



International Network for School Social Work

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The Miracle of Finnish schools - Some reasons behind the success

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Finnish students have time and again performed at the top in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and other international educational assessments. This has not been because Finland would have had the greatest numbers of top performers. Rather, it has been because in Finland there has been very little variation in students' performance. In Finland, weak performers have been relatively few, and they have performed better than their peers in other countries. How has this come about?

There is no one single reason for the success of Finnish schools. Rather, several interrelated factors have helped them to thrive. Some of the most important of these are the following.

Equity and equal opportunities to learn

The success of Finnish schools has largely been related to the principle of equity. In Finland, we want to provide all students with equal opportunities to learn, no matter where they live, whether they are boys or girls, whether they are rich or poor, etc. Also, we are especially interested in the weakest. Thus, in Finland there is a school within reasonable reach of every child. Also, there is very little variation in performance between the schools. We have no elite schools and no bad schools. All schools are about equally good. In addition, boys and girls attend the same schools and study the same curriculum. Besides, school is free of charge for students and families. This includes not only instruction and school materials but also, for example, free warm school meals, transportation to and from the school, health care (including medical and dental care) and special needs education. This is probably one reason why in Finland children of poor and disadvantaged families have performed better than their peers in many other countries.

Comprehensiveness of education

In Finland, the core curriculum is the same for all students. Apart from so-called optional subjects (which make up about 20% of the study time), all students study basically the same subjects. Also, there is no channeling into different tracks or streams. The weakest and most talented students all study the same curriculum.

Heterogeneous teaching groups

The weakest and best students work in the same classes. Finnish classes are thus heterogeneous. Heterogeneous classes have to be small so that the teacher can teach them. In Finland, the average class size has been much smaller than in many other countries, 18-22 students. In a small class, the teacher is better able to tailor his or her teaching to the needs of the individual students, especially the weakest. In harmony with this, studies show that weaker students perform better in heterogeneous groups. One explanation for this is that in homogeneous groups the course contents and expectations are often so low that they do not promote learning.

Highly qualified and motivated teachers

Teaching heterogeneous groups requires highly competent teachers. In Finland, all teachers have to complete a university-level education (Master's degree). The program takes, on average, 5 years to complete and includes not only theoretical but also practical studies: teacher trainees follow and give lessons in schools and receive hands-on advice and feedback from senior teachers. Besides, in Finland the teacher's profession is very popular. Each year thousands of highly motivated and skilled candidates apply, for example, for the class teacher's program. Only 10-15% of them are admitted. Those admitted are thus really the best of the best.

Teacher autonomy

The teaching profession is highly regarded and teachers are well respected in Finland. Largely thanks to their high-level education, Finnish teachers have a lot of responsibility and autonomy in school affairs, much more so than in many other countries. This is seen, for example, in that even though Finland does have a national school curriculum, this only provides very general guidelines. How the curriculum is actually implemented and what is actually taught in a class and how is decided by each individual teacher. Also, Finland does not have any national or standardized tests. Instead, each teacher assesses and grades his or her own students. Again, this puts Finnish teachers in a better position to adjust their teaching to the needs of their students. In harmony with this, studies show that in countries where teachers have a lot of autonomy, students perform better than in countries where education is steered centrally.

Special needs education

Since instruction in Finland is given in heterogeneous groups, it is important to make sure that the weakest students do not fall behind. To this end, there is in each school a special education teacher. Special education teachers have a university-level education. They work with class teachers to identify the students that need extra help and work with these students either individually or in small groups, providing the support they need to keep up with their classmates. Usually, special needs education is provided in this way, as part of regular education, in normal schools. However, if the student has very obvious sensory, emotional or intellectual problems, s/he is assigned to a separate special education institution. In Finland, only 1.5% of all students attend institutions of this type.

Student welfare services

Other support is also available for students needing help. Each school has a student welfare group, which consists of the school principal, the special education teacher, a student counselor, a school nurse, a school social worker and a psychologist, among others. Together these promote students' learning and psychosocial and physical well-being by, for example, removing obstacles to their learning.