Visit by a delegation from the Education and Skills Committee to Sweden and Finland to study education reform

March 2018
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Introduction and purpose of the visit

The Scottish Parliament’s Education and Skills Committee (“the Committee”) is considering the Scottish Government’s plans for further education reforms.

The Scottish Government has stated that it will reform aspects of the structure of school education to support its goal of improving attainment and closing the attainment gap. Consequently, the Scottish Government has identified a number of areas where it will seek to make changes to the current education system in Scotland:

- The legal framework where decisions are taken;
- Culture and capacity within the system;
- Collaboration between local authorities and schools;
- The way in which funding is distributed and staff are allocated to schools; and
- The level of bureaucracy.

Some of these changes may require primary legislation (i.e. a bill) to achieve.

The Scottish Government has indicated that it will introduce an Education (Scotland) Bill (“the Bill”) before the end of the 2017/18 Parliamentary year.

The proposed Bill includes a number of provisions to reform how schools are run and put schools in charge of key decisions about a child’s education, including:

- More freedom to make choices about curriculum, improvement, and funding at school level;
- More freedom for headteachers to choose school staff and management structure;
- New Regional Improvement Collaboratives to provide streamlined and strengthened support to teachers, drawing on experts from local authorities and Education Scotland; and
- Strengthened engagement with young people and parents in schools.

New powers are to be guaranteed in a statutory charter for headteachers, with provisions to ensure young people and parents also have a stronger voice in schools.

The Committee is very interested in following and scrutinising these reforms and has already undertaken a series of investigations to date, which are detailed on our website.

As we can see below, both Sweden and Finland have already instigated a number of similar reforms, with mixed success. New curricula have been introduced, teachers and headteachers have been given greater autonomy and decision-making powers,
a child-centred approach to education based more on outcomes has been prioritised etc.

The purpose of the visit, therefore, was to meet with government ministers and officials, parliamentarians, teachers, teaching unions, educationalists and parents in both countries to assess the reforms undertaken, what had been successful and what still remained a challenge, and to explore what lessons could be learnt for the roll-out of reforms in Scotland.

Our delegation

Our cross-party delegation consisted of:

- James Dornan MSP, Convener, SNP
- Ross Greer MSP, Scottish Greens
- Mary Fee MSP, Scottish Labour
- Richard Lochhead MSP, SNP
- Gillian Martin MSP, SNP
- Oliver Mundell, Scottish Conservative and Unionist

and two members of the clerking team.
Preface

Our sincere thanks are extended to all of the people we met both in Sweden and Finland who graciously offered their time and expertise during our visit to explain how they perceived the education reforms in their country. Any errors in this visit report are our own.

While Members will have taken different things from the trip, all of the Members who travelled to Sweden and Finland learned a great deal from all of the meetings and visits during the trip. Some of the themes discussed were about the approach and structure of education and the process of reform.

In Sweden, Members were particularly interested in the way in which successive reforms have been undertaken and the current focus on making teaching an attractive and well-respected profession.

During their time in Finland, one theme that was ever-present in discussions was trust. There is evidently a great deal of trust at all levels of the education system – from the national government that gives autonomy to municipalities, municipalities’ trust in schools, headteachers’ trust in their teaching staff, teachers’ trust in their pupils, and parents and the public’s trust of the whole system.

Another theme that arose in both countries was the relationship between the central and municipal governments and level of autonomy for municipalities. In different ways and to differing extents, the structures and responsibilities of different levels of government are being contested.

The Committee is aware that education systems are contextualised within their own societies and you may not be able to copy good practice wholesale from Nordic systems into the Scottish system. Members found it extremely useful to learn about different approaches and what has worked well (and less well) in Sweden and Finland. There are clear parallels between the challenges and strengths of those countries and the system in Scotland. The visit was very valuable and will enhance the Committee’s consideration of the Scottish Government’s education reforms as well as informing the Committee’s ongoing scrutiny of education in Scotland.
Our programme

Monday 26th March

Depart Edinburgh for Stockholm

Meeting with the Swedish Minister for Education, H.E. Gustav Fridolin, and Mr Thorgny Arwidson, International Secretary, Swedish Green Party

Meeting and discussion with Mr Björn Åstrand, Senior Lecturer, Former Dean and Chair of the Swedish Government’s education inquiry and Swedish School Commission. Björn will be joined by:

- Mr Matz Nilsson, President, The Swedish Association of School Principals and Directors of Education
- Ms Elisabet Nihlfors, Professor and Dean, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Uppsala Universitet
- Mr Erik Blom, Student, former member of the Swedish School Commission
- Ms Lina Axelsson-Kihlblom, Head of the Department of Education in the Municipality of Nynäshamn
- Ms Marika Markovits, Director ”Stockholm City Mission” och ”Stockholm City Mission’s School Foundation” (a private, non-profit, provider of education)
- Ms Jenny Kallstenius, Senior Advisor, Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR)
- Mr Lars Hallenberg, General Secretary, The National Union of Teachers in Sweden
- Ms Anna Kaya, Teacher and expert, The National Center for Swedish as a Second Language

Tuesday 27th March

Meeting with the Swedish Parliament Education Committee

Meeting with headmasters from Stockholm and visit to the Eriksdalskolan Primary school, Sodermalm, Stockholm

Meeting with the Swedish Parliament’s Labour Market Committee

Depart Stockholm for Helsinki
**Wednesday 28th March**

Visit to the Mattlidens skola, Espoo, and meeting with the School Principal, Teachers and Barbro Högström, Director of Swedish Educational and Cultural Services for the Espoo municipality

Meeting with Mr Kaj Laine, Committee Counsellor for the Education and Culture Committee, Ms Marja Lahtinen, Committee Counsellor for the Education and Culture Committee, and Ms Katariina Kuusinen, Head of International Affairs, Parliament of Finland

Meeting with Ms Heljä Misukka, Director of Educational Policy, and Mr Anders Rusk, NLS General Secretary and OAJ International Coordinator, The Trade Union of Education (OAJ)

**Thursday 29th March**

Meeting with Ms Ulla-Jill Karlsson, Special Government Advisor, Ministry of Education and Culture (vocational education and training), and Ms Annamari Kajasto, Counsellor of Education, Finnish National Agency for Education (early childhood education, pre-school education, comprehensive education)

Meeting with representatives of the Förbundet Hem och Skola i Finland (Swedish speaking Parents Association)

Meeting with two leading Finnish educationalists - Ms Irmeli Halinen and Ms Päivi Nilivaara (CEO of Innoline Oy)

**Friday 30th March**

Meeting with Professor Pasi Sahlberg

Depart Helsinki for Edinburgh
Report of the meetings

Sweden

Meeting with H.E. Gustav Fridolin (Swedish Green Party), Swedish Minister for Education

The current government in Sweden is a coalition between the Social Democratic Party and the Greens. The current education minister is Gustav Fridolin.

Members of the Committee meeting with H.E. Gustav Fridolin (Swedish Green Party), Swedish Minister for Education

Our meeting with the Minister focussed on a number of key areas.

Introduction

Mr Fridolin noted that the 2012 PISA results came as a surprise to many in Sweden. There was a need to update the education reforms of the country.

Mr Fridolin identified three strands to Sweden’s reform programmes:

- More investment in education, including increasing the numbers of teachers and staff.

- A broad-based national coalition to improve the prestige of the teaching profession. This is includes improvements to salaries, conditions and a bonus scheme for taking on additional duties.
• Creation of a School Commission which was an independent review undertaken by teachers and educationalists with a focus on improving equity and equality. The Commission set up was in response to growing inequality, despite recent improving PISA (and other) results.

Mr Fridolin ascribed the widening performance in equity to elements of education reforms undertaken in the early 90’s, namely devolving too much responsibility to municipalities, the development of Free Schools, and reforms being undertaken during a recession.

