

How Rural Schools Can Learn From Finland

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Finland's approach to education has fascinated, intrigued, and puzzled many in the global community. For close to two decades, this Scandinavian country has been at the vanguard of unrivaled academic achievement (Sahlberg, 2014). On international benchmark tests, Finnish school children consistently outperform other countries in reading as well as in other core subjects—namely, mathematics and science; this stellar performance has been recognized worldwide. In contrast, the standards movement in U.S. schools—often characterized by top-down intervention, standardization, and markets—has narrowed curricula, lowered motivation, heightened anxiety, and tampered with achievement among students and teachers alike. Reform strategies that have not been successful continue to be reinvented and re-imposed with greater force and determination. In contrast, in this Nordic country there exists an exemplar of educational success. Finland rightfully boasts the narrowest achievement gaps in the world and enjoys equally high rankings on ratings of economic competitiveness, general well-being, and quality of life (Sahlberg, 2014). As literacy and school library educator-scholars who share a deep commitment to preparing the next generation of teachers and school librarians, we were curious about the Finnish model, so we researched it, organized a study-abroad exploratory experience for college students, visited Finnish classrooms, and while there asked many questions. What follows is our story about how this transformational learning sojourn evolved, what we learned about Finnish schools, and how these new understandings suggest school improvement possibilities in rural settings.

Why Finland?

As teacher educators with specialties in literacy and school libraries, the authors of this paper, read about Finland's superlative and consistent results in educating its school children. The curriculum and approaches to teaching, learning, and assessment produced a nation of accelerated readers. But more than just skilled readers, students' performance on mathematical problem-solving skills and science knowledge, measured by the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) surpassed other nations. Before PISA, tests tended to assess what students had memorized; none "measured teenagers' ability to think critically and solve new problems in math, reading, and science" (Ripley, 2013, p. 15). The PISA assessments changed how educators viewed the potential of large-scale metrics that sought to measure how students think creatively. Results revealed "that spending on education did not make kids smarter. Everything—*everything*—depended on what teachers, parents, and students *did* with those investments" (Ripley, 2013, p. 18). Regardless of economic or social backgrounds, Finnish children outperformed their European, Asian, and American counterparts. We wondered how one country—approximately the size of Minnesota, with 5.5 million citizens—could achieve such results.

As part of our inquiry, we studied Finland's approach to teacher preparation reform that has resulted in high-quality, well-trained teachers. A five-year research-based graduate-level program,

teacher training is defined by rigor, high expectations, and a systematic focus on teacher professionalism. Only 10-15% of those interested in teaching are accepted into professional schools of education. Successful candidates “must have high test scores, positive personalities, excellent interpersonal skills, and a commitment to work as a teacher” (Sahlberg, 2014, p. 103). Teacher candidates are drawn to the profession by its compelling mission *and* the conditions of autonomy and support. Teachers have an expectation that what they have been educated to do—plan, teach, diagnose, execute, and evaluate—will be respected by those outside of the classroom, including the administration, parents, and community members. In short, various stakeholders, including policymakers and parents, trust teachers as the experts in how to educate children. Moreover, Finland’s teachers view themselves as community leaders and are highly esteemed, on par with medical professionals.

The more we read about the Finnish model, the more inquisitive we became. Our conversations animated our collaboration, resulting in a three-credit special topics class (EDCI 491/591- Literacies and Libraries in Context: Finland) and culminating in a faculty-led study abroad experience during mid-March in 2018 that explored schools within this world-class education system¹. Our goals were four-fold:

- (1) To deliver a course that looks in-depth at Finland’s compulsory education system and compares it with the U.S. Pre-K-12 public school system.
- (2) To provide the undergraduate and graduate Department of Education study-abroad students with an opportunity to research the crucial role of teacher/school librarian education and reflect on what decisions are within their professional jurisdiction.
- (3) To observe Finnish educators and students in various school settings.
- (4) To initiate conversations about how teachers can harness time, passion, and energy to effect change in schools, especially those in rural settings.

