

## **Education in Finland: Reflections from a Field Trip Abroad**

**Dr. Debbie Mercer**

**Kansas State University**

**Dr. Lotta Larson**

**Kansas State University**

### ***Introduction***

After hearing much about the Finnish education system, we recently jumped at the opportunity to visit the country to explore schools and education organizations as members of a professional organization tour. In this article, we aim to reflect upon what we learned, provide multiple perspectives of the Finnish education system, and discuss possible implications for Kansas educators.

### ***Background***

Stereotypically, Finland is known for saunas, reindeer, Nokia, and, most recently, excellent schools. In truth, Finland is a highly modernized society with a rich history. In 1917, Finland earned its independence from Russia and became a member of the European Union in 1995. In terms of area, it is the eighth largest country in Europe but, with only 41 people/square mile, it is the most sparsely populated nation in the European Union. Most of the country's 5.4 million inhabitants live in urban areas in the southern regions. Most people live in cities – Helsinki alone houses a population of nearly 606,000– leaving large rural regions in a constant struggle to survive. As the two official national languages, Finnish and Swedish are both taught at school. At home, about 90 % of the population speaks Finnish, 5% Swedish, and 5% other languages. An overwhelming majority (85%) of the Finnish population belong to the Lutheran Church. The immigration rate is low, 2.3 percent. Most women work outside the home, but still experience wage discrimination in most positions. For teachers, however, that there is no gender differences in wages. Education is valued throughout the country with over one-third earning university or other higher-education qualifications. Schools are free, including universities, as education is believed to equalize discrepancies in social class, leading to a more just society.

Finland levies taxes by geographical area, working to keep education fair and equal, especially in low-income, rural areas. Education became decentralized in 1980. As a result of school reform in 1994, a 128-page core National Curriculum Framework for Basic Education was developed. This guiding document is used at the local level that carries the responsibility for all curriculum implementation. Finland has taken a very broad view of what it takes to improve education; including handicrafts, language, career-readiness, and the arts in their curriculum. Further, Finnish schools claim to “assign less homework an engage children in more creative play” that other countries (Partanen, 2012, np). The underlying core that all children deserve the very best education possible gets at the true root of social justice.

## *Travel Reflections*

During our week-long stay in Finland, we made multiple education-related visits to schools, agencies, and universities where we interacted with teachers, students, administrators, teacher educators, and politicians. Learning about the Finnish education system from such different perspectives provided us with a prism of insights and ideas. What follows is an overview of some of our experiences.

### *Finnish National Board of Education*

We began our journey at the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) in Helsinki. The FNBE is the national agency subordinate to the Ministry of Education and Culture. The Board is responsible for curriculum for pre-primary grades through adult education. As visitors, we were provided with an overview of the Finnish education system. The presentation included state-of-the-art technology with a heavy emphasis on research to document the reasons behind the very high Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA, scores earned by Finnish students. Interestingly, the FNBE is quite accustomed to conducting these types of presentations to delegations and researchers from North America, Asia, and Europe. Our presenter spoke perfect English and all handouts were published in English. He explained that they have learned to capitalize on their success and are willing and eager to share their experiences with others. Below are some of the key points from the presentation:

Most Finnish children enter the education system at age 6 in pre-primary programs which takes place either at school or in day care centers. While similar to the U.S. equivalence of kindergarten, the pre-primary curriculum focuses on play and social interactions, rather than academic content. At age 7, students enter their first year of compulsory, “basic education.”

In ninth grade (age 16), students take a standardized assessment, or placement test, to help determine where they will begin the next phase of their schooling. After nine years in basic education, students can continue to either general upper secondary education (for students who eventually wish to attend university), or to vocational upper secondary education (for those wanting to seek a polytechnic education or vocational program). Well over 90% of students start general or vocational upper secondary studies immediately after basic education. For some students, however, a tenth year of voluntary basic school, gives them an opportunity to first improve their grades and clarify their long-term academic/career path.

The set base aid for one child is approximately \$7,300 for 6-15 year-old students. That amount is doubled for students with special needs. More money is allocated to students in the early years, reinforcing a philosophy focused on front loading support for younger children to help address any learning problems early. Additional money is available to small schools in rural or remote areas.