Questions

Members of the Committee asked what responsibilities the centre had now brought back from municipalities. Mr Fridolin said that these were: intake to schools, including the responsibility to ensure schools include a mix of social backgrounds; national standards for the curriculum; and aspects of the budget.

Members of the Committee also asked about the role and responsibilities of headteachers. Mr Fridolin stated that the headteachers are responsible for the interpretation of the curriculum. The inspectorate provides quality assessment along with the municipalities, which also have oversight of the budget.

We also explored the relationship between the municipalities and central government. Mr Fridolin said that there is ongoing negotiation on what the best division of responsibilities should be, but that there was agreement that the 90’s reforms gave too much responsibility to municipalities.

Members of the Committee also asked about how communities have been included in the working of schools. The Minister said that particularly in communities where there were higher levels of deprivation, schools have sought to include their communities more.

We asked about the health and wellbeing of young people and how agencies outside of school were being integrated into the delivery of services. The Minister stated that the model for this is Scotland’s approach to GIRFEC. Training of teachers to support individuals with additional needs has progressed and more can be done. The National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools supports schools in developing pedagogic approaches. Mainstreaming is well established in Sweden and has broad support.

The members then asked whether there are any particular issues with rurality. The Minister noted that teacher shortages were more pressing in rural schools and that Free Schools had tended to be established in urban areas and at upper-secondary level.

We also asked about what is being done to address the shortfall in teachers, particularly in rural areas. The minister said that there are incentives to attract teachers to certain areas. A recent publication by Prof. Bjorn Astrand had identified a number of ways in which continuous professional development could support the
retention of teachers and to attract the most experienced teachers to schools serving families from the lowest socio-economic groups.

Finally, we asked if the effects of reforms giving more responsibility to the municipalities and the fiscal tightening that occurred in the early 90’s could be separated. The Minister stated that this would be difficult.

The Swedish Parliament’s Education Committee

The Swedish Parliament’s Education Committee is one of 15 parliamentary committees in the Swedish Parliament (Sveriges Riksdag).

Its remit is to consider issues relating to pre-school activities and care services for school children, the school system, higher education and research, and financial support for students. It also covers matters relating to expenditure on financial support for students and education and academic research.

Our meeting with members of the Committee began with an overview of the Swedish education system and the historic reforms of the last century (circa 1862) and post-World War II period, which form the basis of the current system. Post-war reforms merged the previous dual-track education system, which had been based on the relative status and wealth of the student, into one with a focus more on comprehensive education for all based on equal access.

The current system has two basic principles at its core, namely the right to equivalent education regardless of background, sex etc. and a comprehensive approach to teaching. The system is split largely into: a pre-school system, which
runs from around 1 year old through to 6 or 7 years of age; compulsory education until young people reach the age of 15 to 16 years old; and from 16 there are non-compulsory upper secondary schools (3 years) or vocational training.

By the age of 3, around 90% of all Swedish children are attending the pre-school system. The parliamentarians described the approach as more of an “edu-care system”, with the emphasis both on pre-school nursery-type care, and pre-school education. In 1996, the early year’s system was moved into the remit of the Education Ministry.

One of the major challenges facing Sweden that we discussed is its shortage of suitably qualified teachers. The Swedish parliamentarians reported a gap of around 70,000 trained teachers within the next 5 years. A comparable percentage shortfall from Scotland would be around 15,000, whereas the actual figures are around 500\(^\text{1}\) vacancies in Scotland. The total number of teachers in Sweden is around 173,000, so a predicted shortfall of 70,000 is very significant.

Around 4 out of 5 teachers are qualified via a teaching certificate. The reported shortfall of 70,000 refers only to qualified staff, not other staff such as classroom assistants. The Swedish system also allows recruitment of staff that have university degrees, but not a teaching certification.

In an effort to close this gap in recruitment, the authorities have introduced a fast-track system (taking about 1.5 years) for staff if they have another university degree. They have also launched advertising campaigns to attract people in, and brought in improved pay scales. The authorities have also allowed teaching students into class to teach, spending around 75% of their time in the classroom (as paid work) and 25% back at university as part of their teaching course.

One of the key factors said to be behind the shortfall is that the reputation of teaching has been damaged in the past through extensive criticism of the profession in political debate, in the media etc. There is now a more cross-party consensus to talk up positives of the profession, whilst still debating the challenges in the education system.

We were also told that some parents have a low opinion of the teaching profession in Sweden and that teachers are often viewed negatively in the press.

The recently concluded School Commission launched by the Swedish Government was said to be an important part of the process of reviewing what further reforms are still needed. It was recognised thought that here will be challenges in implementing the recommendations.

The Swedish pre-school system was said to suffer similar shortfalls of qualified teachers. Around 35-40% of staff in a pre-school are qualified teachers, the remaining staff are day-care professionals.

\(^{1}\) Scottish Government statistics indicate that the vacancies as at 20 September 2017 were 507 in the secondary sector, 309 in the Pre-School/Primary sectors, and 118 heads and deputes across both sectors. [https://beta.gov.scot/publications/teacher-vacancies-statistics-2016-2017/](https://beta.gov.scot/publications/teacher-vacancies-statistics-2016-2017/)
Excessive workload and bureaucracy was reported by teachers to be one of the main issues they face, along with salary concerns and the challenges of maintaining discipline in the classroom. The education authorities have tried to put measures in place to reduce bureaucracy and also introduce classroom assistants to help class teachers with lesson preparation, paper-work etc. Some schools have also taken on staff to help with classroom administration, welfare problems, coaching of pupils with ASN etc. These staff are not teachers or classroom assistants, but are an additional resource to help teachers focus their time on teaching.

We also heard that tensions remain in the system between municipalities and the national authorities. Sweden has 290 municipalities (with around 2,400 people in the smallest one). The Swedish body for local authorities was said not to be “fully on-board” with the recent recommendations from the Schools Commission. It is recognised that some of the findings are politically very challenging and wider issues such as merging municipalities together into larger bodies would be controversial.

The School Commission has considered establishing regional offices of the national education agency to encourage cooperation between municipalities and also between them and the national bodies. National responsibilities in education have always covered issues such as the curriculum, equality goals etc., but teachers have been employed by municipalities since the mid-90s.

One factor deemed important to boosting respect for the profession was the efforts to build political consensus across the different parties, and to try to avoid a constant process of reform. The representatives we met emphasised two shared goals irrespective of party view – on the need to boost attainment and deliver good results. Political debates do still occur in relation to education, such as on the continued support for free schools.

One international example cited by the Swedish parliamentarians is that of Ontario in Canada, which was said the have raised exam results over a very short period time. Teachers in Ontario were said to enjoy a very high status in society.

A financial incentive scheme for teachers, which sees some enjoy an increment to their salary has recently been introduced. This money was provided by the national authorities and distributed by municipalities. The incentive scheme was said to be having some effect, but there has been criticism that the process of distribution has not been transparent and that the criteria for the awards have been unclear.

We also discussed Sweden’s introduction of free schools in previous years. It was noted that Sweden now has a very mixed system as a consequence, with significant variation between rural and urban areas in relation to free schools. For some that we met, these schools should not have a place in the system. Others argued that choice is important but further reforms might be needed. One of the drivers for free schools in rural areas is a desire to keep local schools open which are at risk of closure. A lot of autonomy is given to free schools in terms of how they operate, but many municipalities still require such schools to demonstrate outcomes and meet certain targets (e.g. on results and attainment).

The recent OECD report on Sweden states that the reforms in the 1990s (such as for free schools) had created ambiguity in the system around some issues. These were
around who was now responsible for following up on schools that had poor results if these schools were out of the municipal system. Some believed that the national authorities do not see this as their role, and left it to municipalities. Others thought that the funding regime for the mixed school system was less clear and this had been further blurred because of recent budget cuts.

