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Monday, Apr. 11, 2011

Finland's Educational Success? The Anti-Tiger Mother Approach

By Joshua Levine

Spring may be just around the corner in this poor part of Helsinki known as the Deep East, but the ground is still mostly snow-covered and the air has a dry, cold bite. In a clearing outside the Kallahti Comprehensive School, a handful of 9-year-olds are sitting back-to-back, arranging sticks, pinecones, stones and berries into shapes on the frozen ground. The arrangers will then have to describe these shapes using geometric terms so the kids who can't see them can say what they are.

"It's a different way of conceptualizing math when you do it this way instead of using pen and paper, and it goes straight to the brain," says Veli-Matti Harjula, who teaches the same group of children straight through from third to sixth grade. Educators in Sweden, not Finland, came up with the concept of "outside math," but Harjula didn't have to get anybody's approval to borrow it. He can pretty much do whatever he wants, provided that his students meet the very general objectives of the core curriculum set by Finland's National Board of Education. For math, the latest national core curriculum runs just under 10 pages (up from 3 ½ pages for the previous core curriculum). (See "Paying Kids for Good Grades: Does It Work?")

The Finns are as surprised as much as anyone else that they have recently emerged as the new rock stars of global education. It surprises them because they do as little measuring and testing as they can get away with. They just don't believe it does much good. They did, however, decide to participate in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), run by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). And to put it in a way that would make the noncompetitive Finns cringe, they kicked major butt. The Finns have participated in the global survey four times and have usually placed among the top three finishers in reading, math and science.

In the latest PISA survey, in 2009, Finland placed second in science literacy, third in mathematics and second in reading. The U.S. came in 15th in reading, close to the OECD average, which is where most of the U.S.'s results fell.

Finland's only real rivals are the Asian education powerhouses South Korea and Singapore, whose

drill-heavy teaching methods often recall those of the old Soviet-bloc Olympic-medal programs. Indeed, a recent manifesto by Chinese-American mother Amy Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,* chides American parents for shrinking from the pitiless discipline she argues is necessary to turn out great students. Her book has led many to wonder whether the cure is worse than the disease. (See pictures of a Mandarin school in Minneapolis.)

Which is why delegations from the U.S. and the rest of the world are trooping to Helsinki, where world-class results are achieved to the strains of a reindeer lullaby. "In Asia, it's about long hours — long hours in school, long hours after school. In Finland, the school day is shorter than it is in the U.S. It's a more appealing model," says Andreas Schleicher, who directs the PISA program at the OECD.

There's less homework too. "An hour a day is good enough to be a successful student," says Katja Tuori, who is in charge of student counseling at Kallahti Comprehensive, which educates kids up to age 16. "These kids have a life." (See pictures of summer school programs.)

There are rules, of course. No iPods or portable phones in class. No hats indoors. (They also tried a no-coat rule, but it was just too cold.) But not much else. Tuori spots a kid texting in class and shoots him a reproachful glance. He quickly puts the phone away. "You have to do something really bad, like hit somebody, to actually get punished," says Tuori.

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Finland has a number of smart ideas about how to teach kids while letting them be kids. For instance, one teacher ideally stays with a class from first grade through sixth grade. That way the teacher has years to learn the quirks of a particular group and tailor the teaching approach accordingly.

But Finland's sweeping success is largely due to one big, not-so-secret weapon: its teachers. "It's the quality of the teaching that is driving Finland's results," says the OECD's Schleicher. "The U.S. has an industrial model where teachers are the means for conveying a prefabricated product. In Finland, the teachers are the standard." (See what makes a school great.)

That's one reason so many Finns want to become teachers, which provides a rich talent pool that Finland filters very selectively. In 2008, the latest year for which figures are available, 1,258 undergrads applied for training to become elementary-school teachers. Only 123, or 9.8%, were accepted into the five-year teaching program. That's typical. There's another thing: in Finland, every teacher is required to have a master's degree. (The Finns call this a master's in *kasvatus,* which is the same word they use for a mother bringing up her child.) Annual salaries range from about $40,000 to $60,000, and teachers work 190 days a year.

"It's very expensive to educate all of our teachers in five-year programs, but it helps make our teachers

highly respected and appreciated," says Jari Lavonen, head of the department of teacher education at the University of Helsinki. Outsiders spot this quickly. "Their teachers are much better prepared to teach physics than we are, and then the Finns get out of the way. You don't buy a dog and bark for it," says Dan MacIsaac, a specialist in physics-teacher education at the State University of New York at Buffalo who visited Finland for two months. "In the U.S., they treat teachers like pizza delivery boys and then do efficiency studies on how well they deliver the pizza." ("Read: "China Beats Out Finland for Top Marks in Education.")

The Finns haven't always had everything figured out. In the 1960s, Finland had two parallel education systems after primary school; brighter kids went one way, laggards went the other. Reforms began in 1968, scrapping two-tier education in favor of one national system. Things still weren't right. "In the beginning, we weren't happy at all," says Reijo Laukkanen, a counselor at the Finnish National Board of Education.

In the '80s, Finland stopped "streaming" pupils to different math and language tracks based on ability. "People in Finland cannot be divided by how smart they are," says Laukkanen. "It has been very beneficial." Next to go, in the '90s, were inspectors who oversaw annual school plans. Schools were so hostile that the inspectors became afraid to make on-site tours.

"Finland is a society based on equity," says Laukkanen. "Japan and Korea are highly competitive societies — if you're not better than your neighbor, your parents pay to send you to night school. In Finland, outperforming your neighbor isn't very important. Everybody is average, but you want that average to be very high." (See 20 back-to-school gadgets.)

This principle has gone far toward making Finland an educational overachiever. In the 2006 PISA science results, Finland's worst students did 80% better than the OECD average for the worst group; its brightest did only 50% better than the average for bright students. "Raising the average for the bottom rungs has had a profound effect on the overall result," says MacIsaac.

Some of Finland's educational policies could probably be exported, but it's questionable whether the all-for-one-and-one-for-all-ness that underlies them would travel easily. Thailand, for instance, is trying to adapt the Finnish model to its own school system. But as soon as a kid falls behind, parents send for a private tutor — something that would be unthinkable in Finland. Is Thailand's Finnish experiment working? "Not really," says Lavonen. Would that it could, in Thailand and elsewhere.

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