

Finland – EU – mail first research visit May 2004 [why „did“ Finland come top in PISA?]

The Finland school system is very different from ours in the UK. Children start school aged 7 and attend elementary school for 6 years followed by 3 years at lower secondary school. At 16 they go into vocational education or into 3 years further study at the upper secondary school which takes them on to university.

We were in Jyvaskyla, about the 10th biggest town in Finland, 3 hours by train north of Helsinki and inevitably by and surrounded by lakes. University town, home of architect Alvar Aalto. There were 8 of us, 2 each from Germany, Norway, Sweden and UK. We were in pairs visiting 4 schools. Each pair was accompanied by a trainee teacher who acted as translator. My partner was Marianne, Head of a comprehensive school in Norway of 350 11 to 16 year olds. Our first school was an elementary one. We saw 7 year olds who would be starting school in the autumn lining up in the playground for their introductory visit. At age 7 very self contained and responsible young people. There were no barriers or fences on the playground which was adjacent to a road (admittedly with little traffic). But such a state of affairs would be impossible in the UK.

The ethic of the elementary school was inclusion and ecological awareness. We saw some inspired teaching of children with special needs. After 2 days in the elementary school we changed to a lower secondary some 20 km out of town in a rural municipality. 263 13 to 16 year olds. Beautiful 10 year old buildings. Excellently equipped classrooms, all with large wall-mounted TV, OHP, computer, large pull down maps. Wonderful art and textile areas.

The school day is from 8.15 to 2.15. 6 lessons of 45 minutes each followed by a break of 15 or at lunchtime 30 minutes. In Finland all children have a free hot school dinner. Behaviour at lunchtime was civilized and of course getting a self service lunch was speedier than in the UK because there was no hold up making payments at the till. Minimal evidence of teachers on duty.

Teachers in this lower secondary school admitted they were fortunate in having classes the average size of which was 18. In the elementary school it was more like 25. Teachers were very friendly, relaxed, unstressed.

Their teaching load varies from 18 to 23 lessons a week. School year is the same length as in the UK. School finishes end of May and reconvenes in late August so holidays at other times of the year are short.

Teachers are highly-trained – the youngest are 25 whereas in the UK you can be in the classroom aged 22. We saw few support staff but rich resources. All pupils had not only free textbooks for each subject but also free printed workbooks. In an English lesson for correction of homework the teacher gave out a key book and the pupils corrected their own work. All classes are mixed ability and stay together through the school. Special needs work is well resourced but questions about work with gifted and talented students brought a somewhat blank response.

We observed English and Finnish lessons and saw interesting use of pair work. The teacher would always pair a stronger student with a weaker one and generally a boy with a girl.

My UK colleague Gary who is an Advanced Skills Teacher of Mathematics saw mixed ability maths teaching of 15 year olds where attainment was what he would expect in a top set here in the UK. The Finnish maths teachers were thinking of introducing some setting. Gary's advice "you mustn't".

There are no exams at 16. There is some sample government testing and schools not chosen for this can request copies of the test for pupils to do.

The lower secondary school pupils run after-school classes and activities for the elementary school pupils who share the site (and the head teacher). The head of proud of the anti-drugs programme (alcohol abuse is a problem). If pupils succeed in abstaining from smoking, alcohol and drugs for 3 years, parents pay for rewards such as a holiday in Crete.

All Finnish schools have and use loudspeaker systems. We saw no ICT being used except in the ICT lessons. Little evidence of specialist science areas – they seem to manage to teach science in normal classrooms.

So why did Finland come top in PISA?

I would suggest from evidence we saw that factors in their success include: -

- Well-trained and highly-motivated teaching staff with relatively light teaching loads;
- Mixed-ability teaching. No stressful bottom sets;
- Relatively relaxed school day with 15 minute breaks after each 45 minute lesson;;
- No teaching to tests or exams.

EU-mail (European mixed-ability individualized learning) is a Comeniusart funded project which began in January this year and continues through 2005. After the research visits to each participating country the focus will be on producing materials to help teachers and teacher trainers.

The next research visit is to Tameside in the UK in September (followed by Norway in October, Sweden in November and Germany in January next year).

Please visit the project website www.eu-mail.info. Further information available from Maureen Cruickshank 07876 395 259.