We also explored issues of ASN provision and children’s mental health. In Sweden, all schools are now demanding an integrated health and welfare service within schools and the national authorities are increasing funding for that. We heard views that the level of demand for such services, especially from young girls, is increasing in Sweden and the recent changes to the grade/exam system had led to more stress for pupils.

Neither the national education agency or national government does not collect national statistics on ASN levels. Some statistics on demand are collected at municipal level and the national bodies have provided additional funding for this.

Municipalities are allocates additional funding on the basis of socio-economic needs. Around 6bn SEK (£510m) of additional investment is now being made.

One key body in ASN provision and assessment at a national level is the National Agency for Pupils with Special Needs. This body helps with guidelines and they can send trained ASN provision specialists into schools to help, but not on a permanent basis. These staff are focused on helping the teacher with teaching methods for teaching pupils with ASN and providing specialist teaching materials etc. They do not teach the pupils directly.

One difference between Sweden and Finland that we explored is that Sweden now has a national assessment system, whereas Finland does not. This was introduced so that Swedish education authorities could intervene earlier in the process if results in certain schools or municipalities were falling. The view taken by some was that the previous system provided such results too late in a child’s development. Now, Swedish teachers have assessment results from as early as Grade 3. Others recognised that this provides helpful information to teachers but argued that it can have a demoralising impact on some pupils who do not do well at these tests at an early age.

Finally, we discussed a number of more related to higher and vocational education. One key priority – as in Scotland – is on widening access. The Swedish Parliament’s Education Committee had just completed an inquiry into this issue. This has focussed on the value of a system which is free for all, except non-EU students (there was said to be cross party consensus on retaining this core principle). It also looked at the importance of maintaining Sweden’s generous student support system of loans and grants. One factor in access is that of parental attitude to the value of higher education, and student attitude. One outcome of the review is to be a move towards an entrance examination for HE institution and not just a reliance on exams taken at school.

The Swedish authorities were also looking to address skills gaps in the economy through boosting the attractiveness of vocational education. They are seeking to
make this provision more attractive to students, and are working on a series of initiatives to tackle parental attitude towards vocational training/education as an alternative to HE provision at university.

Visit to the Eriksdalsskolan Primary School, Sodermalm, Stockholm

The Committee visited Eriksdalsskolan, in the Södermalms area of Stockholm. The Committee was accompanied during the visit by the Rektor (Headteacher), Happy Hilmarsdottir, Olle Pettersson, chairman of the School of Teachers’ Association in Stockholm (Lärarförbundet), Björn Hareland (Lärarförbundet) and Paul Savage (Lärarförbundet).

The visit was supported by the Lärarförbundet.

Eriksdalsskolan is a Grundskola which caters for children aged between 7 and 16. James Dornan, Oliver Mundell, Richard Lochhead, Mary Fee, and Ross Greer attended the visit to the school.

The Committee arrived at lunchtime and began the visit with lunch in the school canteen. The Committee then observed a variety of lessons. This included a visit to a unit which provided child care for children before and after school; the staff in this unit also worked as classroom assistants and designed the activities in the wrap-around care to reinforce classroom learning.
The Committee then had an opportunity to speak with the headteacher, Ms Hilmarsdottir, Mr Pettersson, Mr Hareland, Mr Savage, and Åsa Hedlund (a deputy head).

The headteacher, Ms Hilmarsdottir had come to Eriksdalsskolan 4 years ago and had previously been head at a school in an area of high deprivation and with a high proportion of non-Swedish speakers. At the time Eriksdalsskolan was underperforming and Ms Hilmarsdottir outlined how she had turned around the performance of the school.

The head described how she had introduced new and clear structures and discipline procedures that staff would follow and were clear for parents/carers and pupils. These new structures were produced in collaboration with staff, the trade union and pupils.

Ms Hilmarsdottir explained that she took a methodical approach to change management within the school, introducing change incrementally and with the support of the staff, pupils and parents wherever possible.

The headteacher explained that in her view the most important element of improving schools is good leadership. As part of this, it is vital to provide teachers with the support they need and to give freedom where possible (e.g. working patterns). The school had begun to provide the opportunity for teachers to work with a local university to undertake pedagogical research. There are a total of 2 weeks of in-service training days for teachers per year.

Ms Hilmarsdottir explained that she has a good deal of autonomy in how she spends the resources allocated to the school. She decided to spend less on unqualified staff and focus resources on qualified teachers; she also provides free breakfasts to support children from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

The school engaged with pupils through regular questionnaires which sought views on how they felt about the school and teaching. Pupils are also involved in the classroom and, for example, have a say in how units are assessed. There are two student councils (one each for younger and older pupils) which organise school events. There did not appear to be a parent council.

The school had good relationships with the police but worked less closely with other community-based services. There was a view that the school's responsibility is at the school.
Discussions also touched on the Swedish (and Stockholm) system more generally.

Headteachers are appointed by the municipality and Ms Hilmarsdottir has a six year contract of employment. The intention of the Stockholm municipality is to place the right headteacher in the right school – e.g. Ms Hilmarsdottir’s strengths lie in improving lower-performing schools. The Committee asked whether lower-performing heads would likely be moved to another school and we were told that, after support from the municipality, headteachers who were under-performing would not be retained.

The Committee asked about some of the challenges faced by the Swedish education system. Both the pace of change and the constancy of change were highlighted as problematic for the teaching profession. Teacher vacancies were an issue raised in the visit, and had been a theme in all of the Committee’s meetings on education in Stockholm. Mr Petterson noted that around 30% of teachers in Sweden are not fully qualified.

In relation to the disappointing (but improving) PISA scores, it was noted that general education in Sweden is very broad and covers 16 subjects whereas PISA focuses on many fewer subjects.
Labour Market Committee

Whilst other members of the Committee visited the Eriksdalsskolan Primary School, Gilliam Martin MSP met with two representatives from the Swedish Parliament’s Labour Market Committee.

One of the key issues in Sweden for this committee is the current skills gap in a number of key sectors. There is currently a tight labour market and skilled staff are in high demand in some sectors. The emphasis in Sweden is not about attracting new entrants to the country, but upskilling existing residents. The Swedish authorities had also been investing significant sums into vocational training. Unemployment rates are currently low, but progress of people in the labour force from manual to more skilled jobs is problematic.

Sweden also struggles with the challenge of integrating new refugees into the labour market, particularly for refugees from an older generation. A tri-partite agreement now with between employers, unions and the authorities means that immigrants can join the labour market for a short period. This is part of the Swedish social model.

The gender pay gap is also an issue. In Sweden, every firm with more than 10 employees has to produce a report on the gender pay gap. The Swedish government also has a new action plan to tackle the gap. The gender pay gap in Sweden in the private sector is larger, even though conditions for female workers are generally better in the private sector than in the public sector.
A new government initiative has been brought in to ensure all public workers can be offered full-time work if they want. This is intended to make a big difference in terms of the pensions of workers, particular women, so as to provide for better pensions in retirement. If a certain municipality has a high proportion of part-time workers who do not wish to move to full-time work, then the national government will provide additional grants to take on extra staff.

Sweden also has a problem with parental attitudes towards vocational training and apprenticeships. There are few examples of apprentices working in firms in Sweden. The country offers school-based vocational training but interest in this has said to have declined. Additionally, completion of the vocational training at school did not guarantee the right to move into HE at university afterwards. The country does have around 50 technical schools that are jointly run by employers and the trades unions.

Some of the main issues for the Labour Market Committee will depending on the outcome of Sweden’s forthcoming general election. Currently, national governments do not involve themselves in wage issues in the labour market. However, the Moderate Party would like to get more involved in labour market and wage issues. It would like to introduce “Introduction Jobs” into the system which involve a mix of 75% of work and 25% study, with the person receiving 70% of the normal wage, and a tax break. This is designed to get more people working. Others political parties do not agree with this policy.

