

FINLAND EDUCATION SYSTEM

1. What is the secret behind the well-known success of Finland's education system?

Finland started the education reform in a very difficult situation after the devastating years during the WW II. Developing our education system was vital for the economic recovery and development of the country.

Establishing a free 9-year compulsory comprehensive school was one of the most important socio-political decisions made in independent Finland. Today, free education is considered as part of the rights of a citizen in Finland and it is one of the cornerstones of the Finnish welfare society.

Rather than talking about Finland's education "system", I think we should talk about Finland's education philosophy: to give equal education opportunities for all citizens regardless of their backgrounds. In Finland, the aim of education is to educate all, not just some. We could say that before the educational reform, education opportunities were only offered to a selected, wealthy and/or lucky, group of people.

Our educational goals reflect our educational philosophy and these goals, in turn, guide our teaching and show how we understand learning: In the so called Finnish model, the purpose of learning is less to know how to do something as to know how to learn. The aim of Finnish education is to learn to cope with new, unknown, unforeseen situations. As the world is constantly changing, learning never ends. In Finland, all school curricula are based on national core curricula and all teachers are educated through similar national university Master's degree programmes. The teachers are not assigned to a school but they independently choose and apply to the school they want to work in. Moreover, as basic education schools do not select their students, the children have good chances in getting the same quality basic education no matter where they live.

I think the most important (intertwined) areas of Finnish education are a) the high level teacher education, which makes teachers and principals pedagogical professionals and b) decentralisation with a national framework core curriculum, which allow these professionals to make all main educational decisions in the grassroots level. Teachers and principals are the ones who implement education policies as well as didactic principles and make pedagogical choices on the grassroots level.

The practice can be called "a culture of trust". The culture of trust in education sector means that education authorities and political leaders believe that teachers, together with principals, parents and their communities, know how to provide the best possible education for their children and youth. Also the local authorities are educators, not business people or professional politicians.

According to the latest OECD research on "Decisions taken in public lower secondary schools at each level of government" ("decisions" referring to the organisation of instruction, personnel management, planning and structuring, and resources management) it was found that in Finland, the decisions are 100 % taken in the local and school level. For example in Turkey, about 60 % of the decisions are made in central or state level.

2. How important is technology in education in Finland? Could you explain the questions related to hardware and infrastructure?

Technology hasn't traditionally been emphasised in the Finnish curricula, except in the most recent ones. However, the money allocated to education is not earmarked in Finland and therefore, all municipalities and schools may target their resources independently according to what they decide. There are schools that nowadays use more technology but in most schools, technological tools are still used when they are available and when a teacher considers them important or useful for the learning processes. Sometimes they may be very important for the defined learning goals; sometimes "pen and paper" will well suit as well for the purpose.

Even though education technology has not been a focus area in Finnish education, our children did pretty well also in the 2015 OECD survey on online collaborative problem solving (7th from the 52 participant countries).

There isn't reliable research information that technology would improve students' learning. In some studies, frequent use of computers has actually been associated with lower results.

3. What is the role of games in education? Do you give importance in gamification or game-based learning?

All teaching methods and resources used are decided by the respective teachers. Teachers strive to make learning interesting for their students and use methods and resources accordingly.

It is required in the core curriculum that in grade levels 1-2, working methods must focus on observations, activities, games and imagination.

4. Could you explain STEM education in Finland? **Unfortunately, I'm not an expert in this area.**

5. How is the student evaluation made in Finland's education system? What kind of evaluation is done during the transition from basic education to the secondary and from secondary education to the university?

Finnish education focuses more on the educational processes than on the outcomes: the learning processes have value for their own sake. Therefore, the focus is on learning processes rather than on testing.

Teachers do a lot of formative assessment during the school year to get feedback to improve their teaching and students' learning processes. Summative assessments are usually done at the end of a particular study topic and they may vary from formal tests to portfolios and self-assessment.

At the end of each school year, students receive a school year report to show how well the student has achieved the targets set for the school year. Till grade 5, evaluation is usually done through verbal assessment. The teachers are obliged to use numerical grades for every subject in the school year report only from the 8th grade upwards.