The eight-week course required reading deeply about this Scandinavian nation and viewing video interviews with those who had lived and studied in Finland: a Montana State University exchange student and an engineering Fulbright scholar. These preparations helped us to become international ambassadors for Montana. Visiting three schools—an international school that used English as the language of instruction, a neighborhood school in Helsinki, and a forest, or nature-based, school in Tampere where much of the instruction occurred outdoors—were signature features of this nine-day, in-country immersion experience. Other highlights for our thirteen travelers (ten undergraduates and three graduate students) involved touring cultural sites, including Suomenlinna, Finland’s castle and sea fortress, and the National Library in Helsinki. An afternoon at a Finnish sauna on the Baltic Sea and culinary experiences with roasted reindeer and villi—a yogurt-like fermented milk product—rounded out the Nordic experience. Thus, while engaging educational settings was our primary goal and focus, we also had broader cultural opportunities.

Finnish Schools

¹ See <https://www.montana.edu/international/studyabroad/go/program/51524>, syllabus for EDCI 491/591- Literacies and Libraries in Context: Finland and itinerary for the Faculty-Led Study Abroad Experience to Helsinki and Tampere, Finland.

Finland is an ethnically homogeneous country with two national languages: Finnish and Swedish. All school children learn these languages and then begin their study of English in third grade. It is not uncommon for seventh graders to pick up a fourth language, often French or German. Historically, minority populations include the indigenous Sámi and Roma people, but as a result of recent immigration, there are now also considerable groups of Russians, Estonians, and Somalis (Finlandia University, 2017). Even though formal education does not begin until children are seven (the equivalent of first grade in the U.S.), they enter school with firmly established reading and math skills. Since most families have working parents, children attend pre-schools and kindergartens, which are characterized as non-academic with a strong focus on oral language, play, creativity, and discovery. For Finnish children, the school day starts between 8 and 9 a.m. and finishes between 1 and 2 p.m. A 15-minute break or recess occurs after each 45-minute lesson. On average, there are three hours and 45 minutes of daily instructional time and 25 lessons a week. Finnish students spend approximately 640 hours in school each year, which contrasts sharply with the 900-1000 classroom hours experienced by U.S. students (National School Boards Association). Homework is part of the learning formula, but the focus is on practicing concepts presented during class and typically is completed within an hour (Personal communication, March 19, 2018).

The Finnish government's focus on an educated citizenry manifests in a quality universal basic education with only one required high-stakes assessment, administered when students are finishing their secondary level education. While classroom teachers most certainly believe in student accountability and assessment to inform instructional decisions, tests are more formative in nature. When we asked a group of sixth-grade boys if they were anxious about a math test on percentages, scheduled after recess, they looked a bit befuddled by the question. One boy spoke up, "I want to see how well I do. Then I will know what I need to study." This student attitude of seeing schools as a hub for learning was evidenced multiple times. Students appeared happy to be at school and eager to learn.

We found Finnish schools to be relaxed, casual learning environments. Classrooms were filled with natural light, and students and teachers did not wear shoes. This custom to leave one's shoes at the door in a country whose capital city is less than 500 miles from the Arctic circle and where part of the country is covered in snow for over half the year (Finnish Meteorological Institute, n.d.) is based on practicality. Before entering the classroom, student left their boots in the hallway along with their other snow clothing. The quiet of stocking feet made the classroom a peace-filled place.

No state-of-the-art technology dominated the sites we visited. Instead, our impression was that of low-tech learning environments. Furthermore, corridors and classroom walls were not cluttered with posters and student art work. While student work was displayed, it was not stimulus-drenched as is the case in so many American schools. When asked about how they use technology, teachers indicated that one of their professional goals is to expand its use as a learning tool. In fact, they mentioned studying how U.S. schools integrate technology into their lessons. Throughout the school day, middle-school aged students had unrestricted use of cell

phones, but unlike their U.S. counterparts, who often are riveted to hand-held devices, students at the schools we visited appeared to view cell phones as less than crucial. At recess, while a handful did spend their free time checking their phones, this practice was more the exception than the rule. Some, bundled up in snow pants, boots, scarves, and woolen hats, played chase or ball games while others congregated in huddles that were characterized by conversation and laughter.

