

A different country...

...and it consistently tops the international educational league tables. So what, exactly, is Finland doing right? The answer, says **Phil Beadle**, goes way beyond the classroom



★ ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PHIL BEADLE IS A TOURING EDUCATOR WHO HAS ATTAINED SOME MINOR INFAMY FOR BEING ABLE TO SPELL SOME QUITE DIFFICULT WORDS AND FOR ENJOYING THE COMPANY OF CHILDREN.

“It’s funny Dad, isn’t it Dad?” asks my eight-year-old son, Lou, as he tucks his earlobe into his ear while ambling down one of the main shopping streets of sunny Helsinki, “How the people McDonalds in Finland seem to have the same cleverness as the cleverest people you would ever meet in England ... And wouldn’t it be interesting (Dad) to do a cleverness comparison between the people where we live and the people here?”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t think the people in Lewisham McDonalds would do very well.”

He’s right. The charming ladies in the Helsinki McDonalds are so delightful, so bright and so articulate, that they don’t even have a script: they are trusted to give of their best in any of the three or four different languages that they routinely speak. So articulate are they that you feel almost tempted to take them to downtown Lewisham and show them how it’s really done.

“Look. This is the correct surly expression; and you need to learn this particular, monosyllabic shrug... and we generally find it’s best not to master the home language, let alone three others.”

Outside of educational circles, Finland is very much the underrated secret. At a two-hour time difference away from Britain’s grey fields and time-serving work-junkies, it is a land of vast, granite slabs; air oxygenated by endless forests of linden trees, pine and flowers; and wildlife on an altogether different scale – where we have asthmatic sparrows and scraggy foxes, they have wolverine and elk. There’s a lot of nature in Finland, a lot of trees, a lot of resources... and not that many people.

Within educational circles, however, everyone knows the narrative of the Finnish education system: fully comprehensive, no private schools, highly qualified teachers who are held up as respected and valued members of society; and, most importantly, Finland is, as we know, at the very top of the league tables of international comparison. Where it appears fairly evident to the external observer that the juggernaut machinations of the Shanghai China system, and of the Singaporeans, are built on Confucianism and the idea that work and life are not divisible, Finland holds out a beacon of hope to wildly overworked and over-monitored British educators. In the shape of Finland we see that it is possible for an education system to be built on principles of equality, and to function very well indeed, thank you.

But it is easy to eulogise, from ignorance, at a distance, and to get it all wrong. What does the Finnish system actually look like close-up? I’m glad you asked. Because over the summer I took up the very kind invite of Ressu Comprehensive School in Helsinki to come and play, and to see what it is that makes the Finnish education system the envy of the world. This is what I found.

Independence days

“Oh, I don’t check their work!” says Principal, Erja Hovén, somewhat gigglingly scandalised at the idea of monitoring the work of the teachers in her team, “They are professionals. They are proud of their job, and I trust them. Besides, they are all better teachers than me...”

Erja has been Principal of Ressu since 1992. It seems one of the reasons that the Finnish education system is so very functional, so very healthy, is that teachers rarely change

jobs. Why would they? The government seems – somehow – to think it is important that they are happy in their work. They are accountable to a degree, of course, but the accountability is proportionate. Not for them the Premier League approach where a head teacher isn't even allowed one aberrant set of results before he or she is sacked. If they've had a dodgy season it might be down to the cohort: the kneejerk is not always to blame the teachers. Teachers are important in Finland.

And it is evident that this lack of pressure and desperation filters down from the Principal to the teachers. It is evident in the staffroom, in which teachers sit, engaged in fraternal chat, and in which all the same posters and schedules as in a British staffroom are immediately obvious. It is evident in lessons, which run purposefully without any sense that having an external observer at the back of the lesson means that anything has to be done differently. It is evident in the timetable. And, most of all, it is evident in the children, who appear happy, unstressed and intellectually nourished. They do not wear uniform. There is an unstated sense that the idea would be preposterous, as it would be about controlling them and Finnish society does not think much of top-down, external measures of control.

I ask Erja about the lack of uniform and about whether Finnish teachers have any view of schools in Britain. "Yes. I have been to English schools, and it was so strict that even I was a little afraid. Everything in British education seems to be controlled, and being controlled does not make people happy."

This idea of control being an unworthy motive for a system whose function is orientated around enlightenment extends everywhere, and appears to be a key principle. It is about education; not about the reporting of it. There is no inspection regime in Finland! There are no national exams in Finland! The sum total of data that is reported per year is one – yes, you have read that right, just one – cluster diagram of which, it seems, no one takes much note.

But the most interesting thing of all for a visiting British teacher looking for tips and ideas to steal is how similar the pedagogy is: there is nothing in a lesson in a Finnish comprehensive that British teachers would not recognise. In fact, pedagogically, the locus of control that has encircled British teachers has made our practice tighter, more urgent and more detailed than our more successful colleagues across the Báltic. Unlike the Finns, we cannot make mistakes.

A British teacher would view the Finnish timetable with tear-filled eyes of envious awe and bitter wonder. Lessons are 45 minutes long, and after every single one there is a 15-minute break. During this time the younger children play outside, the older children catch up on stuff or chat, and the teachers are actively encouraged to go to the staffroom and socialise. Their relationships with each other are held to be important.

A class act

The difference is one of *philosophy*, and like all things in Britain, it ultimately boils down to the continued hegemony of the British class system. Finland is a relatively new country. It has existed as a unified state for less than 100 years, and its principles are modern. They have never had a king or queen, there is no real societal strata of the super-rich, and there is a sense that after centuries of domination by either Russia or Sweden, they want no more bosses. Equality is a key principle and education the main driver of improving living standards.

The Finns regard social welfare as an obligation they are happy to pay for, rather than as a grudging handout to the feckless poor, as they prefer to live in a society without fear. And it is this healthy society that has allowed them to build an education system that is the envy of the world. There is very little child poverty: 1 in 20 children in Finland grow up without basic needs met; it is more than 1 in 4 in England. And the differential between the highest and lowest earners is 16,000 USD a year less than it is in ours.

Could we – on our small island, blighted by feudal societal structures and with nothing left to sell – ever hope to produce an education system as functional as that which exists in this young, enlightened and very, very beautiful country? In our wildest dreams we might lose ourselves in the fantasy of the idea, but ours is a land of the 'haves' and the 'have nots', and the 'haves' will remain forever eager to perpetuate an education system that keeps things as they are, and a society in which the 'have nots' (for which read state schools and state school teachers) will have to work ever harder for ever less, so that profit differentials can be optimised for the 'haves'. In our wildest dreams.



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