curricula and pedagogy [4]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/13/03/how-finland-educates-youngest-children> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/curricula-and-pedagogy>