

Swedish language teacher Miia Tiirikainen at the Käpylä school in Helsinki (City of Helsinki Education Department). Photo: Pertti Nisonen / City of Helsinki Media Bank

# FINNISH LESSONS FOR KIWI SCHOOLS?

Well-qualified teachers who have the trust of their community are at the heart of Finland's educational success. MATT FINCH looks at what New Zealand schools could learn from the Scandinavian country's education system.

SINCE THE TURN of the 21st century, the Finnish school system has demonstrated outstanding educational achievement. Its learners rate among the highest achievers in the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA); the survey of learner attainment at age 15 in mathematics, science and literacy across the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Education in this small Scandinavian country is not defined by market forces or competition between schools. Finns begin their schooling at age seven. Prior to this, they may or may not have had one year of preschool. Compulsory education runs for nine years and ends in a matriculation exam, which is the only testing mandated by government.

After-school classes and private tutoring are rare in Finland. Although intensive special education needs support is offered to a relatively high proportion of learners in the early years of primary school, this provision is largely integrated into mainstream schooling. The exception is for foreign learners, who may receive one year of separate preparatory education to help them match their native speaking peers' language skills.

One of the most impressive aspects of Finnish success is that there is very little difference in attainment across social and economic divides. A commitment to comprehensive state schooling, emphasising teacher independence and autonomy over testing and performance assessment, has allowed a country of just over five million people to consistently rank amongst the world's highest achieving education systems.

For a New Zealand audience, Finland demonstrates that smaller nations have the potential to punch above their weight in educational terms. The "big beasts" of education – nations such as the USA and China, with larger populations and budgets – don't necessarily have the advantage when it comes to delivering education that empowers teachers and learners alike.

The Finns' attitude to raising standards in education has been one of humility and innovation, learning from best practice around the world and adapting it to suit their society. Examples include curriculum models inspired by work in the UK, Canada and USA, as well as cooperative learning techniques adapted from Israel, and Australian methods for teaching science and maths.

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Teacher Anu Porala and learner Markus Ilves at the Siltamäki school in Helsinki (City of Helsinki Education Department). Photo: Pirjo Mailammi / City of Helsinki Media Bank

An anecdote from the early 1990s captures the wry sense of perspective that has allowed Finland to develop its world-beating education system. At an international conference, the Finns' neighbours and rivals Sweden declared their intention to become the global number one school system by the year 2000. The Finnish education minister, in response, offered a more modest ambition: "For us, it's enough to be ahead of Sweden."

"The irony is that many of our best ideas come from other countries," admitted Dr Pasi Sahlberg, director of the Finnish government agency tasked with promoting international cooperation in the fields of training and education.

A former mathematics teacher who went on to an academic career and senior role with the World Bank before returning to his homeland, Dr Sahlberg is an engaging and easy-going educator who plays Neil Young tunes to chill out, dispelling stereotypes of the dour and introverted Finn.

Although he acknowledges the debt to educational innovators around the world, Dr Sahlberg said Finland's success can also be attributed to the independence and respect the nation accords its school teachers. Finnish teacher training consists of a rigorous master's-level programme, leading to a job with good working conditions and substantial recognition.

"It's not so much the quality of our training, as the quality of the people," Dr Sahlberg said. "Having a master's degree appeals to people with ambitions for a professional status."

The Finns are not the only educators currently focused on attracting high calibre staff to the profession. Geoffrey Canada of Harlem Children's Zone told New York audiences last year that schools, operating on a district by district basis, should "recruit and pay teachers as we do lawyers, but also make them work lawyers' hours".

Dr Sahlberg emphasised that the Finnish model is designed to serve the entire nation, not just individual neighbourhoods: "We're about making a whole system work, not just two or five schools." Finnish teacher salaries are not markedly above the national average, but only 1 in 4 applicants are selected for teacher training – and just 1 in 10 for primary school education training.

Trust underpins the Finnish education system at all levels. The teachers' union maintains good relations with the Ministry of Education; parents by and large respect the teachers who care for their children; and frontline educators have a hand in deciding the design, delivery and assessment of curriculum.

Dr Sahlberg: "While there are national documents and regulations to guide teachers, it's schools and municipalities who take responsibility for planning the curriculum. Curriculum design is



The Nature School at the Harakka Nature Centre in Helsinki. Photo: Pia Bäckman / City of Helsinki Media Bank



Teacher Kaija Hyrkäs-Lyhtikäinen and learners at the Taivallahti school in Helsinki (City of Helsinki Education Department). Photo: Pertti Nisonen / City of Helsinki Media Bank



A music class at the Taivallahti school in Helsinki (City of Helsinki Education Department). The teacher is Marjo Lehto. Photo: Pertti Nisonen / City of Helsinki Media Bank

part of our teachers' basic training and helps to drive school-wide improvement efforts."

Jessica Duff, a teacher at Whangarei Primary School, extolled the virtues of this approach. As in many New Zealand schools, staff at Whangarei refine nationally mandated content to address events that have local and current relevance.

Jessica gave the 2011 Rugby World Cup as an example: *The New Zealand Curriculum* is not as prescriptive as that in the UK, where I also worked as a primary teacher. We have an outline of key skills the children need to learn, but how you go about addressing those skills is up to the teacher – which lets you choose topics that interest your kids, like last year's World Cup mania!"



The Herttoniemi school in Helsinki (City of Helsinki Education Department). Photo: Pertti Nisonen / City of Helsinki Media Bank

While the US and UK tend to assess teachers by their ability to raise their learners' test scores, Finns operate in a school system with minimal testing. The same spirit of trust that informs their curriculum also shapes the Finnish relationship to exams and league tables, as education researcher Samuel Abrams of New York's Columbia University pointed out: "Trust is basic to a school system without standardised testing. Teachers must feel enfranchised and empowered in order to be creative and effective."

In his discussion with *Gazette Focus*, Sahlberg expressed concern that overemphasis on performance assessment weakens teachers' morale and their vocational commitment to doing the best by their learners: "Accountability is what is left when you remove responsibility. Teaching, caring for, and educating children can't be assessed by quantitative metrics alone."

Those keen to emulate the Finns' approach must note that exceptional national characteristics may play some part in Finnish schools' outstanding success. Schools policy is not a controversial topic for Finns, who as a nation tend towards political consensus on educational matters. Samuel spent six weeks observing classroom practice and interviewing public officials across Scandinavia, and gained the impression that "Finns are people who don't jaywalk even when there's no traffic. It's a country where mothers leave their babies in carriages unattended outside cafes."

This engrained trust is combined with a traditional emphasis on literacy: historically, Finns could only marry in church if they were able to read and write. Together, such factors create a uniquely supportive environment in which to grow a stable and effective education system. Still, the Finnish example is a thought provoking one for any New Zealander considering what 21st century education might look like.

The Finns themselves are already looking towards the future and the shape of schooling beyond 2012. With any nation that finds themselves at the summit of educational attainment, there's a danger of resting on one's laurels – but Dr Sahlberg is among those agitating for ongoing reform of the successful Finnish system. He compared educational surveys like PISA to international athletics: "If we over-emphasise international competition, we may see people trying to boost their performance temporarily, to get a better position in the results tables. In order to find the way to the future, we need to keep on innovating, and learning from each other. It's been the key to Finland's success." ■