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Labornet No. 1487

Finland has been crowned the world's happiest country in the 2024 World Happiness Report (UN).

Dear All,

Finland: A Global Model of Education



The main concern of the Finnish school system is not to prioritize top-level academic achievement but to help children develop skills so that they can live happy lives, in and outside of schools, says Sahlberg.

Finland's preschool prioritizes the development of children's self-confidence. School days are filled with tasks such as learning to explore a forest on their own or tying up their ice skates alone.

Finland has transformed its educational system. This is, at first glance, an enigma: the Finns are doing exactly **the opposite of what the rest of the world does** in the eternal search for better school results, and it is working.

The Finnish recipe includes reducing the number of instruction hours and limiting homework and testing to a minimum.

How is Finland doing with “phenomenon-based learning”, the new teaching method of the “best education system in the world”?

Delegations of international educators study the paradoxical Finnish model in search of the miracle formula. And Finns answer: high-quality public education is not just the result of educational policies but **also of social policies**.

“The Finnish welfare state plays a crucial role in the success of the model by guaranteeing all children equal opportunities and conditions for free, quality learning,” says educator Pasi Sahlberg, one of the creators of Finland's educational policy reforms in the 1990s, in his book *Finish Lessons*.

Equal opportunities

The concern for ensuring that all Finns have equal development opportunities is visible at the Viikki Teaching Training School, one of the best secondary and primary educational centers in the Finnish capital, Helsinki.

Like in all Finnish schools, the **son of a businessman studies next to the son of a worker**.

In its large cafeteria, students are served abundant healthy meals every day. And medical and dental services are provided to 940 students free of charge.

All school supplies are also free. Teams of pedagogues and psychologists carefully accompany each child's development to identify issues such as dyslexia and provide immediate support. And no school fees are charged.

Why Finland, the country with the “best education system in the world”, is transforming the architecture of its schools

Sahlberg also highlights the impact of exercise in teaching on the model of equality and social justice gradually created by Finns in the post-war period: health, education and housing for all, generous paternity leave to care for children and widely subsidized or even free child care.

There is also an extensive and supportive **network for citizen protection**.

"Social inequality, child poverty and the absence of basic services have a strong negative impact on the performance of a country's education system," says Sahlberg.

The transformation

Equality and equity principles were the pillars for building the new *peruskoulu* in the 1970s. It is the Finnish compulsory educational system, which covers primary and secondary education.

In a landmark decision by the Finnish Parliament, all children, regardless of their domicile and socioeconomic background were given **equal and free access to quality schools** to complete the 9-year comprehensive basic education.

In Finnish society, the teaching profession has always enjoyed great public respect and appreciation.

The vital next step was an unprecedented appreciation of the teacher.

Finland launched excellent teaching training programs in the country's universities. Finland created remarkable working conditions and broad autonomy to make decisions in schools, **paying teachers reasonably well.**

And teaching has become the number-one profession among young Finns – above medicine, law and architecture.

Society participation

Finland announced a new teaching revolution in the 1990s.

Associations of teachers, politicians, parents, members of academia and different sectors of society were called to participate in the creation of new and revolutionary education paradigms in the country.

These paradigms reject a widely accepted – and generally unquestioned – belief as the recipe for improving school performance.

Finland says it has learned a lesson: Education policies are necessarily intertwined with other social policies.

"People have a **strong sense of shared responsibility**, not only for their own lives, but also for the lives of others", says Sahlberg in his book *Finnish Lessons*.

"Fostering the well-being of children starts before they are born and continues until they reach adulthood." "Day care is a right of all children before they start school and public health service is easily accessible to everyone during childhood." "Education in Finland is widely seen as a public good." "And it is therefore protected as a basic human right to all in the constitution".

Finnish investment in education is also seen as one of the key drivers of economic development and the means to put an end to poverty in the country.

Highly skilled citizens have leveraged the growth of production and the transformation of Finland into **one of the main innovation and technology hubs in the world**, with the emergence of companies such as telecommunications giant Nokia.

Education policies are necessarily intertwined with other social policies.

Equality from the cradle

The vast network of social benefits in Finland is the result of building a generous welfare state since the 1970s, financed by one of the heaviest tax burdens in the world.

Today the individual income tax is 51.6%, which did not prevent Finland from ranking as the **happiest country in the world** according to the *World Happiness Report* prepared by the UN.

Finland's baby box, a cardboard box containing products for the newborn, is one of the country's most successful social policies.

Since the late 1930s, Finland has provided every pregnant woman with a maternity kit containing around 50 basic baby items. This gift is designed to give everyone **an equal start in life**, regardless of social class.

Why do Finnish babies sleep in cardboard boxes?

In addition, mothers are entitled to 105 working days of maternity leave. Fathers receive 54-day leave. In addition, couples can divide an additional period of more than five months of parental leave between them.

In other words, the vast majority **of children stay home during** their first year.

After parental leave, one of the parents has the right to stay at home with the child, if they wish so, and receive an allowance of around 450 euros per month (USD 525). In this case, the father or mother will be able to return to the same job they had before childbirth when the child turns 3.

Parents still have the option to return to work part-time and get partial parental allowance.

Most fathers and mothers eventually return to work, and when they decide to do so, the State offers a network **of specialized, highly subsidized day** care centers to care for the children.

