

# Educators Flocking to Finland, Land of Literate Children

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Published: April 9, 2004 The New York Times.

UUTARILA, Finland - Imagine an educational system where children do not start school until they are 7, where spending is a paltry \$5,000 a year per student, where there are no gifted programs and class sizes often approach 30. A prescription for failure, no doubt, in the eyes of many experts, but in this case a description of Finnish schools, which were recently ranked the world's best.

Finland topped a respected international survey last year, coming in first in literacy and placing in the top five in math and science. Ever since, educators from all over the world have thronged to this self-restrained country to deconstruct its school system - "educational pilgrims," the locals call them - and, with luck, take home a sliver of wisdom.

"We are a little bit embarrassed about our success," said Simo Juva, a special government adviser to the Ministry of Education, summing up the typical reaction in Finland, where boasting over accomplishments does not come easily. Perhaps next year, he said, wishfully, Finland will place second or third.

The question on people's minds is obvious: how did Finland, which was hobbled by a deep recession in the 1990's, manage to outscore 31 other countries, including the United States, in the review by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development last September? The rankings were based on reading, math and science tests given to a sample of 15-year-olds attending both public and private schools. United States students placed in the middle of the pack.

Finland's recipe is both complex and unabashedly basic. It is also similar to that in other Nordic countries. Some of the ingredients can be exported (its flexibility in the classroom, for example) and some cannot (the nation's small, homogenous population and the relative prosperity of most Finns, to name two).

If one trait sets Finland apart from many other countries, it is the quality and social standing of its teachers, said Barry Macgaw, the director for education at the O.E.C.D.

All teachers in Finland must have at least a master's degree, and while they are no better paid than teachers in other countries, the profession is highly respected. Many more people want to become teachers after graduating from upper schools than universities can actually handle, so the vast majority are turned down.

"Teaching is the No. 1," Outi Pihlman, the English teacher at Suutarila Lower Comprehensive School, said about a recent survey asking teenagers to name their favorite profession. "At that age, you would think they would want anything but to go back to school."

The Suutarila school - cheerful, well lit, nicely heated - is typical of Finnish "comprehensive schools," which run from first to ninth grade. The students, who number about 500, pad about in their socks. After every 45-minute lesson, they are let loose outside for 15 minutes so they can burn off steam. Others are allowed to practice their music, and they file into classrooms, sling electric guitars across their chests or grab drumsticks and jam.

Children here start school late on the theory that they will learn to love learning through play. Preschool for 6-year-olds is optional, although most attend. And since most women work outside the home in Finland, children usually go to day care after they turn one.

At first, the 7-year-olds lag behind their peers in other countries in reading, but they catch up almost immediately and then excel. Experts cite several reasons: reading to children, telling folk tales and going to the library are activities cherished in Finland. Lastly, children grow up watching television shows and movies (many in English) with subtitles. So they read while they watch TV.

So long as schools stick to the core national curriculum, which lays out goals and subject areas, they are free to teach the way they want. They can choose their textbooks or ditch them altogether, teach indoors or outdoors, cluster children in small or large groups.

While there are no programs for gifted children, teachers are free to devise ways to challenge their smartest students. The smarter students help teach the average students. "Sometimes you learn better that way," said Pirjo Kanno, the principal in Suutarila.

Students must learn two foreign languages - Swedish is required by law, and most also take English. Art, music, physical education, woodwork and textiles (which is mostly sewing and knitting) are obligatory for girls and boys. Hot and healthy school lunches are free. There are also 90 computers scattered about the school, and students are free to attend homework clubs staffed by assistants after school.

Despite the accolades, Finnish officials say they are far from perfect. Boys, for example, perform much worse than girls in reading, and with so many wanting to become teachers, too few are willing to leap outside the social service sphere. "We're trying to get them to start their own businesses," said Kirsi Lindroos, the national board of education's director general.