In the core curriculum, there are sample evaluation criteria for "good performance" (that is 8 in the scale from 4 to 10) for each subject for the two transition phases: at the end of grade 6 and grade 9 that is the final evaluation.

There is no established examination system in basic education except for some national evaluations that the schools and classes can voluntarily take part in. Usually schools do take part in these as teachers and school can use them as tools for self-evaluation. Instead of testing the children, there is a strong focus on school-based self-evaluation and national sample-based evaluation.

External evaluations are conducted by Finnish Education Evaluation Council. these evaluations are sample-based and conducted according to the MEC evaluation plan. Evaluations are not for drawing ranking lists but to gather information for national education development and decision-making purposes. No individual school performance results are published. The main aim of the national evaluations of learning outcomes is to follow at national level how well the objectives set for education have been reached. Finland also takes part in international researches and studies, such as OECD's studies, to map effectiveness of its education policies and processes, and its national research results.

6. Does the Ministry of Education and Culture have any stakeholders with whom they work? If they do, what are their roles?

MEC and the National Agency for Education (NAE) work at the central governmental level: MEC is the highest education authority; NAE is responsible for drawing up the national core curricula.

A unique characteristic of the Finnish system is the very independent role of local authorities: municipalities, schools and teachers, who function at the grass root level by providing education. Local authorities are responsible for designing a local curriculum on the basis of the national core curriculum and for recruiting education personnel. All schools are responsible for practical teaching arrangements as well as the effectiveness and quality of their education. Teachers are responsible for students' learning and well-being at school. A framework curriculum allows teachers independently organise their classrooms, decide their teaching methods and choose the textbooks and materials they want to use.

In Finland, as in some other countries, the process of making a national curriculum is not purely governed by the administrators. Also educational professionals, parents and a range of other stakeholders are consulted. For example, for the 1994 curriculum, a lot of different stakeholders were included in the drafting process, such as some NGOs, researchers, representatives of business people and even parents.

Again, for example for the 2016 basic education curriculum, there were more than 300 people working together in the process. It was published online three times during the process also for public comments and feedback. The most important feedback, however, is said to come from the schools themselves.

7. What kind of innovations has been done in the new curriculum?

Contrary to some international media news, subject teaching hasn't been abolished in Finland. Finnish students still, in each school level, study compulsory school subjects. Instead, the new curriculum, more than the previous ones, encourages work over these school subjects. Each school subject contributes to the overall

competence building by bringing its subject specific knowledge, contents and methods to the learning processes.

In the new basic education curriculum, more emphasis has been put on so called transversal competences. The transversal competences are defined as follows: thinking and learning to learn; cultural knowledge, collaboration and expression; everyday life skills; multi-literacy; ICT literacy; working and entrepreneurial skills; and active citizenship and sustainable future.

In the new upper secondary curriculum, education is intertwined in cross-curricular themes which are taken into account in instruction in all subjects as appropriate.

The themes are defined as follows: active citizenship, entrepreneurship and working life; safety and wellbeing; sustainable development and global responsibility; cultural knowledge and internationalism; multi-literacy and media; and technology and society. Each school year, every school must have at least one clearly defined theme, project or course that combines the content of different subjects and deals with the selected theme from the perspective of several subjects. These entities are called multidisciplinary learning modules.

In the new upper secondary vocational curriculum, the emphasis is on lifelong learning skills, which are defined as follows: active citizenship, entrepreneurship and working life; safety and wellbeing; sustainable development and global responsibility; cultural knowledge and internationalism; multi-literacy and media; and technology and society.

TEACHER

8. What are the criteria for a teacher?

There is a requirement of a university Master's degree for teachers. In order to qualify as an applicant to a university programme, you will need to pass the Matriculation examination test, which is the only national test in Finland. It is taken after completing general upper secondary studies.

As universities function as autonomous units, they are able to organise their own entrance tests and select their students independently. The entrance test usually comprises two parts: a test testing academic skills needed for university level studies and an aptitude test, usually with interviews. The academic skills test has since 2006 been a joint-venture of a network of 7 universities in Finland.

Teacher education is very popular and teacher profession is socially valued in Finland: less than 10% of the applicants usually manage to get a study place in one of the universities offering teacher education in Finland.