Finnish children can spend their first years of life with their parents

Under Finnish law, all children aged 0 to six have the right to daycare, whether part-time or full-time. Fees **vary according to parents' income** and the geographical area where the family resides. The maximum monthly fee is currently 290 euros (about USD 338).

For low-income families, daycare is free.

Free education all the way

At the age of 6, all Finnish children have the right to pre-school education, which is completely free of charge. The main aim of preschool is to provide each child with basic skills and knowledge to prepare them for school life.

Thanks to free access to universities and institutions of technical and vocational education, higher education has also been an opportunity for equal access for all Finns. Education in Finland is **free for everyone, from preschool to PhD**.

The use of alternative technology and methods (such as balls instead of chairs) is encouraged in schools in Finland.

Statistics show how combining education policies with social policies has led to success, says Sahlberg.

"More **equitable countries** have more literate citizens, rarer school dropout, less obesity, better mental health, and fewer teenage pregnancies than those countries where the income gap between the poor and wealthy is wider" says the Finnish educator.

The Finnish teach that innovating is always important. In the 1990s, educational reform led by Finland took the academic world by surprise with a paradoxical theory that would prove to be visionary.

Paradox 1: Less in More

The Finnish experience defies the conventional belief that more instruction hours and more homework are the key to boosting students' academic performance.

School days are shorter in Finland, **with less instruction time** than in any other industrialized nation, according to OECD statistics. The OECD is an organization that brings together the richest countries in the world.

In a typical Finnish school, teachers give **about four lessons daily**.

The main concern of the Finnish school system is not to prioritize top-level academic achievement but to help children develop skills so that they can live happy lives, in and out of schools, says Sahlberg.

In Finnish schools children have time to be children.

Finnish educators don't believe that more homework necessarily leads to better learning, especially if pupils are working on routine and intellectually unchallenging drills, which is unfortunately what school homework assignments often are.

According to OECD statistics, Finnish students spend **less time doing homework** than their peers in all other countries: around half an hour a day.

"Students learn what they need to know in the classroom, and many do their homework right here, at school. This way, they have time to be **with friends** and do the things they like to do outside of school, which is also important," said teacher Martti Mery at Viikki school.

Preschool prioritizes the development of children's self-confidence. School days are filled with tasks such as learning to explore a forest on their own or tying up their ice skates alone.

Paradox 2: Test Less, Learn More

Finnish students do not need to worry about exams: their educational system **does not believe in the effectiveness of highly frequent exams and tests**, which are therefore administered with little regularity.

Despite all this, Finland tops every global education ranking, alongside countries with the best educational performance in the world.

Finnish students don't have to worry so much about exams.

Miracle? In Finnish philosophy, teachers should focus on encouraging students' natural curiosity, creating a **relaxed** classroom environment, and not merely passing exams.

"The pressure of a structured instructional model of teaching and external assessment of pupils' achievement is having dramatic consequences according to some teachers. Consequences of the high-stakes testing environment include avoidance of risk taking, increased boredom, and fear", says Sahlberg.

PISA concludes that **only 7% of Finnish students said they feel anxiety when working on mathematics tasks at home**. Meanwhile, Japan's rigid education system boasts high levels of academic performance while reaching record-high rates of suicide among students. This rate reaches 52%.

In the classrooms at Viikki school, the atmosphere is calm and relaxed. There are no school uniforms, and students study barefoot – reflecting the atmosphere of Scandinavian homes, where no one wears shoes.

Elementary school is pretty much test-free. In order to prevent children from being categorized according to their academic performance, the Finnish system virtually **abolished grade assessment** in the first five years of *peruskoulu*.

In the following years, assessment is based on tests prepared by the teacher and on the student's performance in the classroom, in addition to an extensive evaluation of each student carried out collectively by the teachers at the end of each semester.

Those who need more help receive particular attention: Finnish philosophy appreciates the belief that all children have the potential to learn, if they have **adequate support and opportunities**.

Every year thousands of young people enroll in teaching training programs.

In Finland, teaching is a prestigious profession.

Every spring, **thousands of young students** submit their applications to departments of teacher education at Finnish universities.

But only the best and most prepared students can become teachers: in the demanding Finnish system, only around 10% of applicants are generally accepted into teacher education master's programs at Finnish research universities.

Obtaining a **master's degree has become a teacher's basic and mandatory qualification** to be able to teach in Finnish schools - even in pre-school education.

And innovation continues: the school curriculum adopted in 2016 created, for example, teaching based on phenomena or projects, which updates the traditional division by subjects and gives more room for certain topics (e.g. the Second World War) to be approached by teachers from different disciplines.

Finland continues to innovate in education.

All aspects behind Finnish success seem to be the opposite of what is done in most parts of the world, where competition, heavy instruction and testing load, the standardization of education and privatization are, as a rule, the prevailing principles.

"Exercising tight controls over schools and students, paying teachers based on students' test scores, handing over school leadership to management experts or converting public schools into private ones are ideas **that have no place in the Finnish repertoire** for educational improvement", says educator Pasi Sahlberg.

Sahlberg summarizes Finnish thinking about quality public education as follows:

"It is a **moral obligation** because each person's well-being and ultimately happiness arises from knowledge, skills, and worldviews that good education provides." "It is also an economic imperative because the wealth of nations depends as never before on know-how."

Please do not hesitate to contact us for further information.

Best regards.

Natalia de Diego

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