We heard that Sweden is successful at being able to attract companies to Sweden via Foreign Direct Investment but also keep Swedish-owned companies in the country. Views expressed to us were that this was because the local labour market conditions and business climate was attractive, with little industrial strife, high wages and good conditions, skilled labour force etc., so there is little incentive for a Swedish firm to sell and businesses therefore continue to grow. Also, Sweden has the world’s highest lowest wage rate.

Sweden also has two government initiatives at a national level that operate like an investment bank. They also have co-operation agreements with the universities to fund incubation services to help start-up firms and university spin-off companies.

Tackling the challenges from immigration will be another main issue in the election and for the committee afterwards. Sweden has agreed a system whereby there are 14 different types of jobs where someone can have a fast track to convert previous skills into the Swedish version of those skills, plus extensive training to help them learn Swedish. This scheme – mainly focusing on manual jobs – means someone can now learn to be a bus driver in 18 months. In the past, it took around 9 years for 50% of people to have a job that earned around 240,000 SEK (approx. £20,000). Now it takes about 5 years to achieve the same goal.

During a short tour of the Swedish Parliament’s debating chamber, we also learnt a little about the Swedish Parliament’s initiative to offer all schools a grant to help them visit the Parliament, which was important for schools and their pupils from remoter areas of the country. Interesting also was the fact that the members of Parliament sit by geographic area, not by political group.
Meeting with Björn Åstrand and other who served on the Swedish School Commission.

The Committee met with Björn Åstrand and a number of other experts and representatives who served on the Swedish School Commission. The attendees are listed in the programme, above.

Mr Åstrand had also published a report for the Swedish Government on ways to support teachers and improve the esteem of the profession.

The meeting was informal and included several conversations happening at the same time. Notes of these discussions were therefore not taken.
Finland

Visit to Mattlidens Skola, Espoo, and meeting with the School Principal, Teachers and Barbro Högström, Director of Swedish Educational and Cultural Services for the Espoo municipality

Members of the Committee visited the Mattlidens Skola in the municipality of Espoo, just outside of the capital city of Helsinki. The school campus contains sites for preschool, compulsory school and the gymnasium school. The school is aimed at Swedish-speaking Finns and teaches mainly in Swedish.

Espoo is the 2nd largest city in Finland and its fastest growing. Swedish speaking Finns represent about 7.3% of the city’s population and about 5% overall in Finland. Around 10% of people in the city choose to send their children here, because of a desire for them to be bilingual. To date, few of the “new Finns” (mainly immigrants and refugees) choose to attend this school as the municipalities tend to send such pupils to Finnish language schools so that they can learn Finnish first.

Members of the Committee with Barbro Högström, Director of Swedish Educational and Cultural Services, Espoo municipality

The local municipality of Espoo operates a very integrated approach to Swedish language education and adult learning. This means that schools, social work, adult education etc. are all integrated together into one team. This requires leadership within the municipality to arrange.

Organising the system in this way at the local level provides for shared objectives across all the different services and the creation of one single management group,
which makes for efficient decision-making. A ‘big tent’ approach is taken involving all the local school principals, school directors etc. and is based on a joint leadership approach with the education authority.

In a message we were to hear a lot in Finland, trust is said to be the key to the Finnish system. Education Directors trust school principals to run their schools, principals trust teachers to do their job, teachers trust pupils to learn in a way that best suits them.

Finnish teachers are trained to a very high professional capacity. They all have Masters degrees. They are highly networked to other teachers and education professionals in their own municipalities and wider afield. Additionally, we heard that Finnish teachers are given a high degree of autonomy for decision making. This gives teachers influence and power.

The design of the national curriculum and its translation into local and school versions has been an inclusive process. There is a national core curriculum. Municipalities then design a local curriculum; in Espoo this included subject specialist teachers collaborating across schools.

The process of agreeing and implementing the municipal and school-by-school versions of the core curriculum involved the education authority organising a 2-day away day, to identify of common goals, self-evaluate 4-6 goals for each school or child care centre etc., all of which were measurable and could be tracked.

The next steps involved were visits to schools by a particular school principal's peers. This was a kind of ‘inspection visit’, to encourage discussion amongst peers and the production of a jointly produced report on issues needing improved, which is followed up as part of a subsequent visit. The identification of someone’s peers was quite organic and may involve schools of a similar type, or ones with quite different needs. Schools, day-care and pre-school and vocational centres are all involved in the peer group. Accountability and responsibility for planning and implementing the new curriculum was shared across the schools in the area.

The localised adaptation of the national curriculum is based around the principle that teachers should aim to teach and coach pupils in a way that suits them best and is best adapted to how an individual child learns.

The local versions of the curriculum are constantly evaluated and updated each year, with a local management board taking decisions in Espoo.

Within schools, the approach we saw in Espoo involved a very flexible and child-centred approach to teaching. Depending on the needs of the pupil in the 6-15 year group, subjects are combined or not into themes to help pupils learn differently. This means that the school day is not necessarily broken up into separate subject classes lasting for a set period of time.
Differing approaches to classroom teaching – from beanbags to desks and white boards

Older pupils can be taught by a range of different teachers taking them for different subjects, or by one teacher for all subjects of that suits them better. We also saw class sizes of around 20-25, but also classes with pupils of similar ages learning in much smaller groups and using peer-learning and self-learning in quiet spaces within the school. The essential principle was to use whatever approach and format suited that particular child.

Teaching is flexible within any given lesson and is often multidisciplinary including perhaps art or music to support broader learning. Outdoor teaching is used a lot in Finland to stimulate senses. We also saw examples within a class where teaching involved pupils learning from a book, using a game, using an online tool, working with a teacher on a problem, working with their peers etc., all during one lesson. The same lesson could be interrupted for a short period of physical activity help refresh the pupil and aid concentration.

The message we heard is you have to teach pupils to find the joy in learning and that learning by heart, or rote learning, doesn't work for all. In the view of those we met, pupils have to find their own path and be involved in planning their own learning.
The focus for the teacher was less on attainment for a particular exam, and more on ensuring that every child develops to the degree that is possible for them. This approach means that teachers feel respected for their professionalism and skills. The committee heard that teachers worked in a culture of self-analysis and reflection and one where teachers felt they had ownership of the curriculum and teaching and learning in the classroom.

A fairly tough approach was highlighted to us by the principal in terms of teachers that do not wish to work in this way. Her focus was mainly on helping those teachers who do want to follow this approach, and she suggested than that those that don’t eventually come around through curiosity when they see others using these new pedagogical methods. In the school we visited, we were told that teachers value the new curriculum and the child-centred approach to teaching.

One point emphasised was that co-operation between school and home is very important, and that the School Council (for the pupils) is key too. The School Council is properly integrated into decision-making in schools. The Council sets its own agenda and Pupil Council reps choose their own teacher to help them, not have one imposed. Pupil reps also have right to take 5-10mins out of lesson time to report back to other pupils on decisions taken at the School Council.

Pupils were also involved in co-production of how they learn. They have a say in setting their learning goals and how their learning will be assessed.

The school we visited was also well resourced in terms of ASN provision. It had a total of 14 staff working on student welfare, for 700 pupils. This involves its own social worker in the school, psychologist and therapist.

The approach in Finland is for each pupil with ASN to be assessed in terms of a pathway for extra help in an existing classroom by the teacher if possible. If that is not effective, intensified support by the same teacher is provided if necessary. If that doesn’t work, a specially designed approach for that pupil with additional specialist teaching is provided. During our visit, we saw classrooms that had been designed to resemble a living room in a house, where a teacher would teach pupils with more complex additional needs in groups of one or two pupils.

We heard that setting the right atmosphere in a class before learning is important, as is the atmosphere and ethos within school more generally. Finnish teachers follow the KiVa approach.

