

Focus on Schools Helps Finns Build a Showcase Nation

Achievements Reflect High Status Given to Vocation of Teaching

By Robert G. Kaiser Washington Post Staff Writer, Tuesday, May 24, 2005; Page A12

HELSINKI

A foreigner asking to visit a school in Finland this spring got an unexpected reply from the Helsinki City Education Department: Our schools are overwhelmed by visitors; do you have to visit just now?

In fact, the Finns, who have long felt neglected by the rest of the world, are delighted to show off their schools. But they do have a logistical problem. Foreign educators in droves want to visit Finnish schools for the simple reason that they are so good -- very likely the best on Earth.

Superb schools symbolize the modern transformation of Finland, a poor and agrarian nation half a century ago, and today one of the world's most prosperous, modern and adaptable countries.

Finland finishes first in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) exams that test 15-year-olds in all of the world's industrial democracies. Finland also finishes at or near the top in many global comparisons of economic competitiveness: Internet usage, environmental practices and more. Finland, where the modern cell phone was largely invented, has more cell phones per capita than any other nation -- nearly 85 per 100 citizens.

As recently as the 1970s, Finland required that children attend school for just six years and the education system here was nothing special. But new laws supported by substantial government spending created, in barely 20 years, a system that graduates nearly every young person from vocational or high school, and sends nearly half of them on to higher education. At every level, the schooling is rigorous, and free.

"The key," said Pekka Himanen, 31, a renowned scholar with a PhD in philosophy (earned at age 20) who is a kind of guru of information-age Finland, "isn't how much is invested, it's the people. The high quality of Finnish education depends on the high quality of Finnish teachers. You need to have a college-level degree to run a kindergarten. You need a master's-level degree to teach at a primary school. Many of the best students want to be teachers. This is linked to the fact that we really believe we live in an information age, so it is respected to be in such a key information profession as teaching."

The principal of the Arabia Comprehensive School, Kaisu Karkkainen, 49, has the same answer when asked the reasons for Finland's educational accomplishments. "Three reasons," she said over a tasty lunch of chicken, rice and green salad in her school's cafeteria: "Teachers, teachers and teachers." Then she grinned an un-Finnish grin at one of her favorites, English teacher Riitta Severinkangas, 47, who has been teaching for 16 years.

A visit to Severinkangas's eighth-grade class demonstrates that her students can all read and speak in English, a language that has virtually nothing in common with the Finns' obtuse and complex native tongue.

"The teachers did it" is pretty much the universal answer to questions about Finland's educational successes. Seppo Heikkinen, 45, a producer of educational programs for the Finnish Broadcasting Co. and a member of the governing board of the Arabia school, credits "the professional level of the teachers," who are "highly motivated."

A System Rich in Staff

On Friday afternoon, Heikkinen was at the school, named after the Helsinki neighborhood where it's located, to meet with his 9-year-old daughter's teacher, the school psychologist and another teacher who concentrates on children with special needs. "She has motivational problems," he said of his daughter, and the school is looking for ways to get her interested in her work.

This seems characteristic of a system that is rich in professional staff: 28 teachers for 265 students currently enrolled at Arabia. The atmosphere in Arabia's classrooms reminds an American visitor of the best U.S. private schools, where intimacy between teachers and students is enriched by high expectations for performance from everyone, not just the brightest.

The school, in a new neighborhood on the edge of Helsinki, is housed in a refurbished former clinic for the treatment of alcoholics (a big need in Finland). Now in its third year of operation, it has been growing by one grade a year, and next year will have all nine grades of the Finnish comprehensive school. Construction of apartments in the neighborhood is continuing, and a new school is on the drawing boards, scheduled to open in 2010. It will have 500 students, about as big as Finnish schools get.

The student body at Arabia consists primarily of the children of college graduates and professionals, said the principal, Karkkainen. But a visitor who asks if the school's successes can be attributed to this fact is quickly put straight. "My last school," Karkkainen said, "was much different" -- in a poor neighborhood, "nearly a slum." (There are no slums in Finland that Americans would recognize as such.) It had a student body consisting of one-third "refugees," meaning immigrants, of which Finland has relatively few, and one-third students needing special education. The city supported that school, she said: It had a fine new building and extra social workers on staff. There were lots of problems with students and parents. "But still, the results were very good," she said. "The teachers are trained to deal with problematic children."

Antidote to Poverty

Faith in education is not just a matter of government policy in Finland; it comes from deep in the national character of a country that has few natural resources beyond fish and timber. Finns came to realize that education was the best antidote to their endemic poverty more than a century ago, said Himanen, the philosopher: "The development of Finland has come through investing in the education system."