Finnish children are raised to be independent at an early age. Teachers interviewed expressed the importance of helping students to become self-directed as learners. Time and time again, we witnessed this prevailing philosophy in action. Children as young as six or seven used public transportation without adult chaperones. No doubt the fact that Finland has a low crime rate contributes to this phenomenon. In shop, or industrial arts, class, fourth graders used power tools to construct projects. Teachers circulated but did not seem concerned with students' potential misuse or carelessness with these tools. Students, in turn, behaved responsibly. In a family and consumer science class for middle-school aged students, the kitchen facility looked much like any such learning environment in the United States, with neatly labeled cabinets, hooks for aprons, and multiple sinks and oven stations. Additionally, we noted how the boys separated themselves from the girls and acted as typical early adolescents. It reminded us that young people are fundamentally the same, no matter if they live in Helsinki, Finland or Bozeman, Montana.

For Finns, sports are important and part of the cultural fabric but separated from the school premises. Instead of staying at school for team practice, students go to clubs to play Pesapallo, a traditional sport much like baseball, or to participate in other activities, including basketball, floorball, football, and ice hockey. This arrangement seems to reinforce the understanding that schools are dedicated to learning.

We entered Finnish schools expecting to be overwhelmed by a uniquely distinct approach to education. Instead, we found ample similarities between a typical U.S. and a Finnish classroom. Additionally, we observed subtle and not-so-subtle differences in how teachers and students viewed described their views on education.

Lessons from Finland

In reflecting on our conversations with Finnish educators and students, we pinpointed three areas that set apart our Nordic professional colleagues. Differences included their approaches to teaching, their philosophy that learning and autonomy are intertwined for maximum student agency, and the distinction between accountability (U.S. schools) vs. responsibility (Finland). The International Literacy Association (2013, p. 3) notes, "Teachers are a critical factor in K-12 students' literacy performance. From the very first day of class, a teacher's instruction affects students' literacy achievement." Therefore, teachers' work must be supported, not hindered by outside forces. Edwards and Martin (2016) opine that schools "start on new initiatives, with passion and energy, only to have this fade away with no delivery. Then another

initiative with the same result: nothing absolutely mattered, nothing deeply embedded. Teachers need a sense of completion and achievement as much as their students” (p. xix). Since classroom teachers are the linchpin to learning, as skilled professionals they should be able to focus on what they have been trained to do—teach. Doug Lemov (2015) believes that the “best teachers find ways to take anything you give them and make it more rigorous (p. 5). Teachers who plan well-sequenced lessons and expect learners to master the content are “investing directly and substantively in students’ base of knowledge” (Lemov, 2015, p. 19). In classrooms where expert instruction is paired with an expectancy that all students will learn, achievement flourishes. Edwards and Martin (2016) link teacher expectations with student achievement. While both Finnish and U.S. teachers are invested in student success, the education outcomes differ.

Below we suggest how rural educators might adopt some of these Finnish principles. Rural schools are uniquely positioned because they *are* small and more independent. With fewer bureaucratic hoops, teachers can conceivably exert more autonomy over their daily schedules. Unlike larger districts where teachers feel compelled to cover the curriculum at the same pace, practitioners in rural areas can explore some of the Finnish education practices we have described.

Instructional Approaches

Classrooms in Finland are centered on exploration where students learn by doing in settings that are joy-filled and stress-free. With a focus on collaboration, not competition, students become invested in an us-as-a-learning-team rather than the U.S. model of doing more, better and faster. As well, collaboration among colleagues is a signature feature of Finnish schools; the shortened days and multiple mid-day breaks help to make this feasible. Finnish teachers, not motivated by producing high test scores on national exams, strive instead for a peaceful school environment that gives students the gift of time and quiet, so deep, real learning can occur. When children are not pressured to memorize facts but focus on fundamental concepts in a supportive space, they grow intellectually. Allowing the brain to experience quietness and various environments to process is critical, too. Thus, frequent breaks and fresh air are common-sense antidotes to the hurry-up pace that characterizes so many schools. Returning to a serene classroom from a 15-minute outdoor break and wearing comfortable socks in the classroom contributes to the relaxed learning atmosphere. Rural schools in Montana also have the potential to structure breaks that get children in the habit of exercising outdoors, making the most of clean Montana air. Fortunately, this change is easy to implement.