KiVa is an evidence-based programme in a school aimed at preventing bullying and tackling the cases of bullying effectively. The third aspect of KiVa is constant monitoring of the situation in the school and the changes taking place over time; this is enabled by the online tools included in KiVa. These tools produce annual feedback for each school about their implementation of the program as well as the outcomes obtained.

KiVa includes both universal and indicated actions. The universal actions, such as the KiVa curriculum (student lessons and online games), are directed at all students and focus mainly on preventing bullying. The indicated actions are to be used when a bullying case has emerged. They are targeted specifically to the children and adolescents who have been involved in bullying as perpetrators or victims, as well as
to several classmates who are challenged to support the victim; the aim is to put an end to bullying.

**MSPs enjoying a healthy school lunch, Finnish style**

Finally, the Finnish school system takes a holistic approach to other key factors that can help promote learning. All pupils are given free transport to/from school and all pupils are offered one healthy school lunch. Pupils are not allowed off campus until they reach the age of 16 years old when compulsory education is completed.

**Officials from the Education & Culture Committee in the Finnish Parliament**

The Education & Culture Committee in the Finnish Parliament (Suomen Eduskunta/Finlands Riksdag) is one of 15 permanent special committees, along with the Grand Committee, which focuses mainly on EU affairs.

The Education & Culture Committee deals with matters relating to education, training, science, art, cultural activities, sports, youth work, copyright, and financial aid for students.

The Committee’s main areas of work in recent months have been on inquiring into reforms to the Finnish vocational education system. The Committee is now beginning work relating to day-care provision in Finland and the legislative framework for this, and funding for the cultural sector as part of the other strand of its remit.

In an overview of the education system, we heard views that the process of reform of the system builds upon the initial changes that were made following WWII. The key to the education system was said to be the emphasis placed on the training of teachers and the requirement that such teachers are educated to Masters level. Another important factor is the level of trust placed in the profession. The national bodies set the core curriculum and then teachers and municipalities follow this core.

At the level of the national parliament, there is some, but limited, involvement of politicians in the detail of the education system, such as the development of the core curriculum. This was developed in the main by experts within the national educational agency. It was noted that the process led to a lot of political debate though, but it was for the national agency to decide how to progress.
The officials stressed that the process of implementing a core curriculum at local level did not result in major changes or substantial differences between any national-level core curriculum and those taken forward at local or school level. Municipalities had a high degree of autonomy, but still had to work within a framework agreed at national level.

Members of the Committee in the chamber of the Finnish Parliament (Suomen Eduskunta/Finlands Riksdag)

We also discussed the PISA results for Finland, noting that there was little variation between schools within Finland which was said to have one of the lowest spreads in results within the OECD. The officials reported though that they had been finding that some schools with a high proportion of parents with more limited education did have an impact via an inherited lack of interest in engagement with the school. This is quite a new development in Finland and was said to be down to the change in socio-economic circumstances.

The Finnish authorities had recently responded to these changes by giving more ‘equality money’ into those areas in Finland with higher social deprivation. The system of redistribution involves a process of allocating money nationally to the municipalities, who then pass this onto the schools directly. Any extra funds have to be spent on specific things, like more teachers, smaller class sizes etc. and the school has to account for how it has spent the money. If the school improves, it does not enjoy a continuing grant. This equality funding has been operational for around 2-3 years.
A central message emphasised to us is that the national authorities do not inspect or rate/grade schools. There is little appetite in Finland for a system that may lead to league tables and schools that are more favoured over others. This system was ended in the 1980s. If parents have an issue with schools, they are not slow at contacting the local municipality. There is also a body at regional level that deals with complaints about the standard/quality of teaching/care provided to a pupil.

The members of the Committee explored the issue of the relative levels of funding for education from the national government and from local municipalities. This is a complex area. Monies from central government for education are part of a wider grant which local bodies then decide how to distribute. A rough estimate was that perhaps 40% of a school’s budget came from the state and 60% from municipalities. The latter use a system of local taxes, with inter-municipal redistribution, to fund expenditure.

The officials we met indicated that Finland does not have too much of a problem with recruiting teachers. There were some localised challenges and some issues with the recruitment of special needs teachers. The lack of issues was said to be down to the high status of the profession and high starting salaries. The national authorities were now looking at salaries in the pre-school and day-care sectors, as salaries are lower there. Teacher training is delivered in universities and most of the university staff have been former teachers.

Class size is not considered to be a key factor in Finland. We heard views that it is more a question of dynamics in classroom and how well the teacher can function, plus how much resource they have in the room in the form or classrooms assistants, ASN provision etc. In classes with a high proportion of pupils with ASN, sizes can be smaller.

**OAJ – Trade Union for Teachers in Finland**

OAJ an independent and not-for-profit trade union, not linked to any political party, with over 120,000 members (around 90,000 of which are still working). The unionisation rate in Finland amongst teachers is one of the highest figures in the world (about 90%). The OAJ is part of a wider consortium of 18 trades unions across the Nordic states. The OAJ is the only recognised union for bargaining purposes.

Most pay negotiations are conducted at national level, with only 4% of a teacher’s salary negotiated locally. Other terms and conditions are part of a national agreement.

The OAJ reps we met said that, since 2011, the budget cuts in Finnish education have been severe, with cuts of around 25% to the budgets of polytechnics and 15% for secondary schools. We heard that there had been a number of lay-offs of teachers and increasing class sizes. Additionally, teaching time had been reducing. This had led to an overall increase in the workload of teachers.

OAJ campaigns in Finland in recent times have been on increasing funding to match levels in other Nordic countries, in clarifying the legislation to improve the quality of teaching, in efforts to provide a more updated register of teachers to provide for better workforce planning, and to try to get local decision makers to work better together, especially in eastern Finland (where there are large disparities between bigger and smaller cities in education provision).
The OAJ’s other campaigns have focussed on efforts in increase resources for special needs/ASN provision. Only around 3% of OAJ teachers believe that resources for ASN are sufficient and that class sizes with ASN pupils are too large.

School drop-out rates are also a problem in Finland. Around 50% of post-16 year old pupils education drop out at that point. The OAJ has been campaigning for longer compulsory education ages to also include the upper secondary education provision. The OAJ staff quoted stats that showed that the risk of unemployment risk is cut by 50% if a person completes upper secondary education.

Finally, with an economy said to be booming, the OAJ reported that the country now faced some labour shortages and that the national government was likely to invest more in adult education to help people change professions.

Members of the delegation with staff from the OAJ union

When we met the OAJ reps, they discussed the balance of powers between the national authorities and municipalities. They expressed a view that some powers/roles needed to be more centralised to tackle the variations that were occurring between local authorities. For example, there are no centrally agreed rules or guidance on class sizes (which can vary between as low as 10 and up to 34; OAJ thought approx. 20 was the right size). OAJ believes that a more nationally agreed legislative approach to standardise more on these types of issues will help. They consider that financial incentives don’t really help to reduce these variations, reporting that some municipalities don’t apply for the equality funding on offer as they don’t want to be controlled by national bodies or they don’t have staff available locally to prepare bids for such funding.
At this point in time, the reps we met were not clear if there was a direct cause and effect relationship between the budget cuts and the very recent fall in PISA scores. They did not that it was clearer that some areas of education, such as ASN provision, had suffered. It was also clear, for the OAJ, that some schools in less affluent areas were not doing as well and that this was also the case in some parts of Finland where education budgets were not as much of a priority as care for the elderly because of local demographics. Where parents were very active in engaging in the school, then that can make a difference to attainment levels.

For the future, the OAJ wanted to see the political debate move on to trying to continually improve and not rest on Finland’s recent successes. They were also clear that they did not want a regime of school inspections or league tables. They did want to address some of the more localised recruitment problems. Currently, in Finland, they have around 9-10 applicants per teacher training place, making it harder to become a teacher than study medicine or law at university.

