

FINNISH LESSONS

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Within the space of only one generation, Finland has made a successful transition from an agrarian society to a high-tech community with the highest educational level in Europe. But without having been able to combine their tradition of solidarity with the virtues of originality and discipline, the Finns would not have made it this far.

Finland is now a country many politicians look upon with envy, due to its being ranked as the best performing European country in the PISA-2000 study. Since the results were made public, politicians and educational experts have flocked to schools in Finland to discover the secret behind such outstanding performance. And so did I. Because of a tip I got from a PISA researcher, I decided to visit one of the best performing schools in Finland, the Voionmaa secondary school in Jyväskylä.

Counting on education for all

The first thing you discover when visiting Finland in the late summer is your own shadow. As you walk along, your shadow follows you on the other side of the road as if it were a grotesquely distorted extension of yourself. It is the effect of a sun that always hangs low, shining yellow and bright on the horizon. Also, it is not unlikely that you will meet cross-country skiing Finns in the streets with

ski poles in their hands and traditional wool caps on their heads. The only problem is that there is no snow and they do not use skis. They use rollerblades.

The new headmaster of the Voionmaa school in Jyväskylä is Ismo Falck. He is a young biologist who got the job temporarily after the previous head teacher, Tamara Eloranta, retired last summer. He shows me the school. At first glance it does not appear to be the wonderful place of educational excellence it is said to be. The grey buildings clearly need to be renovated. The long naked corridors are painted in poisonous green colours, and the classrooms are quite small. But there is no graffiti. Lots of students between fourteen and seventeen walk quietly up and down the corridors or sit on the small benches reading.

“We have no national tests, something which gives us a lot of freedom,” says Ismo Falck. “And we do not control what the teachers are teaching. We only look for teachers who are willing to get involved in the students’ learning and are able to support the weak as well as the strong students. The atmosphere among the teachers is very good at this school.”

In Jyväskylä, Finnish and foreign students can study English from grades one to six in the neighboring Cygnaeus school and from grades seven to nine in the Voionmaa school. Those foreign students who are not taught in English are given one year of preparatory tutorials for comprehensive school, after which they move to a support school. These schools have language assistants for the largest language groups and teaching materials for foreign students. There is also an option to be taught in your mother tongue. In addition to this broad range of opportunities, every teacher in the primary and secondary schools has a minimum of a Master’s degree. This means that the subjects taught are up to date, and it adds positively to the professional depth and development at the schools. At the Voionmaa school, up to seventy-five percent of the students will later attend the upper secondary school. The national average is only sixty percent.

Not that outstanding!

I decide to attend a physics lecture. The subject is electricity. The teacher is a bit worried as she walks towards the classroom because the students “are all ninth-graders and know each other well”, meaning that they talk a lot and might turn out to be a little more difficult to handle than other classes. The classroom is organized quite traditionally. Tables and chairs are aligned in rows and face the blackboard in front. The students sit in pairs. Girls at the front, boys at the back. The teacher shows overheads with batteries in series, batteries in parallel, bulbs in series, and bulbs in parallel. We learn that serial arrangements make the bulbs

glow dimly and parallel arrangements make them glow brightly. The students write everything down in their notebooks. They are quiet and prepared to work hard even if they are not very interested.

After the theoretical readings, each table is handed an experimental box containing batteries, flexible cords, an ammeter and voltmeter. The point is to convert theory into practice. The teacher is the one to pose the questions and the students answer by putting up their hands. Pedagogically speaking, this is not the best way for students to be taught, of course. They will get the impression that practising physics is a matter of following a recipe, and being tested on whether they are bright enough to assemble wires quickly and correctly. But it is probably hard to blame the mistake on the teacher. She has been taught this way, as have her teachers before her. Moreover, the amount of time, space, and materials available in the school does not leave much room for the implementation of more modern learning principles. Forty-five minutes twice a week is the time the physics teacher has to work with, and it is naturally also necessary for the teacher to make sure the students learn everything stated in the school's examination requirements.

But then again, since the beginning of the 1990s the Ministry of Education has dropped the detailed national curriculum. The current national guidelines only include the most general principles, for instance, the number of hours a subject has to be taught. The previous head teacher of the Voionmaa school, Tamara Eloranta, rebuilt the whole curriculum. The school now mixes the classes so that seventh-graders sit together with ninth-graders. This reduces teasing and makes older students take responsibility for those who are younger.

Sticking together

The school has also developed some strong mechanisms for working together with parents. After the physics lesson, Ismo Falck shows me a document that is a written agreement between the teachers, the students, and their parents. They all have to sign this agreement before the students begin in the Voionmaa school. The agreement states some general principles concerning how one should behave and cooperate as a parent. It says for instance:

“We listen and talk to the children.

We try to see the good things in the children.

We guide them in learning right from wrong and help them develop responsibility.

We do not accept any teasing.

We interfere with improper behaviour, also among other children.

Curfew is 9 PM Monday to Friday and 10 PM during weekends, if their homework is done.

Kids inform their parents where they are and parents inform the kids where *they* are.”

“This written statement,” says Ismo Falk, “is becoming normal in Finland, because parents do not realize that they have to say no sometimes. We try to support parents to do their job as parents.”

