

# Trust, Collaboration and Well-Being: Lessons Learned from Finland

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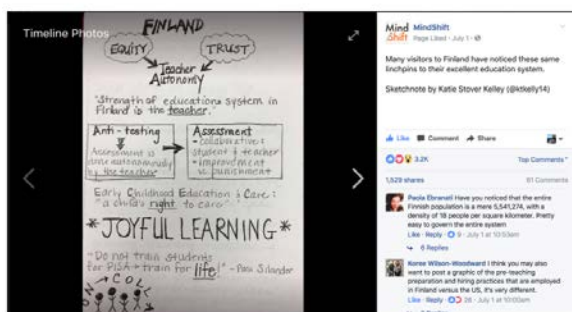
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This article describes three key principles learned while visiting schools in Finland in May 2017. Specifically, the article explores how trust, collaboration, and well-being contribute to the foundation of student-centered school cultures. The use of trust-based responsibility over test-based accountability allows for greater teacher autonomy and student-centered assessments and learning experiences. Administrators, teachers, students, and the community collaborate to foster phenomenon-based real-world experiences while developing literacy skills. Ensuring students' basic needs, providing well-resourced schools, and making sure that children feel safe, comfortable, and ready to learn are essential factors in Finland's highly educated society. Collectively, these key principles offer teaching tips for educators to consider ways to engage students in meaningful and equitable learning experiences that result in preparing children for life – not to simply pass standardized tests.

Educators are flocking to Finland to determine what factors contribute to this small Nordic country's high rankings in education. Katie's sketch note (see Figure 1) with ideas from our visit attracted much attention on social media resulting in thousands of likes and shares. So what makes Finland's school climate and culture so interesting?

Figure 1 |

Timeline Photo



Finnish schools have received much attention in recent years largely due to their consistently strong performance on the

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). This strong performance is particularly interesting because the Finnish do not believe in teaching to the test. As Pasi Silander from the Helsinki Education Department stated in his talk, *How to create the school of the future*, “We do not train students for PISA. We train them for life” (Silander, May 2017). To educate for life involves authentic and joyful learning experiences both in and out of the classroom as well as a focus on cultivating a desire to ‘learn how to learn.’

Much of Finland's recent educational success can be traced to significant reform efforts both in schools and the social environment outside of schools. Social reform in the 1960's set the stage with major overhauls that provided high-quality and heavily subsidized childcare and early childhood education (Kirby, 2006). In this way, Finland addresses inequality before formal schooling even begins and aims to provide a more level playing field for all

students. Finnish social policy goes a long way in reducing social inequalities between families and provides a stark contrast to the U.S. context. According to recent statistics from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the child poverty rate in the United States is 20.2%. In Finland, the comparable figure is 3.6%. While both nations have similar levels of economic inequality before taxes and government transfers, Finnish social policy cuts economic inequality in half (OECD, 2014). On the other hand, U.S. policies reduce original market inequalities by about one-fifth.

These social policies are coupled with an education system that focuses on equality and access for all students. As Partanen (2011) notes, “Education has been seen first and foremost not as a way to produce star performers, but as an instrument to even out social inequality.” In the 1970’s and 1980’s, major school reform efforts focused on student-centered learning as a way to foster the potential of all students (Gross-Loh, 2014). Indeed, Finnish education embraces authentic learning practices with individual student needs at the heart of the curriculum (Partanen, 2011). We detail several specific examples of these practices as they relate to our key themes of trust, collaboration, and well-being.

Taken together, these reform efforts in and outside of the education system set the stage for a unique school culture. The current culture of education in Finland includes an emphasis on innovative, project-based, student-centered learning. Finland’s 2016 National Curriculum positions teachers as facilitators rather than as dispensers of knowledge. The shift in pedagogy from remembering content and searching for information has been replaced with the construction of knowledge and processing of information.

In the next sections, we share three guiding principles of the Finnish Education system, as informed by our own classroom observations, interviews with educators, and participation in several interactive lectures with Finnish educational experts. We believe the principles of trust, collaboration, and well-being are essential to cultivating vibrant student-centered school cultures.

### **Trust**

The first overarching principle of school culture in Finland is the role of trust (Ministry of Education and Culture & Finnish National Board of Education, 2012). According to former director general of Finland’s National Board of Education, Dr. Vilho Hirvi, a principle goal of recent school reform was to create “a new culture of education” focused on “cultivation of trust between education authorities and schools” (as cited in Sahlberg, 2015, p.2). For instance, school inspections were abolished in the early 1990’s and results of evaluations are no longer used for school rankings (Ministry of Education and Culture & Finnish National Board of Education, 2012).

