

Wise, Wiser, Teacher – What I Learned in Finnish Schools

By Therese Quinn

On a tour of an elementary school in Tampere, Finland, I was thrilled by the teachers' lounge. It was large and stocked with long tables, full bookcases, and not just comfortable-looking, but stylish—that great Finnish design—cherry red armchairs. A table held a coffeepot and a box of Fazer chocolates; a large window looked out on a stand of birch trees. During the 20 minutes I spent there talking to the school's director, teachers stopped in to chat with each other, to sit and rest, or to work.

I also loved other things I saw at this school: boys and girls knitting puppets in an art room; sock-footed children sitting on their classroom floor playing chess; a hot lunch served on china plates and eaten by students and teachers together at tables with flowers in vases. But I was awestruck by what the teachers' room indicated—someone who made decisions about space and resources knew that teachers should have lots of both.

That was 2006. Three years later I returned to spend a semester as a Fulbright scholar at the University of Helsinki. While there I visited seven elementary and high schools, and four universities. I talked to many parents, teachers, and professors about education in their country.

Finns are proud of their uniformly high-quality schools. Unlike in the United States, where parents fret about getting their children into "good" and often private schools with restrictive enrollment, virtually all schools are public, and most Finnish parents send their children to the school closest to their home. Everyone I spoke with told me that teaching is a desirable profession in Finland, albeit not very highly paid, and also largely female. The nation's positive view of the field is expressed in the slogan on T-shirts made for the teacher education program at the University of Oulu—"Wise, Wiser, Teacher." Teaching is seen as comparable to information technology employment; it is considered exciting and contemporary work.

The master's-level degree program for teachers is free, as is all education in Finland. The government also provides a monthly allowance, housing, meals, and free health care. Once employed, teachers enjoy a good deal of respect, autonomy, and responsibility, and the benefits of strong union representation. Teachers and professors are part of the same union, and even teacher education students have a union. (Eighty percent of all Finns are members of a trade union.)

Referring to the national core curriculum as a guide, teachers work independently and collaboratively with colleagues to design curricula and assessments. Finnish teachers are in the classroom about 20 hours each week, and spend another five to 15 hours planning, depending on their level of experience.

Finland's education system is not without problems: Roma children drop out at high rates, immigrant children are overrepresented in special education classes, parents have begun avoiding schools with large immigrant populations, and sexual identity-based slurs are common in schools. But Finns often told me that they value equality, and this social ethic has an array of education-related tangibles. To start, basic education (ages 7–17) includes all materials and supplies, dental and health care, hot meals, and, if needed, individualized tutoring and special education, even before formal schooling begins. For example, one mother told me that a pediatrician recognized memory difficulties at her child's school entrance physical and prescribed remedies, including asking this parent to memorize poetry with her son. These kinds of assessments follow children to school so families and teachers can continue addressing learning problems early and together.

Probably most important, school and health services are embedded within a society that provides preschool, housing, and a minimum living allowance for all, and anyone pushing a stroller rides public transportation free. That daily sight sets a tone that speaks volumes about Finland's priorities.

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