Teachers in small schools frequently have opportunities to make adjustments to daily schedules. If students are energized about learning, for example, teachers in rural settings can extend a morning lesson into the afternoon, whereas teachers in larger districts might have to consider other scheduling constraints. As learning should be student-centered, not schedule-centered, making these accommodations is certainly best practice.

Philosophy

Teacher beliefs about how children best learn matter and could easily be implemented into Montana schools. According to the Finnish National Board of Education, “Learning is

supported by a peaceful and friendly working atmosphere...and a calm, peaceful mood (2016, n.p.). Philosopher Bertrand Russell (1930) offers this insight:

A child develops best when, like a young plant, he is left undisturbed in the same soil. Too much travel, too much variety of impressions, are not good for the young, and cause them as they grow to become incapable of enduring fruitful monotony. (p. 24)

In rural schools, teachers may have more control in something as simple as the colors painted on the wall and other aesthetics that contribute to creating a welcoming environment. When Massachusetts teacher Timothy Walker moved his family to Finland to be a teacher in Helsinki, he was in for a surprise. “When I first started teaching, I was convinced that children would learn most if I was an incredibly dedicated and sacrificing teacher. This meant impeccable lesson plans, the best resources, the newest educational supplies, carefully planned circle times, and schedules planned to the minute” (2016, p. 52). But then Walker realized that what he had been doing for five years could not be sustained. Teaching became a chore, driven more by paperwork and meetings than actual teaching. However, when he taught in Finland, he learned to embrace, albeit reluctantly, the mindset of his Nordic colleagues. Instead of avoiding the teachers’ lounge, which can be a hotbed of negativity in the U.S., he joined them there between classes. Rich conversations ensued, and his vibrancy in the classroom resurfaced.

Accountability vs. Responsibility

In an era of global competition, Finland shows that there is another way, which does not disengage learners nor leave teachers burned-out and exhausted. Optimizing the 8:30 to 3:30 workday to focus on learning as the co-construction of knowledge is a win-win proposition. Walker (2016) reflects, “Although educators in Finland aren’t held accountable by standardized tests or school inspections, I’d argue that this low level of accountability works in Finnish schools because there’s a high level of professional responsibility, which is afforded by a high level of professional trust” (p. 121). While both countries have hardworking, responsible educators, he believes the difference is more cultural. Holding teachers accountable for student achievement is a tactic based in mistrust, whereas believing teachers can help students advance is trust-based. In his interactions with Helsinki educators, Walker (2016) observed “a common belief is that teachers can do their jobs well, without external pressure—and, in the end, everyone seems happier that way. Fear-driven accountability efforts can essentially squeeze out the opportunities for a person to experience the joy of exercising meaningful responsibility” (p. 123).

High-stakes testing, ubiquitous at all levels in the United States, is an unknown in Finland. While teachers do assess their students, the focus is on learning, not accountability. Finnish school leaders do not collect test data to compare one teacher or school against another. They trust that quality teaching delivered by highly-trained and select individuals contributes to student learning. The former member of the Finnish Board of Education, Pasi Sahlberg (2015) writes that “just having better teachers in schools will not automatically translate into better learning outcomes” and that school systems must re-examine the way they “think about teaching as a profession and what the role of the school is in our society” (p. 137). He urges policymakers to do more than just dream about having teachers like those in Finland. Rural schools can be a catalyst for change by asking hard

questions about how accountability is measured and how teachers are trusted as responsible caretakers of students' school achievement.

Conclusion

Finland is an inspiration. The country's approach, defined more by simplicity than complexity, shows how schools might become better. The suggestions proffered in this paper highlight that the Finnish approach can serve as the impetus to effect change in rural U.S. schools. Creating the best conditions for young people to become engaged learners, self-actualized individuals, and compassionate, productive, and literate citizens is our shared priority. Teaching in a rural state offers untold opportunities to re-imagine how schools can become centers that celebrate learning.

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