Three components of the education reform movement in Finland include:

1. **Teacher training** – a focus on effective preparation for both new teachers and in-service teachers.
2. **National development programs** – National programs are developed based on the needs that arise from data analysis. For example, data indicated that boys read less than girls. A national reading incentive program led to a decrease in the difference between gender reading scores. This competitive program equated the number of pages read to the number of kilometers you could travel on the globe. Another example of a national development program focused on language learning. Specially developed software to learn the Finnish language collects data including where an individual student is experiencing problems. This phonics program is available to students free via the Internet. Highlighted as perhaps the most successful program, LUMA focused on math and natural science beginning in 1996. Again, gender focused, LUMA supported girls participation in mathematics and science courses.
3. **Textbooks and other materials** – Finland stopped reviewing and approving textbooks that could be used in schools, instead trusting teachers to find the best materials. Currently, about five percent of teachers are not using any books, instead looking for current relevant resources including computer applications.

After spending a day at the FNBE, we had a much greater appreciation for and understanding of Finland's education system and the philosophy guiding instructional and policy decisions. Equipped with a basic understanding of their educational structure and ideas, we were excited to learn more about the teacher education program at the University of Helsinki.

### *University of Helsinki Teacher Education Program*

As teacher educators, we were personally very interested in the Finnish approach to teacher preparation. During our visit to the Teacher Education Program at University of Helsinki, we learned that Finnish teachers are highly qualified and committed to their profession. A Master's degree is a requirement for all teachers, and teacher education programs include extensive field experiences. Below, we highlight some of our notes from this informative visit:

Teacher preparation is viewed as an important part of the overall effective school plan. Teachers are well respected and teaching is consistently at the top of the list for potential professions by high school students of both genders. Hence, admission to the nation's eight teacher preparation programs is competitive. Universities select the most motivated and talented applicants, resulting in an acceptance rate of approximately 10%. Selection is based on high school records, a written national exam, and interviews. Typically, programs are five-years long. All candidates must study education-related courses, plus all the subjects they are going to teach. Most classroom teachers major in pedagogy, whereas subject teachers major in their chosen content area. A master thesis is required on a relevant topic, further enhancing the research foundation for all educators. This focus on research is designed so that teachers "contribute to an increase of the problem-solving capacity of the education system" (Buchberger and Buchberger, 2003,

p.10). Extensive field experiences constitute up to one-fourth of total program requirements. Often these take place in a lab school associated with the university where cooperating teachers are well trained in mentoring and supervision.

To enter the profession, the university degree is the only credential needed; there are no licenses or renewal requirements. For in-service teachers, three days of professional development is required annually. Most new teachers are offered an open-ended contract and typically stay in that position for their entire career. Retention in the profession remains steady at 85-90%. There is one teacher union, The Trade Union of Education, to which almost all teachers belong.

The school day includes time for planning. “A typical middle school teacher in Finland teaches just under 600 hours annually. In the United States, by contrast, a teacher at the same level typically teaches 1,080 hours annually.” (Sahlberg, 2011). Thus it is evident that time in class alone does not promote high test scores.

### *School Visits*

With a firm foundation of knowledge about the Finnish education system and its teacher training, we were excited to visit students, teachers, and administrators in schools. To exemplify what we learned, we are offering our notes from two different school visits. First, let us introduce you to **Etelä-Tapiola Lukio**, a public upper-secondary school in Espoo, Finland’s second largest city, located just outside Helsinki. One of 420 upper secondary schools in the country (grades 10-12), this school focuses on social studies, and socio-economic awareness. The average score for acceptance to this school is among the highest in Finland, making this one of the most sought after upper secondary schools in the country. Approximately 30 teachers from all over the world provide instruction for approximately 500 16-19 year old students.

Upon our arrival, a group of five students treated us to an in-depth presentation about their school. Impressively, they all spoke English and their prepared multimedia presentation included pictures and information (also in English) to help us understand and appreciate the school’s mission to offer an internationally-oriented, pre-university program while emphasizing active citizenship through social and economic awareness. The school is non-graded, with most students completing the required curriculum in three years, although a fourth year can be added if needed. The daily schedule typically included three to eight courses. To graduate, students must complete 75 classes. All students study multiple languages (Finnish, Swedish, and English are compulsory; French, German, Italian, Chinese, and Spanish are considered electives). Many students engage in a “Young Entrepreneur Project,” in which they conceptualize and nurture an entrepreneurial enterprise, or business venture, over the course of an entire school year. While touring the building, we noticed groups of students hanging out in a “lounge,” which students had decorated and furnished on their own. Reminiscent of a college-level student union, the principal explained that allowing students to be in charge of their own space, communicates a sense of trust between students and faculty. The day we visited happened to be “picture day,” including a make-shift photography studio in the school cafeteria. While we detected several differences between this school and a typical Kanas high school, we both noticed that the time students spent primping and preparing for the “perfect” school picture, seemed to be a rather universal phenomenon. (To see pictures

from Etelä-Tapiola Lukio, please visit <http://www.etela-tapiola.fi/>)

