

How Finnish schools shine

Teachers are respected, exams are shunned and league tables simply don't exist – but if the Finnish system is so good why is it so hard to emulate?



Classes in Finland are far more relaxed than those in the UK. Photograph: www.alamy.com

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In 2009 the UK's education policy directors suffered a significant blow. The **PISA tests** (OECD Programme for International Study Assessment) results were published, ranking the UK way down the international league table in reading, maths and science.

In total 65 countries were assessed; the UK scored: 25th in reading, 28th in maths and 16th in science. The overall best performer in the 2009 test was the region of Shanghai, China. Results from **PISA** suggested that school autonomy in defining the curriculum and assessment methods

relates positively to overall performance. Additionally, the [PISA](#) data reported that creating homogeneous schools and/or classrooms through selection is unrelated to the average performance of education systems.

As if these facts weren't enough to send policy makers and directors into a whirlwind of confusion, it was also noted that UK ranked as 8th in the table for spending per pupil, but had a 23rd position average overall – this raises the question: "Who does score consistently highly and how do they approach the delivery of education in a pedagogic, political and cultural sense?"

One western country that has excelled in [PISA](#) ratings consistently over the years and is highly regarded across the globe as a leading education nation is Finland. Their sustained success has for many years prompted educationalists to consider how they have achieved this.

The reasons behind Finland's success are complex, not because they have one particularly incomprehensible approach to education, but instead, the evolved working parts within their system, framed within their cultural backdrop complement each other tremendously. Therefore an explanation, in my view, cannot be plucked out of their model in isolation, as each element is interdependent and inherently contingent on various other tacit and inconspicuous aspects that ultimately play a significant role within the mechanics of the model. It is this complexity that has perhaps been the source of difficulties experienced by authorities attempting to directly emulate their system.

In Finland teaching is a prestigious career. Children aspire to be doctors, lawyers, scientists and in the same breath teachers. They are respected and appreciated; they are highly qualified (requiring a Masters degree for full time employment) and job selection is a tough process with only best candidates gaining the posts.

The Finnish curriculum is far less 'academic' than you would expect of such a high achieving nation. Finnish students do the least number of class hours per week in the developed world, yet get the best results in the long term. Students in Finland sit no mandatory exams until the age of 17-19. Teacher based assessments are used by schools to monitor progress and these are not graded, scored or compared; but instead are descriptive and utilised in a formative manner to inform feedback and assessment for learning.

Great emphasis is put on pupil and teacher trust and well-being. Outdoor, practical learning opportunities and healthy related physical activity sessions are a regular feature in the curriculum: helping to maintain a healthy body and mind.

Finnish schools receive full autonomy, with head teachers and teachers experiencing considerable independence when developing and delivering their own individual curricula: suited to their setting. Combinations of alternative pedagogic approaches, rather than mere instructional methods are utilised by the teachers. The pedagogical freedom experienced facilitates greater creativity, pro-activity and innovation.

This naturally allows a greater degree of individual emotional well being, that no doubt plays a role in fostering positive learning role models and environments: positively shaping the minds of teachers and pupils alike.

Finland's Ministry of Education's philosophy has been to trust the professionals, parents and communities to guide their own policy: and it would appear that their investment has paid off.

From this secure base, in which high quality teachers are appreciated and trusted to do their job effectively as they see fit and political agendas

are deflected, there emerges an impressive education system to be proud of that serves its students, communities and country very well.

All students in Finland receive a free education from when they start at seven years of age until they complete their university studies. During their educational journey all pupils receive free school meals, resources and materials, transport and support services.

Professional Learning Communities are integral to sharing and spreading good practice in a collaborative manner. The systematic introduction of languages is also striking and very effective. Pupils will often begin learning a third language by 11 years of age and some a fourth at 13.

A no child is left behind approach means that all classes contain a mixture of ability level pupils, with most classes containing two or more teachers who focus on those needing additional support. By having professionals working in conjunction, the needs of the pupils can be better met within a happy and familiar environment. Many teachers also stay with a single class for many years, moving with them through the school.

Many institutions are combined primary and secondary schools with no major unsettling transition stages; this also allows a consistent ethos and common language to pervade. Students address teachers by their Christian names, do not wear uniforms, and are encouraged to relax in their surroundings.

As with any system there are of course strengths, areas for development and ideological conflict. The Finnish system is aware of this and prides itself on positively evolving with the pupils' needs and interests at the heart of all decisions.

The Finnish system's success is built on the idea that: "less can be more". This may appear counter-intuitive to many within other

educational systems in which standards and effectiveness are measured in standardised data and evidence trails. The absence of corrosive competition and an egalitarian ethos inherent in the Finnish culture has surely played a role in shaping this very impressive system.

With [PISA 2012](#) on the horizon, the outcomes are sure to provide more food for thought for all educators and policy makers around the world.

- Adam Lopez is a primary school teacher at Langstone Primary School in Newport, South Wales. Adam has used Comenius funding from the British Council this year to create a multilateral international partnership/project that has allowed teachers to visit an array of countries and provided a shared curriculum for the pupils.

If you are interested in creating your own international schools partnership and learning in an international community there are many schemes funded by [The British Council](#) that can make this happen.

- This article was amended on 21 May 2012. When this piece was first published it included a reference to 80% of Finnish pupils going on to university. This figure is unverified so has been removed.