The members of the Committee also asked about the implementation of the core curriculum and the views of the teaching profession. OAJ said that it was not the introduction of the new curriculum that had been difficult, but some of the localised decision-making on how to adapt this. Teachers had felt, however, that workload had increased. OAJ and teachers liked the flexibility in the core curriculum, for example when it comes to how to evaluate/test/grade students. They recognised that new national legislation won’t help everything though and there does need to be local flexibility as municipalities do vary in their needs, socio-economic demography etc.

On the issue of funding, the OAJ reps estimated that the broad split between national and local funding levels for schools was more like 25:75 and this had fallen from 40:60 respectively. They considered that the equality money had had some impact, but it only amounted to €30m per year; relative to the budget cuts in 2011 of around €900m.

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**Finnish Ministry for Education and Culture, and the National Agency for Education**

The Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for the development of education, science, cultural, sport and youth policies. The administrative branch of the Ministry of Education and Culture comprises 13 agencies, including Finnish National Agency for Education, Academy of Finland and Arts Promotion Centre.

The Finnish National Agency for Education works under the Ministry of Education and Culture and its tasks and organisation are set in the legislation. Its core tasks are:

- to develop education and training, early childhood education and care, lifelong learning; and
- to promote internationalisation in Finland
The officials we met stressed that everyone in Finland has the right to basic education free of charge and that the public authorities have to guarantee thus for everyone. This means that two principles are at the core of the system:

- equal opportunity to receive other educational services in accordance with their ability and special needs; and
- the opportunity to develop themselves without being prevented by economic hardship

Core curricula are now in place for all aspects of the Finnish system, from preschool, through compulsory and upper secondary school and, since 2017, into adult education.

In the early years/pre-school system, the focus is on the following strands:

- Integrative education
- Individual early childhood education and care plan, no learning standards
- Learning through play
- Languages, physical activity, exploration, artistic experiences and self-expression

In the very early years, many children attend day-care. Some of this is provided by the state, but some parents pay privately. Costs are linked to the income of the family. The maximum cost per child is €280 per month (with reductions for siblings).

At the age of six, the system provides a minimum of 700 hours of pre-primary education, free of charge. This is provided in early childhood education and care centres and schools. Pre-school teachers are also trained to Masters level, but are not as well paid as teachers in basic and upper secondary education.

After the age of seven, the child enters compulsory or basic schooling. The new curricula for grades 1 to 6 in those schools were rolled-out in 2016. It is being extended to other school grades, ending with grade 9 by August 2019.

The Finnish system also recognises other factors that are important to a child’s ability to learn. Since 1948, all schools offer every child one free school meal, to cover a third of the recommended calorie intake.

The curriculum is set nationally, but the system allows for some degree of localised adaptation and implementation.
The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014)

- provides a uniform foundation for local curricula
- enhances equality in education throughout the country
- the curricula of each municipality and school (local curricula)
  * steer instruction and schoolwork in more detail
  * take local needs and perspectives into consideration
  * may also be further specified later
  * serve as an active and flexible support for teaching and school activities

Core subjects in Basic Education
The national core curriculum is comprised a set of the objectives and contents for each subject. The purpose of the national core curriculum is twofold: to enable a reform of school culture and school pedagogy, and to improve the quality of the learning process and enhance learning outcomes.

At a local/municipal level, the authorities take the national core curriculum and draw up their own local curricula. In doing so, the national agency provides supporting materials and assesses compliance.

The key goals of the national core curriculum are as follows:

- to ensure that the knowledge and skills of Finnish children and youths will remain strong in the future, both nationally and internationally
- to help schools develop their operating methods in order to increase the pupils' interest in and motivation for learning
- to enhance pupil participation
- to increase the meaningfulness of studying

The largest change in emphasis in the Finnish system from its recent reforms is to make education far more pupil-centred, focusing much more on the way teachers teach, not what they teach. The focus is on giving teachers skills to use different styles of teaching depending on the pupil’s need, with the pupil being part of the discussion about what would work for them.

Thus, the responsibility for the teacher is to:

- guide pupils to assume more responsibility for their work
- give pupils more support for their studies
- instruct and guide the pupils into becoming lifelong learners, and
- take the individualised learning approaches of each pupil into consideration

The Finnish authorities had a number of reasons for reforming its education curriculum. Firstly, reforms were needed to reflect today’s society as well as the knowledge and skills needed in the future. Additionally, a view was taken than social studies and a second national language needed to be introduced in lower grades than before. The main change in emphasis was the freedom to choose optional lessons in artistic and practical subjects (e.g. music, crafts, and visual arts) which had been expanded to lower grades. Finally, more emphasis was being placed on well-being, daily life management and technology which are increasingly visible in the instruction and studying in Finnish schools.

The Finnish system also places emphasis on the development – through the curriculum reform – of a school culture that promotes learning, participation, well-being, a sustainable way of living and has an emphasis on the school as a learning community that creates preconditions for learning together.

The culture in a school is based around three core principles:

- taking various working approaches and creating different forms of learning environments, such as providing space for experimentation, exploration, active learning, physical activity and play;
- providing for cultural diversity and language awareness (around 7% of population is non Finn, with the largest proportion being Russian speakers, then Arabic and other languages)
- enabling pupil participation and democratic activity, with pupils being provided with opportunities to participate in planning and developing the school’s activities and that structures are created and room is made for participation in the everyday life of the school, and
- equity and equality, whereby the members of the school community are encountered and treated as equals, independently of any personal characteristics

As we witnesses during our visit to a local school in Espoo, the school day and individual lessons are fairly unstructured, and can involve outdoor learning, breaks in lessons for physical exercise (to boost concentration levels), extensive use of games and other virtual environments etc.

Multidisciplinary learning is an important component in the Finnish system. Each school year at least one clearly-defined theme, project or course that combines the content of different subjects and deals with the selected theme from the perspective of several subjects is selected. Pupils participate in planning of the multidisciplinary learning modules at their school and they are assessed alongside core subjects.
A strong message we heard from these officials, which echoed that from others, is that there is a focus on learning in the Finnish system rather than testing and that there is no ranking between schools.

The assessment system in the basic, compulsory (7 to 16 years) system is as follows:

Assessment

Assessment and feedback information must be provided to pupils, parents/guardians, and not only in the form of school/class reports. At the end of each school year pupils receive a school year report with a grade for each subject on how well the pupil has achieved the targets set for the school year. The municipality decides as to whether the assessments in school year reports for grades 1-7 are verbal assessments or numerical grades.

There is a national assessment exercise in every subject at the end of grade 6 and the final assessment after grade 9 as defined in the national core curriculum. The national assessment criteria describe what kind of competence is required for particular standard to have been achieved. Each teacher uses these criteria when grading his/her pupils in the school year report at grade 6 as well as in the basic education certificate. The national agency has provided descriptions of knowledge and skills in support material for the curriculum.

The purpose of the final assessment at the end of basic education and the decision on the award of the basic education certificate is based on four factors:
• to define how well the pupil has achieved the objectives of the syllabi in different subjects

• the final grade describes the pupil's performance in proportion to the objectives of each subject and the final assessment criteria

• the final grade is not calculated directly as an average of the grades in the pupil's reports for previous courses, units or school years, and

• the formulation of the final grade is based on the competence and work demonstrated by the pupil at the end of the studies

Members of the Committee also looked at ASN/special needs provision in Finnish schools. This is based on a three-stage intervention system. This starts with general support from the class teacher. This then moves to intensified support based on pedagogical assessment and learning plan (with teaching also from the class teacher). Finally, the last stage is for the pupil to receive special support and have a detailed and specialist support plan in place. We were told that it would take probably a few weeks to a month or two at most to put a plan in place for a child requiring more intensive support and perhaps up to 6 months for the final stage of intervention.