**Lauttasaaren Yhteiskoulu** further provided us with a glimpse into the daily lives of Finnish students and teachers. This is an independent secondary- and upper-secondary school housing grades 7 – 12 located in Helsinki on the island of Lauttasarri. The student body is comprised by secondary 263 secondary students (grades 7-9) and 335 upper-secondary students (grades 10-12). Contrary to Etelä-Tapiola Lukio, this school accepts many low-scoring students. Fifty-four full time teachers, nine hourly assistants, and nine other staff members are employed by the school.

While all courses are designed to deepen and apply knowledge, the school focuses on international business relations. Hence, students are often involved in international projects and a global education certificate is a popular program of study. Every student learns multiple languages. A tenth-grade student explained that he spoke Finnish, Swedish, English, and “pretty good” German. He shared that he had spent the previous semester as an exchange student in Germany. When asked how long it took him to feel comfortable with that language, he smiled and said, “A couple of days. Once you know several languages, it is much easier to navigate another one.” While spoken with the confidence of any teenager, he also expressed an accurate and insightful belief of his own language-learning ability.

Student voices are well respected and often drive change. For example, students typically attend five classes a day; three before lunch and two in the afternoon. Recently, students petitioned for an earlier lunch, resulting in the third class being split into two sections so they can go to lunch earlier.

During our visit, we had the opportunity to eat lunch in the school cafeteria; a sunny, bright space where clusters of 6-8 students and teachers were seated around small tables. We immediately noticed three essential differences between this setting and the typical Kansas high-school lunch experience. First, all students ate for free (regardless of socio-economic status). Second, the lunch was served buffet style and primarily made up by various salads and vegetables, in addition to rice, potatoes, and beef stew. The third, and perhaps most noticeable difference, was the noise level. Although the large cafeteria was rather crowded, the space was quiet and calm as students and teachers talked quietly with their table peers. For a moment, we almost forgot that we were visiting a school full of teenagers... However, the second we exited the cafeteria, we were quickly brought back to reality as we literally tripped over mounds of book bags, coats, and stocking caps that were haphazardly strewn all over the hallway floor, despite the many hooks and coat racks provided. (To see pictures from Lauttasaaren Yhteiskoulu, please go to <http://www.lauttasaarenyhteiskoulu.fi/>)

### *Implications and Discussion*

Again and again, we heard the word “trust” associated with the Finnish education system. The government trusts teachers to effectively teach students and provides minimal oversight. Communities trust teachers to effectively provide instruction and care for their children. Teachers trust students to impact change and to make good choices (and to learn from their mistakes when they do not). Schools do not spend time on excessive testing. Schools are not visited by accreditors. School leaders are responsible for ensuring that the school is a safe learning environment.

Teachers are provided time to plan and time for professional development. There is more teacher autonomy to develop curriculum and lessons that fit their students. The country of Finland employs approximately the same number of teachers as New York City, but houses only 600,000 students compared to over 1 million school children in the Big Apple. On the average, starting salaries are lower in Finland than in the US. Compared to other professions, however, Finnish upper-secondary teachers with 15 years' experience make 102% of what other college graduates make, compared to 62% among U.S. high-school teachers (Moore, 2013).

School finance is handled much differently in Finland. High taxes lead to a free education for all students. The Finnish government pays for all educational expenses, including a healthy lunch, textbooks, and all learning supplies. Additionally, the government, often in collaboration with schools, provides health care. By contrast, in Kansas, state base aid per pupil is a court-contested challenge. Parent pay for many school related needs including text and workbooks, lunches and extra milk (although a sliding scale exists based on income), extracurricular expenses, field trips...and the list goes on.

A stark difference in the curriculum is the continuous focus on language learning. While all students graduate from Finnish schools fluent in two languages, most actually have sufficient knowledge in several more. A focus on career and college readiness is also evident in the course offerings. Languages, handicrafts (wood working, sewing, arts), international studies, and business classes are regularly completed. "A new initiative, the Youth guarantee, has been set up to ensure that all young adults find their way into education, working life and society. The Youth guarantee offers everyone under the age of 25, as well as recent graduates under 30, a job, on-the-job training, a study place or rehabilitation within three months of becoming unemployed." (FNBE, 2013, n.p.)