Furthermore, no national tests are responsible for assessment of curriculum in Finland. Rather, the goal of assessment is to develop students’ abilities to “guide and encourage learning and to develop the pupil’s ability for self-assessment” (National Curriculum, Section 6, pg. 49) to support growth of knowledge, study skills, and to increase awareness of their progress and learning process (Ministry of Education and Culture & Finnish National Board of Education, 2012). This is achieved through more comprehensive assessments such as portfolios, reflections, projects, and self-assessments (Sahlberg, 2015). Assessments are often student-driven and created in a way that provides immediate and ongoing feedback to foster student progress and growth. Clearly, this process requires trust at

many levels. Reciprocal trust between students and teachers enables this kind of assessment in the first place, and a trust in this process is in turn extended to families and government officials.

Assessment in Finland values trust-based responsibility over test-based accountability (Sahlberg, 2015). The government trusts that students have well-prepared teachers who are equipped to teach. Just as the government trusts the teachers as professionals, the parents' view of teachers is similar. Teachers are highly-valued in society as capable professionals entrusted with the responsibility of educating Finland's youth. This is partly due to the rigorous nature of teacher preparation programs in Finland. Teacher education programs are rather selective with approximately only one in ten applicants typically accepted (Sahlberg, 2013). This not only leads to well trained teachers who are proud of their occupation but also contributes to increased respect for teachers from the community and school leaders along with greater teacher autonomy.

With this system in place, there is no need for an emphasis on high stakes accountability. However, in the U.S., the lack of trust and autonomy for teachers has led to a greater focus on standardized tests. This, in turn, often results in a focus on test scores instead of the development of students. As one Finnish principal explained, the lack of an inspector system in Finland creates a school environment where teachers have pedagogical autonomy to make instructional decisions related to methods of teaching, materials, and assessments. "When teachers have more control over curriculum design, teaching methods, and student assessment, they are more inspired to teach than when they are pressured to deliver prescribed programs and must submit to external standardized tests that determine progress" (Sahlberg, 2013, p. 39). This type of school culture where teachers and students do not

feel scrutinized by high-stakes assessments and evaluations not only increases the morale of teachers but also leads to a more energized and meaningful learning environment for students. In Finland, all principals are also teachers which helps establish trusting relationships and communication with teachers (Sahlberg, 2013). This climate of trust within the educational system lays the foundation for school leaders, teachers, parents, and students to work together towards common goals.

### **Collaboration**

A second principle of the Finnish education system is collaboration between administrators, teachers, students, and the community. In particular, the Finnish system values the collaboration between students which provides children with opportunities to construct knowledge through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). As a part of the Basic Education Act (National Curriculum, 2014, section 47), schools must work together with the parents and community outside of school. Internal cooperation within the schools is also essential. Teachers collaborate to create a positive learning community for the students within the school environment (National Curriculum, 2014, pg. 38).

One way Finnish schools do this is through the use of a phenomenon-based approach where learning begins with real-world inquiry. Student-generated questions cultivate collaborative projects within and beyond the school. As a result, learning moves beyond isolated subjects to help students take active roles in their learning and in the community while developing essential literacy skills. Focusing on cooperation rather than competition, educators and students at one Helsinki school worked with local architects to build a bridge in the community. The ten-year-old students developed designs, computed calculations,

and researched issues of sustainability and safety. Through this process they collaborated with the architects, learned interpersonal communication skills, and gained a better understanding about the process of building a bridge. Ultimately, the students were engaged in a meaningful learning experiences while contributing in real ways to the community.

Students at Siltamäki Primary School in Helsinki worked with a local assisted living facility on a project to bridge the generations through play. It began with the students inquiring about the types of games people played before technology. Following students' interest as a springboard, the teacher established a time for the students to interview the senior residents about the games they played during their youth. As a way to embrace collaboration through reciprocal learning and teaching, the children then taught the seniors games using tablets. They worked together to combine the traditional games with technology by creating a video on how to play the most popular games the seniors taught them. Students were proud to present the published video to the assisted living community members.

Finally, every year at Siltamäki Primary School the entire school engages in a student-created and led musical where they write, conduct, and orchestrate a play including lyrics and music. From the general educators who teach lessons on storytelling, to the music teacher who help the students learn the art form of songwriting and playing a variety of musical instruments, the entire school collaborates in bringing the music to life. Every child and faculty member plays a part in making the musical possible. This yearlong endeavor is possible due to the collaborative teamwork of the teachers, students, and administrators.