In terms of vocational training, there are currently around 280,000 Finns involved in training of this type, with around 60,000 in apprenticeships. The gender split is 50:50. The vocational training system is set to be overhauled in 2018. Vocational training for young people has now merged with adult vocational education. Vocational training is modular to help with a more flexible approach to learning and one which can be run alongside work. Vocational training is mainly around the trades, ICT, day-care etc.

Around 10% of those involved in vocational training go on to study in higher education. However, interest in vocational training has declined and the authorities are trying to make it attractive for younger people and more competitive relative to university. The system still struggles with drop-out rates. Some of the reforms planned include shortening the duration of studies and a more rapid access to employment.

**Förbundet Hem och Skola i Finland (Swedish speaking Parents Association)**

The Förbundet Hem och Skola i Finland is the association for Swedish-speaking parents in Finnish schools. It is a membership body consisting of 275 local groups. An increasing number of parents from pre-school education are now joining. The purpose of the Association is to help promote home/school cooperation.

Most parental support in Finnish schools is not provided through volunteering during school time, as most parents work full time. Parents help out in the evenings and at weekends.

The Förbundet Hem och Skola i Finland believes that the legislative provision now for education is good with a helpful number if policy documents that promote
parental involvement. The legislation requires the school to initiate cooperation with parents and is based on trust, cooperation and respect.

Parents will typically be offered a parents’ evening every year and a twice-per-year discussion between the teacher, parents and the pupil. The national legislation and policy documents set out parental rights to information (on the curriculum, objectives of the school, assessments, welfare issues, school events etc.). A new emphasis has been placed recently on schools setting up joint events and activities between the school and parents.

The Association produces and sends out lots of information to parents, such as on supporting children when they start school, explaining the new curriculum etc. Teachers actually use this information material too, as it is easier to digest than that which has been produced by national agencies.

The Association also produces material on how to define values in a school and uses games material to stimulate debate amongst parents and teachers when it comes to working together to define cultural values. This material has been useful for schools with an increasing number of immigrants and refugees attending. The Association also provides its schools, member organisations and parents with information on societal challenges, such as equal rights, #MeToo campaign etc.

One recent innovation is the introduction of a “parent class contact”, who arranges social events and activities that involve the teacher, class and parent volunteers.
A big emphasis is placed on trying to promote parental reading with their child every day for at least 15mins, with the child writing a short report on how they found the book, which is then provided to the teacher. The Association promotes the use of reading diaries and a “like/did not like sticker” to make it more fun. This is one area where parents can make a huge impact.

The Förbundet Hem och Skola i Finland is now cooperating with the Finnish Parents Association for a survey of parents in April. This will be used to help drive ideas for change in the education system.

Many schools now arrange one day per year in September where parents can spend a whole day in school with their child/children.

The Association also attends universities to meet teacher training students and helps provide information and advice on how to engage with parents, how to make parents evenings work etc. This has made a difference to teacher attitudes towards engaging with parents.

More recently, the Association has set up lectures and talks for parents and local associations on issues such as sexual harassment, bullying etc. They offer a range of lecturers and experts and can also pay for them to speak in schools. The Association has noted that incidents of sexual harassment is on the increase, especially in the senior phase of schools. It has hired outside experts to help it on some of these issues, such producing information on consent and the changing social role of technology. The Association’s material is targeted on taking out the embarrassment of starting discussions on these issues.

The Association stressed it is not its role to get involved in the daily operations of schools or pedagogical approaches.

Finally, they produce a magazine four times per year for parents.

A central principle for the Association is to try to keep party politics and politicians out of schools as that breaks down trust. In their view, Finnish MPs don’t get involved in pedagogical matters. They reported that schools are a “battleground in Sweden and Denmark”, but Finland doesn’t have this. They noted that many parents still chose the local school for their children as there is little choice unlike Sweden where that has now become divisive in their view.

Local members of a parents’ association costs about 10 euros per family, but the Association is trying to make info free for all. Local associations elect their chair.

In recent months, the Association has been awarded funding for a 3-year project, funded by the government via a tax on the national lottery. This will look at how to engage with harder to reach parents. The Association will hire 2 new workers, based in northern Finland. The work will initially focus on fathers, as mothers tend to be more involved with the school. The work will focus on building skills within parents to engage with their children and with the schools, and about how they can help their child to learn.
Irmeli Halinen & Paivi Nillivaara

Irmeli Halinen is a very experienced educationalist in Finland and former Head of curriculum development with the Finnish National Board of Education. Paivi Nillivaara is the chief executive of a private company that provides online teacher training and guidance information for municipalities.

In the view of our experts, some of the problems in the previous system before the new curriculum were brought about because successive national governments saw it as their role to design curricula. This led to constant change. Additionally, at the time of reforms, the world was changing – becoming more global, with growing reliance on ICT – and Finnish education needed to be reformed to cope with this change. This led to a total rethink of the curriculum.

When developing the new curriculum, Ms Halinen and her colleagues undertook an extensive student survey. They received over 60,000 responses with their views on what students wanted to see in the future. Officials toured the country, meeting teachers to ask what they would change if they could change anything, what would be the school of their dreams, and what would they keep?

The team then synthesised these views together, along with with a roadmap and timescales on when the final report would be done. It was a very transparent process, which helped with engagement levels.

The first drafts of the report focussed on the big issues – new values, new school cultures, transfer of competences from national to municipal levels etc. This gave a feel for whether the team was headed in right the direction based on the feedback received.

The experts felt that the two most important changes were both connected. They were developing a fully collaborative culture for all involved in education, plus moving to a teaching environment that was about how to learn, not just learning facts: a more child-centred approach based around teaching a child how to learn, not just rote learning facts, dates and concepts. Other key changes were opening school values to a more multicultural world, with greater emphasis on sustainability. Finally, and important factor was a move towards student assessment that was done by feedback, not exams.

Finland has found it challenging to share good practice across municipalities. The challenge is that the country has lots of different types and sizes of municipalities, and they have significant levels of autonomy. The state sets the overarching rules, provides some of the budget and offers support and guidance material through the national agencies. However, our experts recognised that they could do better and that there still was variation in performance between municipalities. Smaller municipalities that have very small administrative structures need a lot of help, such as for teacher training and this is provided through consultancy.

One example of this is the use of externally hired consultants who act as “local coordinators” in a municipality to bring people together to work to define how to adopt the national core curriculum for local needs.

Finland does have some examples of regional collaboration between municipalities, such as the 18 municipalities around the city of Tampere (about 300,000 citizens).
One benefit of the regionalisation approach is greater networking and sharing of practice and cooperation.

Our experts stressed that the regionalisation is quite organically arranged. That is, it is not arranged by the central government deciding who should work together. The municipalities decide themselves.

When the new curriculum was rolled out, our experts thought that there was little resistance from the teaching profession. They felt that around 90% of the feedback at the time was positive, but did have some ideas for further changes. Our experts felt that one reason for this was the extensive involvement of teachers right from the start of the reforms. They were also pleased about how positive students were to the reforms. One bit of feedback was that pupils did not like the ‘hurried’ atmosphere in schools in the past, where pupils had to rush around between lessons, with no time to think or discuss and no time for students to get involved and influence how students were run.

Committee members with Irmeli Halinen & Paivi Nillivaara

The national agency still collects feedback from teachers and their trades union. Teacher training days (in-service days) are used to collect views on implementation of the new curriculum.

Our experts recognised that the reforms are still a challenge for teachers, They said teachers still need to learn to trust students that they can learn differently. This was thought not to be generational divide or because newer teachers were more open to different forms of teaching. Our experts thought this was more of a mind-set. For some teachers, they think they have to be speaking for students to learn, i.e. the
pupils can’t learn themselves and have to be taught be being spoken to from the front of the class.