Very few students in Kansas study a second language. A national survey conducted by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages cites 16% of all Kansas students studied another language in 2008, as compared to a national rate of 18.5 percent. One Kansas district, Blue Valley of Overland Park, boasts 79.5 percent of their students enrolled in a language course. Considering the demographics of Kansas students, it is not surprising that Spanish is the number one foreign language studied and spoken. Of interest, is that Vietnamese is second most native language spoken, followed by Chinese (Farrar, 2011).

Compared to Finland, the teacher retention rate is lower in Kansas. While teachers leave the classroom for a variety of reasons, in 2010-2011 the top two reasons for leaving the classroom were retirement and moving to another school district within the State. However, the next two most prolific reasons include leaving the profession and leaving the State. In total, only 78% of the teachers that began teaching five years ago are still in the classroom. Unfortunately, the fifth overall reason for leaving the classroom during this time period was due to a reduction in force. (KSDE, 2011)

Fully 93 percent of Finns graduate from high school – 17.5 percentage points higher than American students. Sixty-six percent of Finns are accepted to college, a higher rate than the US and every European nation. Strikingly, the achievement gap between the weakest and strongest students academically is the smallest in the world (Moore, 2013).

### ***What does this mean for Kansas educators?***

Can we learn from Finland's success? Absolutely, we can. Is everything transferrable to our own system? Probably not. However, our reflective journey has allowed us to think deeply about our own work and the experiences we provide both pre-service and in-service teachers.

After conducting extensive research on Finnish education, Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) summed up Finnish reform efforts as placing “an emphasis on teaching students how to think creatively and manage their own learning” (n.p.). We agree with her statement and make a concerted effort to extend her observation to our teacher preparation program. Teachers need to be encouraged to think creatively and to be trusted to monitor their students' learning, in addition to their own, ongoing professional growth and training. Our program prides itself on building knowledgeable, ethical, caring, ethical decision makers; more than ever, we are more pointedly focusing on trusting our pre-service candidates to uphold these dispositions at all times. While creativity may have diminished in overall lesson development over the past decade, we will continue our tradition of holding a special professional development day for our candidates that focuses on creativity. We will continue to stress the development of the whole child and develop opportunities for creative problem solving within our candidates' future classrooms. Furthermore, we are hopeful that the shift to Common Core State Standards will bring back a focus on creativity and students' ability to manage their own learning as much-needed components of becoming career and college ready.

### ***References***

- Buchberger, F., & Buchberger, I. (2003). Problem-solving capacity of a teacher education system as a condition of success?: An analysis of the 'Finnish Case.' In F. Buchberger and S. Berghammer (Eds.) *Education policy analysis in a comparative perspective*. Linz, Austria: Trauner
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). Steady work: Finland builds a strong teaching and learning system. *Rethinking Schools*, 24, 4.
- Farrar, P. (2011). 2011 survey of world language enrollment. Kansas Department of Education. Retrieved March 1, 2013, from, <http://www.ksde.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=n0RqqkzseGE%3D>
- Kansas State Department of Education. (2011). Licensed personnel report. Retrieved March 1, 2013 from, [www.ksde.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=CzdnHgvNsRs%3D&tabid=322](http://www.ksde.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=CzdnHgvNsRs%3D&tabid=322)
- Moore, L. (2013) Finland has an education system the US should envy – and learn from. *The Guardian*. Retrieved March 1, 2013, from, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/feb/15/us-education-reform-lessons-from-finland>
- Partanen, A. (2012). What Americans keep ignoring about Finland's school success. Retrieved January 15, 2013, from, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/12/what-americans-keep-ignoring-about-finlands-school-success/250564/>
- Sahlberg, P. (2011). Developing effective teachers and school leaders: The cases of

Finland. American Educator, AFL-CIO. Retrieved February 15, 2013 from [www.all4ed.org/files/TeacherleaderEffectivenessReport.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/files/TeacherleaderEffectivenessReport.pdf)

### ***Additional Resources***

Niemi, H., Toom, A., & Kallioniemi, A. (2012). *Miracle of education: The principles and practices of teaching and learning in Finnish schools*. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Sahlberg, P. (2011). *Finnish lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* Teachers College Press: NY.

Finnish National Board of Education (2008). *Education in Finland*. Available at [http://www.oph.fi/download/124278\\_education\\_in\\_finland.pdf](http://www.oph.fi/download/124278_education_in_finland.pdf)