9. Could you give details about teacher training in the university?

Class teachers major in education and they may specialise in teaching one or more subjects in their minor studies. Subject teachers major in specific subjects and do their pedagogical studies over a five-year programme or as a separate module after their graduation.

Teacher's pedagogical studies are minimum 60 ECTS while the whole degree is 300 ECTS for class and subject teachers and 180 ECTS for kindergarten teachers. In the teacher's pedagogical studies practical training amounts to 20 ECTS for class teachers and subject teachers and 25 ECTS for kindergarten teachers. The

pedagogical studies combine theory to practice. At the end of their studies, students prepare a Master's thesis that equals 40 ECTS.

The requirement for a school principal is also a Master's degree in education plus a certificate on Education Administration from the NAE (12,5 ECTS). In some schools, the principal may even hold a PhD in education.

Teacher education is research-based with the emphasis on developing pedagogical knowledge. With pedagogical knowledge I mean "to know how to teach". In Finnish context, it means to know how to teach so that all students, regardless of their background, will have equal chances to learn and succeed. Equal may mean different teaching methods and materials; probably also different tasks and assessment for different students. There is also emphasis on practice, which includes basic teaching skill practices in front of fellow students, and a much more significant portion of compulsory teaching practice at teacher-training schools run by the university the student teacher is studying in, and regular schools.

10. How do you evaluate the performance of teachers?

The decentralisation of leadership puts the principal in a crucial role: it is the obligation of the principal to oversee both administration and teaching in the school, to ensure that the school curriculum corresponds with the national goals, and that the written goals are put into practice in classrooms. The previous includes teacher performance. There is no formal evaluation for teacher performance in Finland. Instead, there is a strong focus on school-based self-evaluation.

11. What kind of studies and works do you have for improvement of teachers' teaching abilities? Do you have in-service trainings for teachers?

Municipalities are required to fund three days annually of mandatory professional development or planning for each teacher. Municipalities are also responsible for other in-service trainings for teachers. Some municipalities organise in-service programmes uniformly for all; in others, it is up to the individual teachers or school principals to decide how much and what type of professional development is needed and whether such interventions will be funded.

This refers also to Q13.

12. Do teachers have any responsibilities except standard course/lesson hours? If does, could you explain what they are?

Teachers have other duties related to their job such as homework checking, planning and preparing their lessons and sitting in different school-related meetings. One very important part of their job is home-school cooperation and monitoring their students' overall well-being.

13. How do you provide teacher competency in the usage of technological equipment?
See Q11.

REFUGEES

14. How many refugee students do you have in Finland? How is their education system and how do you run the orientation period of them?

I couldn't find the exact number of the immigrant students for the moment, but it has grown a lot during the past years. However, the number of pupils with an immigrant background is still rather small compared to for example the other European countries.

All children residing in Finland receive free nine-year compulsory basic education between the ages of 7-16, including refugee/immigrants, refugees and expatriate children.

All immigrant children are supposed to start their compulsory basic education as soon as possible, usually within weeks after their arrival in Finland. The number of immigrant students varies from area to area, from municipality to municipality and from school to school. 65 % of immigrants live in the biggest 10 cities; most of them in the capital Helsinki area. In these areas, in some schools almost 50% of their students may have an immigrant background when at the same time, schools in the other parts of Finland may have no or at least very few immigrant students.

Always when possible, we strive to include immigrant students in mainstream classes as one important aim of immigrant education is to help children feel as part of the community.

The core curriculum provides guidelines on how to adapt the curriculum in instruction in a foreign language or language-immersion instruction. For those children who, for various reasons, are behind the mainstream in terms of language of instruction (usually one of the official languages Finnish or Swedish) or other basic skills and competences, depending on a municipality, the children are placed either in immigrant profiled schools, in separate so called preparatory classes in regular schools or follow so called partially pull-out policy to provide them e.g. extra Finnish as a language B classes when the mainstream has their Finnish as a mother tongue classes.

STUDENTS AND CLASSROOM

15. How many days of the week are school days? How long takes courses/lessons in a day in basic education and secondary education?

The school week is from Monday to Friday. The length of a school day depends on a respective school's curriculum and on a respective class's timetable. However, the hours allocated to each subject and the minimum hours of education at different grade levels in comprehensive school are set in a government decree.