As children progress through school, they 'learn to learn' and gain an appreciation

for how they might use their skills to find their best fit role in society. Finnish educators stress that students do not learn solely from lectures but rather from *doing* something by themselves or in collaboration with other students. In this way, they must actively dissect problems, arrive at meaningful solutions, and leave the classroom thinking: "hey I got this – I understand now." When students 'learn to learn' they develop skills that can be applied to a multitude of problems and projects - something that is especially relevant for modern economies.

For many, the idea of collaboration on a school-wide level may seem daunting. However, as Timothy Walker states in his book, *Teach like Finland*, collaboration between colleagues rarely is a "serious and structured" image of "teachers putting their heads together, looking exhausted, as they pore over unit plans" (2017, p. 181). Rather, collaboration can, and should, happen naturally. One way collaboration can be encouraged in schools is by creating a school culture with a welcoming environment where teachers want to come together and discuss what is happening in their classrooms. Another way to encourage collaboration is through the establishment and development of programs that regularly bring together older and younger students. For instance, the use of cross-grade reading buddies provides engaging opportunities for children to practice their reading for an authentic audience. While it might start as reading buddies, these partnerships can extend beyond reading for other phenomenon-based and project-based learning experiences. When students collaborate with their peers and schools partner with parents and the community, the school becomes a hub of engaged learning focused on every child's development and well-being.

## **Well-Being**

The third guiding principle of Finnish education is an emphasis on the overall well-being of the child. In conjunction with related family and early childhood social policies, the Finnish education system places considerable emphasis on well-being. In fact, scholars consider this more comprehensive view of child and societal well-being as a major factor of Finland's success in international assessments, such as PISA (Condrón, 2011). Upon the release of the first set of PISA results, many Finns were surprised to see their country ranked so highly. Perhaps some of this disbelief can be attributed to certain goals the Finnish system simply views as common sense – and for good reason. It should come as no surprise that ensuring students' basic needs, providing well-resourced schools, and making sure that children feel safe, comfortable, and ready to learn goes a long way when it comes to building a highly educated society. This, in large part, is why the Finnish education system is so successful.

Jaana Juutinen, a doctoral student at the University of Oulu, summed up this comprehensive approach to well-being by saying: “schools should adapt to kids, not the other way around” (personal communication, May 16, 2017). Regardless of student background, all basic needs are met. Students receive nutritious hot meals at breakfast and lunch and work with a collaborative team of on-staff professionals (social workers, counselors, nurses, and school psychologists, with referrals to specialists in speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy) focused on student well-being. The whole school community works together to provide the appropriate support for children who may need more help. These well-resourced schools also serve as community centers – in some cases the school library or the gymnasium is a community resource, open to those living in the nearby community. The

Finnish believe schools should be at the center of communities and communities at the center of schools. This school-community relationship reiterates the themes of trust and collaboration and contributes to the well-being of children in school.

## **Conclusion**

Above and beyond all else, the Finnish treat education as an investment in the future and as a common goal of the highest quality. Trust, collaboration, and well-being should be priorities for school reform efforts in the United States. In many ways, ‘trust’ is the glue that holds the Finnish education system together. This high level of trust in the mission of schooling is shared by teachers, parents, students, and government alike. Meanwhile, collaboration is how we can best describe what Finnish schools look like ‘in action’. Innovative, project-based learning that blurs the line between schools and communities is perhaps the epitome of this type of collaboration. During this process, students not only learn course material, they learn how to apply it and they develop skills that can translate easily to other projects and problems. Finally, a focus on well-being provides a powerful reminder that vibrant school cultures cannot exist without attention to students' health, safety, and livelihood as a first priority. Social and educational policies in Finland ensure that students' basic needs are met and that they are therefore, ready to learn. Before we begin implementing changes in our classrooms, we cannot lose sight of the kind of policy decisions that can help give students a fair chance for school success from the starting gate (Heckman, 2013). We must also remember that we are creating learning environments where we are teaching children for life, not to pass standardized tests. “Teachers and students must teach and learn in an environment that empowers them to do their best” (Sahlberg, 2013, p. 39). Factors such as trust,

collaboration, and well-being reflect the foundation of school culture and professional practice that leverage meaningful learning experiences and greater academic progress.

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