The PISA exam, administered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in Paris, confirms that Finland does remarkably well in schools serving all levels of this egalitarian society. "Finland and Japan stand out for high standards of both quality and equity," according to the organization.

Karkkainen enjoys substantial autonomy as principal of Arabia. With her governing board -- consisting of five parents, two teachers, a representative of the blue-collar workforce and herself -- she can set the school's curriculum, write its rules and hire its teachers.

She explained over lunch how she hires a teacher. She recently announced a vacancy for a senior Finnish-language teacher on the Helsinki school system's computer network. Thirty-seven qualified teachers applied, nearly all with experience. Typically, a new graduate of one of the universities that train teachers here has to work part time or in the provinces for about five years before landing a full-time position in the capital.

Karkkainen and the board interviewed five candidates and picked the one who will start at the beginning of the next school year, in mid-August.

Arabia Comprehensive is not never-never land; during a day spent in the school, a visitor saw many reminders that kids are kids, school is school, learning is always a combination of rote, fun and angst. But some things were striking.

One was the relative maturity of students. The Finns long ago decided that 7 is the right age to begin school, so in every grade the children are a year older than they would be in the United States. Six-year-olds have kindergarten (and a high percentage of Finnish youngsters come to school from state-run day-care centers, which are also generously staffed and supported). But according to Raili Rapila, a kindergarten teacher at Arabia, there is no pressure to begin reading before the first grade. Three of 10 in her class are readers, she said, but all 10 love to be read to, and are often, every day. "Social skills and learning to play are more important than reading" for the 6-year-olds, she said.

In Riitta Severinkangas's eighth-grade English class, one 14-year-old boy conspicuously refused to participate in a recitation of phrases and listened to his iPod instead. "Do you choose not to participate?" Severinkangas firmly but gently asked him, looking right into his face. He didn't reply. He looked like the classic tuned-out, bored teenager.

But a few minutes later he was conversing in good English with the American visitor, describing his "personal record" for hours worked at his computer without sleeping -- 76, he claimed. How did he stay awake? "More cola, more coffee. It's easy when you have work to do." And what was the work? Translating English pop music lyrics into Finnish, for example.

This was a difficult student, Severinkangas explained later, but she thought she might have discovered a way to reach him during a work-study week the school held recently for eighth-graders. She sent him to work in the school's day-care center, and he loved it. "And the little kids loved him." So perhaps, she thought, he would eventually discover he wanted to be a teacher.

'The Work Is Fun'

American public school teachers regularly gripe about the lack of support and respect they receive, but attempts at Arabia to prompt comparable complaints all failed. Tuomas Paarlatti, 38, a science teacher who earned his master's degree in geography, said his university friends who work for Nokia, the giant cell phone maker, for example, make considerably higher salaries, "but I tell them to compare the number of hours worked per year." He works a 190-day school year, three to eight hours a day. "The work is fun. You can make your own projects. It's important. What more could you want?"

Paarlatti said his take-home salary was just under 2,000 euros a month (about \$2,500 at current exchange rates). Like all Finns, he pays nearly nothing for health care, and nothing at all for education, from day care through graduate school. Undergraduates and graduates all get a monthly stipend of more than \$400 for living expenses. Paarlatti's private passion is sailing on Finland's many lakes; he owns an 18-foot sailboat.

Paarlatti's domain at the school includes the computer lab and two dozen laptops that students can check out for their own use. But there is no systematic teaching of information technology in the first nine grades -- no teaching even of typing, and many Finns use just two fingers on the keyboard. It's a good example of the non-compulsive Finnish approach to education.

Another is the general absence of testing. According to Karkkainen, the principal, apart from the PISA exams, her students face math tests at the end of fifth, eighth and ninth grades, and a test in chemistry and physics at the end of eighth grade. That's it. "And there are no bad consequences," for student or school, if the results are not good.

Interestingly, given the overall success of Finnish education and Finns' pride in it, state spending on schools is actually declining. Karkkainen has had to cut her school's spending 4 percent this year. "The number of old people is growing all the time," she said, causing a drain on the Finnish welfare state. "So there is not enough money for schools."

But it is difficult to imagine that Finns would allow their schools to fall very far now that they have achieved such excellence. Education is part of what Himanen calls "the Finnish national project," the country's determined effort to make a comfortable place for itself in the modern world.

"There's still a feeling that we have to show something, that we're *really* good," Karkkainen said.