

Let the children play: the secret to Finnish education^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A small, tousled-haired girl is retrieving her socks and shoes from a little basket outside the darkened room. Inside, other toddlers are prolonging their post-lunch nap on some of the two dozen little blue beds.

This is Franzenia Day Care Centre in Helsinki, where 223 children aged up to six attend daily, making it the biggest centre of its kind in the Finnish capital. It operates from 6.30am to 5.30pm, although most of the children come between 8.30am and 4.30pm, and provides breakfast, lunch and snacks.

Housed in a former University of Helsinki 1930s building, it's a large-scale, urban setting for its little clients. Divided into 16 groups, the children have ample room to spread themselves.

Outside there is a well-equipped, extensive playground area, including swings, a miniature city tram, bright red slides set into a synthetic green mound and two large sandpits artfully bounded by wooden benching modelled on the nearby tall terraced housing.

As warm autumnal sunshine filters through the leaves just starting to turn on the clusters of trees, a member of staff walks quietly among the children, jotting down notes on their activities that will help to inform ongoing assessment and weekly information updates for parents.

Children spend at least an hour and a half of their day outside; only if the temperature falls below minus 20 degrees are they kept indoors. And every week they go on a nature trip further afield for at least two hours.

Subsidised care

Since 1996, all children in Finland under the age of seven have had the right to subsidised full-time day care provided by local authorities, if their parents choose to avail of it.

However this entitlement was controversially reduced last August to part-time only for families where one parent is at home caring for another child, or has been unemployed for more than two months.

No family has to pay more than €290 a month to have a child in day care, with fees sliding downwards for lower income households. It is estimated that overall parents contribute just 14 per cent of the cost of providing municipal early childhood education and care.

The centre includes a preschool, which is compulsory and free for all children aged six and usually lasts about four hours a day. Only after a year of that do they start "basic" (primary) education at a comprehensive school, which caters for ages seven to 16.

Roughly half of the pupils then progress to a general upper secondary school to prepare for matriculation exams to get into university. Most of the others go to a vocational upper secondary school, from which they will most likely go to a polytechnic college or university.

"We think children under seven are not ready to do academic work," explains Tiina Marjoniemi, head of this day-care centre. "They need time to play and be active – it's a time for imagination and creativity."

In recognition of the pedagogical importance of so-called "playful learning", responsibility at a national level for day-care centres and preschools was transferred several years ago from the Social Affairs and Health Ministry to the Ministry of Education and Culture.

The centre, which has 47 staff, operates a staff to child ratio of 1:4 for under threes, while it's 1:7 for older children, which compares to an Irish minimum of 1:5 (one to two years), 1:6 (two to three years) and 1:8 (three to six years).

A generous system of paid parental leave, along with the option of a homecare allowance instead of day care for children under three, means many children are kept at home until their third birthday.

If a parent wants to work part-time, this can be combined with a reduced homecare allowance until the child is three, when most will go to a day-care centre such as this.

Just 40 per cent of those aged one to two years attend public childcare in Finland, compared with about 80 per cent in Norway and 90 per cent in Denmark, according to the Nordic Social Statistical Committee.

Marjoniemi says the job of day care, which is guided by the national core curriculum, is to prepare children to go to school. The emphasis is on developing social skills and teaching them to take care of themselves. They are also intent on picking up any learning difficulties – “we want to know about problems before preschool”.

She has worked in early childhood education for 30 years. What are the biggest changes she has seen over that time?

“Now we want children to take part in planning and say what they want to learn,” she says. “We listen to and observe children as we go on, planning how we do it, not what we do.”

Technology’s role

The Playful Learning Centre at the University of Helsinki’s teacher education department is where early childhood educators of the future get their inspiration. Every element of this room is designed to promote creativity, from the big green fabric canopy over a large wooden tree in the corner, underneath which patterned cushions are scattered, to brightly coloured circular floor mats, small tables equipped with big boxes of chunky coloured pencils and baskets of beads, mural-covered walls and open-sided cupboards and shelving.

“We try to create a learning environment so children can be self-directed learners,” says the centre’s scientific director, Prof Kristiina Kumpulainen.

Technology is embraced as a learning tool, with children encouraged to make digital stories.

“It is very wrong to see children as passive consumers [of technology] and just try to keep them safe,” she says. They are growing up into a digital world in which they need to have a voice.

Independence

Generally, Finnish children are raised to be independent from an early age and it is quite usual for children to walk to and from school from the age of seven without adults. Of course it helps that urban planners have been mindful for many decades of the need to provide for the safe passage of pedestrians and cyclists.

No doubt that is one reason why there appears to be much less parental paranoia about children’s safety than in Ireland. Kirsi Sutton, a special education teacher for preschool children, wouldn’t be untypical: she and her husband Stephen leave for work in the morning before their eight-year-old daughter Crissa goes to school. She is well able to get herself out and walk the 500 metres to school on her own up to an hour later.

“One of us usually phones her, but she knows the time herself,” says Kirsi. “The street we live on is one of the busiest streets but we have been living there all her life and I have been teaching her how to walk there. So we’re not afraid all the time. We trust her.”

In Helsinki, children can go places by themselves, she explains, but when they go to Britain, Scottish-born Stephen is always telling Crissa not to go far away from them – a reminder that not all European countries are as child friendly as Finland.

Exercise regime

The wellbeing of children has always been a priority in Finland and in September its government recommended that they should be getting three hours of physical activity a day.

Exercise improves not only physical and mental health, it has also been shown to have a positive impact on learning. That’s one of the reasons Finnish schools are keen to encourage pupils to move more.

A typical Finnish school day is divided into hour sessions – 45-minute lessons and then 15 minutes to go outside before the next class begins.

There is none of the “fair weather” mentality that shapes many an Irish school’s policy on when children are allowed into the playground; Finnish children dress for the outdoors as well as the indoors. The temperature needs to fall below minus 20 degrees before it is considered too cold to go out.

Pihla Meskanen, who has a seven-year-old daughter in second grade of primary school, believes these regular, compulsory breaks outdoors are very important. “They get fresh air and movement. Otherwise I think it is very hard for children to sit and sit.”

Under the new Finnish curriculum, which came into effect in August, schools are not only looking at providing a minimum of two to three hours physical education a week but also new ways of teaching that involve more movement among children.

While reports of the death of the desk in Finnish classrooms might have been exaggerated, traditional furniture is being removed from some to encourage more circulation and collaboration in certain subjects.

Parents are also being advised to encourage children to take up hobbies that require physical exertion.

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