The demographic statistics support his claim. More than half of the children in Finland are children of divorced parents. Unemployment in Jyväskylä is 15 per cent, but it has actually been much worse. Twelve years ago Finland had a huge financial crisis. The economic collapse of the Soviet Union and of the other socialist countries virtually eliminated Finland’s export markets. Just one year after the collapse, the national income had fallen by 6.3 per cent. Unemployment rose to 20 per cent.

There is one thing that characterizes the Finnish people very well. It’s the notion of “*sisu*”. When people mention their *sisu*, they talk mainly about sport. *Sisu* stands for the determination to win and for the endurance and toughness that is needed in order to reach a goal. In Finland there is a lot of *sisu*. Within twelve years, the Finns have collectively managed to become a rich country with the highest educational level in Europe. The schools and universities are free of charge and the government has a detailed program for the financial support of women with children who wish to study and start a working life. Finland has a mantra, a kind of national saying, which every teacher repeats to visitors. Sirkka-Liisa Kuorikoski, the chemistry teacher at the Voionmaa school, puts it this way: “We are only five million people. We cannot afford to lose anyone. Wherever there is talent, it will be supported.”

The well-behaved children

The last lecture I decide to attend takes place in the forest near the city. The new biology teacher, Elina Nurmenniemi, has prepared a list of names and printed images of leaves and flowers on paper, and the students must now find samples of the leaves and flowers in the forest. Even though it is the first time that Elina Nurmenniemi has taught this particular class, there is no trouble from the students. They listen carefully and organize themselves into small groups in order to retrieve the samples. It is quite late in the afternoon and the students work quickly. They find the samples and deliver them in a polite manner to the teacher. Then they head off for the bus stop.

As we wait for the bus back to town strange things happen. One of the girls from the class offers her seat to Elina Nurmenniemi and myself. Baffled by this politeness, which is uncommon to me, I reject the offer instantaneously and start to wonder what is going on with these Finns. No shouting, no teasing, no jumping, no nothing. The competitive mingling and constant struggling for social acceptance, which is so normal for Danish teenagers, seems to be unimportant to them. They just talk quietly and they even seem to be happy when they sit alone in order to read a book. No wonder they are the best readers in the world.

From the hill comes yet another rollerblading Finn. Doubled up with his ski poles at his sides, he quickly tears down the road and out of sight. This scene, I speculate, might be a good metaphor for the story of Finland: “the combination of modern equipment with traditional supporting tools mixed harmoniously together into a fast moving body”. After the first, yet another man comes down the road. But this time it is a heavy drinker who walks towards us slalom-style. He tries to grope the girls but is sent away by the teacher. Then the bus arrives and we all go home.

Waiting for the magic mill

It is as if Finns still have an animistic heritage. Nature is still endowed with spirit, just as it is in the *Kalevala*, Finland’s national epic. Every school child reads and learns the *Kalevala*. It is about the struggle and reconciliation of animals and the woodland spirits with the witches and the humans. The heroes

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of the epic promise to return one day with the “*Sampo*”, the magic mill. The mill will then once again grind gold and flour and salt, and it will bring another *Kantele* – a wing-shaped zither – that will enchant all life with its magic music. This epic is as different from the epic of the slaughtering

Vikings as the Finnish children are different from the restless children in Danish schools.

If I were a politician, I wouldn’t envy Finland because of its educational system. I would envy Finland its enduring people. Finland’s success is a fairy tale about an agrarian society that has skated into the hi-tech world of the Internet and mobile phones. The Finnish people have made many sacrifices in

order to be where they are today. So far, the tale seems to have a happy ending, as the Finns have survived as a community. But thinking about the larger context, it's also a worrying story. In 1990 the share of wages among salaried employees and wage-earners amounted to fifty-five per cent of the country's total earnings. In 2000, it dropped to forty-five percent. In the same time span, business earnings rose from fourteen to twenty-eight per cent. Ismo Falk barely earns €2,100 a month before taxes. A teacher for grades one to six earns only €1,700. Along with the decline in wages, workers had to accept the erosion of the social welfare system. From 1992 to 2000, social expenses were cut from thirty-four to twenty-five per cent. And since 2000, things have become worse. Finland's largest company, Nokia, continues to cut expenses and eliminate jobs. It is very likely that social tensions will increase as the recession in the IT industry persists, making inequalities in income more visible.

But then again; maybe Finland's prospects are not really that bleak. As long as the Finnish people continue to combine new discoveries with traditional virtues, such as when they combine IT, solidarity and "*sisu*", or when they combine rollerblades with ski poles, nothing should be able to prevent Finland from having a flourishing society in the twenty-first century.

The city of Jyväskylä has a population of 80,000 and is situated almost in the centre of Finland, about 250 kilometres north of Helsinki. Jyväskylä's nickname "The Athens of Finland" derives from the city's long tradition of education and culture. The educational level of the citizens is high: sixty-one per cent of all citizens over fifteen years of age have graduated from educational institutions. Moreover, the city's thirty-year-olds are the best educated in Finland. The University of Jyväskylä is home to Finland's first Faculty of Information Technology, the only Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences, a strong Faculty of Natural Sciences, and a highly extensive range of study programmes in the Humanities, Economics and Social Sciences.

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