

Finland's Success in Education

Jouni Kangasniemi

On April 14, elections were held in Finland for the Parliament which is the supreme decision-making authority for national decision-making. The Finnish parliament is unicameral and has two hundred members who are elected for a term of four years. Currently, the members of the parliament belong to 11 parliamentary groups.

As soon as the Parliamentary results were confirmed, the new Parliament convened its first session on April 24. In the next weeks, a new ruling Government would be formed by the winning parties so that the majority of votes in the Parliament are reached and the new Government programme can then be implemented over the next four years. A Government in Finland is always formed by several parties as none of the parties are big enough to have the majority of votes in the Parliament on their own. This calls for good cooperation among the parties for a shared vision for Finland. The ability to collaborate and agree on things is especially important when a new Government programme is formulated. At the moment, it seems likely that a new Government programme will be released by the end of May.

Finland is often referred as one of the top countries when it comes to education. It is obvious that education will be high on the upcoming Government agenda. For a country with a small population, like Finland or Bhutan, a well-functioning education system is important for long term prosperity, for a peaceful society built on knowledge and harmony, together with a sustainable future. More important, education creates well-being, promotes human rights, safeguards democracy and reduces inequalities between social groups and regions. For any peace-loving country this is the basis for all future development.

Today, one of the widely accepted principles in education is that all people must have equal access to high quality education and training. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by all United Nations Member States, in 2015, says it more directly - Education is for all.

For example in Finland, the same opportunities to education are available to all Finnish citizens irrespective of their age, aspirations, wealth, ethnic origin or where they live - be it in the countryside or in the city.

The current education system and its priorities in Finland did not come into reality overnight. It is an outcome of long-term education policy and decision-making together with strong implementation over several decades. A transformation of the education system in Finland was needed in the wake of a rapid industrialisation period in the 1960s. After a very controversial and heated debate, a consensus agreement was reached to provide same basic education for the whole population, for free. Looking back now, it is easy to agree that decisions made then have been right and successful for Finland. Also, against this background (and personal experience), I cannot agree more with His Majesty the King of Bhutan when he reflects on the long-term vision of Bhutan and sees education as the number one priority. When thinking in the long term a 50-year-perspective can and will make a difference in the quality of life and the success of the whole country. Finland has been ranked as the happiest nation in the 2019 World

Happiness Report for the Second Time in a Row

It is also necessary to note that education reform is much more than just political reform. Those who share the inspiring new vision and implement the changes needed are the key players. The teachers in Finland, particularly, have played an important role over the years.

A well experienced teacher once said that “to teach is to touch lives”. There is a lot of wisdom in these words. Part of the attractiveness of the teacher profession in Finland is that those who are committed to the teaching profession see their roles in a much larger perspective than just someone who shows up in a classroom and teaches the specific content or to read, write, and do mathematics. The current philosophy in education is to see that “every child can flourish”. The potential of each child should and can be maximized with proper education. Educational guidance is seen as essential so that each pupil and student can perform as well as possible in their studies and be able to make appropriate decisions concerning their education and future careers.

Guidance and counselling are seen as the work of all education personnel working in schools, not just the teachers. Teachers are treating the young people as individuals and helping them to proceed according to their own capabilities. Learners together make up a larger group for learning, where learning takes place in a more collaborative way. Collaboration rather than competition among the students, we say it in Finland. It is not only the content. Learners should also experience the success and joy of learning. Something we both agree easily in Finland and in Bhutan. Also, learning to learn is a skill, which takes many years to understand and benefit from to become innovative and adaptive to new realities.

As stated above, teaching is an attractive career choice in Finland and the teaching profession has a high status. Thus, the teacher education universities can select those applicants most suitable for the teaching profession. For example, the intake for class teacher education is only 10 percent of all applicants.

Teachers in basic and secondary education are required to hold a Master's degree. The high level of pedagogic training is seen as necessary as teachers in Finland are quite autonomous in their work. Currently, almost all teachers at all levels of education have the required degree and qualifications. The base for this was set in 1976 when the primary school teacher education was moved to universities as the former two-year teacher training seminar was comprehensively upgraded and the focus of the studies shifted to promote strong learning sciences together with skills needed in the teaching profession. Since then, the schools have been transforming and evolving by using high quality knowledge and expertise for their development.

Finnish teachers can and are often active, influencing the development of education at the national level. Teachers are generally represented in the expert groups preparing education reforms and new initiatives at the Ministry of Education and Culture. They are also providing expertise for development of the national core curriculum which has become the main document for steering education. With solid support from teachers, it is easier to exchange good practice and discuss new initiatives openly - what works in schools and what does not. The teachers' union, which represents 95 per cent of Finnish teachers, is also one of the important stakeholders who contribute (and not oppose) to the development of education and training. Our way of gradually improving the education system is in many

ways shared and supported. When everyone knows their responsibility and acts accordingly, the system as a whole can be steered through trust rather than several layers of control from administration.

Finnish teachers have many opportunities to influence their work and development of schools. They decide on the teaching methods, the teaching materials used, as well as pupil and student assessment often in cooperation with other teachers. Most teachers also participate in joint decision-making, drawing up of local curricula, as well as other development needs. An administration that is flexible and supports development at school level is a strong asset. At most levels of education (except in higher education), teachers are required to update and upgrade their skills annually. Teachers are recognised as the key to quality in education. Therefore continuous attention is paid to both to teachers' pre-service and continuing education.

In Finland, education providers with schools are responsible for employing their teaching staff. They also determine the types and number of posts needed. The recruitment is an open process and the vacant posts are advertised in newspapers, professional journals, and relevant websites. Each education provider decides who is responsible for appointing new teachers. It may be the education committee or another equivalent committee, the school board or – especially in the case of short-term substitute teachers – the principal. The aim is to select a person who is both qualified and most suitable for both the position in question and the school community.

Responsibility for the daily operations of basic education schools and upper secondary schools rests with principals. The principals (rectors) of the schools are seen as the pedagogical heads and thus the quality of teaching and learning in schools is their main responsibility. The principal creates possibilities for a student-centered operational culture by his or her own involvement. This role is vital especially as he is also seen as the enabler of new innovations introduced in the schools. In other words, a student-centered school culture means that all work and activities in schools aim to provide time, space, and possibilities for new learning.

In Finland, there are 185–195 school days in a year. Teachers are not obligated to be at school on those days when they have no lessons or other particular duties. In addition to teaching, the tasks of teachers include planning of instruction and pre- and post-class work. Furthermore, the

school's internal development tasks and cooperation with colleagues, homes, and other partners such as staff in pupil and social welfare services, the local family counselling clinic, the police, business life, form an integrated part of the teaching profession. For this type of activities an allocation of three hours of work per week for teachers has been determined collectively.

Continuing teacher education is encouraged. Teachers in Finland generally have many opportunities to develop their professionalism. Finnish teachers consider in-service training as a privilege and therefore participate actively. The State also funds continuing training programmes, primarily in areas important for implementing education policy and promoting areas seen important in education reforms. Updated knowledge is always welcomed by the teachers. All in all, paying attention to teachers and their role as agents of change pays off.