The timetables are typically divided into 45-minute lessons with a 15 minute break in between them. Teachers are allowed to combine these 45-minute lessons when they consider it necessary for the learning processes.

The minimum school hours per week for grades 1-3 are 19 hrs; for grade 3 they are 22 hrs; for grade 4 they are 24 hrs; for grades 5-6 they are 25 hrs; and for grades 7-9 need to have 30 hrs.

16. Is homework given to the students in Finland?

Homework is considered as part of the learning processes in Finland and it always needs to be meaningful in terms of the learning goals and it also needs to support student's learning. As homework, students are e.g. required to apply the skills that

have been studied at school or to do some project or exercise to deepen their understanding of what has been studied. It is up to the teacher to decide what kind of homework is needed and most suitable for a given learning process and/or a given student. In general, I believe, compared to many other countries, Finnish students don't have to spend very much time doing their homework.

17. Could you give information about the physical structure of the schools and classes?

The schools and classes differ from one another, but they all must be furnished and equipped so that they support the school's curricula based education. The schools are free to choose how they group their students and the teachers are free to choose how they organise their classrooms. The class sizes vary as the number of students per class is not defined. Usually the number of students in one class is somewhere between 20 and 30.

A typical school has home-classrooms for each class and separate subject classrooms for upper grades subject teaching, such as a sports hall, chemistry/physics classroom, textiles/technical handicraft classroom, home economics classroom with kitchen areas to cook. All schools have a supervised outdoors recess area where students usually (some weather conditions apply) spend their break times. Usually there is a close-by sports field where outdoors physical education takes place. There is also a kitchen and a lunch room as the schools offer each student a free-of-charge lunch every day. Most schools also have their own school libraries.

18. How do you make school attractive to students?

One requirement for the schools is that their learning environment should support positive teacher-student and student-student relationships. Teachers and principals as pedagogical professionals use their pedagogical knowledge and skills to ensure this.

It is recognised that in order to learn and to succeed, all students, regardless of their background, need to have equal chances to feel comfortable at school, to feel being part of the group. This is one reason why home-school cooperation is a very important part of Finnish education. Teachers in general know pretty well their students and their families, and the teacher-student relationships are very informal.

I believe that at least most of the overall learning goals also make sense to the students. One of the most important learning goal is to learn to take responsibility of one's own learning: to learn to set one's goals and work towards them. Equality in education in Finland does not mean "the same" but depending on the student, it may mean different teaching methods and materials and different tasks and even assessment. A teacher cannot teach each student differently, but she/he can help students observe their learning processes and help them find their learning styles they find most suitable for them.

19. Which courses are given to the students during the basic and secondary education periods?

The subjects common to all students in basic education are listed in the Basic Education Act. In grade levels 1-6 there are 14 of them, a few more in higher grades. The hours allocated to each subject and the minimum hours of education at different grade levels are set in a government decree.

The subjects common to all are: mother tongue and literature (Finnish or Swedish), the other national language (Swedish or Finnish), foreign languages, environmental studies, health education, religion or ethics, history, social studies, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, geography, physical education, music, visual arts, textile/technical handicrafts and home economics.

In the core curriculum, the goals and contents of different school subjects are divided according to the grades: 1-2, 3-6, and 7-9.

20. Which languages are taught? Could you explain your foreign language teaching methods or strategies?

Unfortunately, I haven't taught foreign languages myself in a Finnish school. As the teachers are free to choose the methods and strategies they use, I will not be able to illuminate this part of the question.

Language studies are divided into compulsory and optional languages. In some schools, children can start their first compulsory foreign language already in grade 1 (11,2 % of the first graders do it in Finland), but generally the first foreign language is started in grade 3. Most often this language is English though in some schools, the first foreign language options also include Swedish, German, French and Russian. Some recent statistics show that 66% of the pupils attending grades 1-6 study English either as a compulsory or optional foreign language.

The second compulsory language for Finnish students is Swedish, which starts in grade 6.

The first additional optional foreign language can be studied from grade 3 onwards (depending on the school); another optional foreign language can be chosen in grade 7.