The emphasis in Finland is also on a ‘mixed economy’ in teaching styles. The Finnish system recognises the value of lots of approaches to teaching but the key is that teachers can adapt to either or both a more traditional or an activity-led approach. In their view, it is still vital that pupils learn how to learn, learn how to plan their studies, learn how to collaborate as these skills are needed for employment and for life. Teachers are co-learners, they have to adapt too.

We learnt also that the reforms only began in 2014, so the system is still reforming. One tenet of reform is to build on existing strengths though and not to lose the good things that had been done on the past and to reform incrementally.

Teacher workload and time spent on administration is still a live issue, especially when tackling ASN area, which involves a significant amount of paperwork.

Our experts thought that the recent budget cuts had made reforms more challenging to implement as some municipalities may not have had enough staff or money to buy help, spend on training, consultancy etc. Additionally, in some places there was not enough staff in schools to roll things out as well as they would have liked.

Our experts were firm on the issue of assessments and standardised tasting. Their view was that data on school or pupil performance is always needed and it’s important to know. However, they questioned whether it was wise to put a lot of money, time and energy to assess all Finnish children. The Finnish system uses sampling techniques to get a representative view without the need for all children to sit tests. Finns trust teachers to see beyond a child’s ability to take a test. The national authorities consider that they get enough information on performance from sampling and they don't want to spend scarce resources on full scale testing.

Our experts did not agree with the unions that we met that more centralisation is needed in the system, because there is too much variation between municipalities. They respected the autonomy of local authorities, but stressed that there must be enough support and guidance to them from the centre. They thought it would be a good idea to earmark or ring fence money for education, before it goes to municipalities, so they can’t spend on other things.

In terms of development and promotion of teachers, the Finnish system is a very flat structure. The system has created the post of “tutor teacher” who get a bit more money to support other teachers, and do assessment work in schools, but not all municipalities have used the money for this. The feedback from tutor teachers is that they very much value the ability to network with colleagues, offer peer support, learn from and mentor others etc.

In recent times, Finland has been working with neighbouring Estonia and the successes of their system. The Estonian approach has been to adopted the most successful reforms to pedagogical techniques, coupled with an old fashioned approach to student discipline, hard work etc. Estonia was perceived to still have those values coupled with a strong emphasis on the role of new digital technologies in work and in its economy. Estonian education has also had an historic emphasis on
the value of maths, science, engineering etc. from its former role as part of the Soviet Union.

Finally, our experts stressed the importance in Finland of a “whole system approach” to education, considering that it was vital to have a holistic approach. Pupils needed education, but they also needed a healthy diet, exercise, a stable family environment with a reasonable basic income etc.

**Professor Pasi Sahlberg**

The Committee was delighted to have the chance to speak with Professor Pasi Sahlberg. Professor Sahlberg is a world-renowned educationalist. He worked as schoolteacher, teacher educator, researcher, and policy advisor in Finland and has studied education systems, analysed education policies, and advised education reforms around the world. He is a former senior education specialist at the World Bank, a lead education expert at the European Training Foundation, a director general at the Finland’s Ministry of Education, and a visiting Professor of Practice at Harvard University. He is a member of the International Council of Education Advisors (ICEA) for the Scottish Government. He is now also a professor of education policy at the Gonski Institute for Education, University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia.

The Committee explored with Prof. Sahlberg the differences between the Swedish and Finnish systems.

Prof. Sahlberg noted that a Finland is a small nation and is keen to learn from its larger neighbours to both the east and west. In policy, it often waits to see what Sweden does and how successful their policies are.

Like Sweden, Finland adopted a 7-16 general and compulsory education system. In this system there is no tracking (i.e. setting or streaming). Prof. Sahlberg identified a key strength to Finland’s system had been the focus on high-quality teachers. Well-educated teachers were able to teach a diverse classroom successfully. Originally, this diversity was likely to be about ability and socio-economic backgrounds.
In 1979, all teachers were required to be educated to a Master’s degree level and there is a strong focus to ensure that the depth and level of teacher education is equivalent to Master’s level qualifications in other academic fields. This was a point of divergence with Sweden where requirements to become a teacher are looser.

Prof. Sahlberg also noted that there is no longer a central school inspectorate in Finland – indeed he was the last inspector to be employed permanently. This change did not mean the end of inspections or assessment of schools’ performance, only that assessment was undertaken by the municipality and the school itself. Prof. Sahlberg stated that the change led to assessments that were much more in-depth and critical than the inspectorate would have been able to achieve, as teachers and school leaders have a much closer understanding of the school and are better placed to be a critical friend. The absence of inspections means that the national government’s quality control is at the entry point to the profession – the quality of the teacher – not the quality of service.

Prof. Sahlberg commented on the Swedish system of free schools and the voucher system which was introduced in the early 90’s. He argued that this has led to segregation and money being taken out of the education system as profit to private companies. School choice exists in some areas of Finland (e.g. in Helsinki) however, the homogenous quality of schools means that choice is fairly meaningless as all schools are very good. Schools in Helsinki that serve communities with higher proportion of deprivation or unemployment will attract higher funding, which ensures equity in the system.

In the early 90’s Finland, like Sweden, faced a severe recession and reformed their education system. Similarly, at this time Finland gave more autonomy to municipalities at the time of shrinking budgets. Prof. Sahlberg noted that the high quality of teachers in Finland made the reforms successful as they had the skills and training to take on more responsibility.

Prof. Sahlberg suggested that the success of the current Finnish system is as much due to luck as it is to wise policy choice. Finland benefits from using Sweden as a policy laboratory (as Estonia does for Finland); Finland also was lucky as the growth of Nokia in the early 90’s mitigated the effect of the recession; and the first PISA results 2000 validated the comprehensive system which had come under political pressure.

The Committee then explored what lessons the Scottish system could take from the Finnish education system.
Further information

A link to a brochure about compulsory education in Finland:


A brochure about what the statistics tell about teachers in Finland:


A brief text about early childhood education and care in Finland:


2015 PISA results


Swedish ‘School Commission' which reported with recommendations in April 2017. (Summary in English available at pp 35 – 54.

http://www.regeringen.se/498092/contentassets/e94a1c61289142bfbcfd54a44377507/samling-for-skolan---nationell-strategi-for-kunskap-och-likvardighet-sou-201735.pdf
Background to education in Sweden and Finland

Comparative Attainment

PISA surveys 15 year olds in OECD countries every three years. The survey covers science, reading and mathematics.

In Finland, Sweden and Scotland, PISA mathematics scores have, in general, been falling. A relatively steep fall in Sweden between 2009 and 2012 has since been reversed, with the score for 2015 being the same as that for 2009.


An overview of PISA 2015 results is available here, showing Singapore ranked first for science, with Finland fifth. Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Hong Kong (China) and Macao (China) achieve high levels of performance and equity in education outcomes.

Teachers in Finland and Sweden

Both Finland and Sweden take part in TALIS (Scotland does not participate in this survey). The following results from the last run of TALIS in 2013, show similar results for Sweden and Finland in terms of working time, but show a very large difference in the perceived value of the profession.
• Only 5% of teachers in Sweden report that teaching is a valued profession in society, compared with 59% in Finland.
• 18% of Swedish teachers regret becoming a teacher compared with 5% in Finland.
• In Sweden, teachers spend around 11% of classroom time keeping order in the classroom, compared with 13% in Finland.
• In Sweden, teachers spend 21 hours per week teaching and 5 hours planning lessons.
• In Finland, teachers spend 18 hours per week teaching and 4 hours planning lessons.
• Primary school teachers at the top of their scale earn: US$ 47,682 in Sweden, compared with US$42,963 in Finland (2015). Middle and Senior school teachers earn slightly more. (In Scotland, main grade teachers at the top of the scale in 2015 earned £35,409 (US$48,918) at current exchange rate).
• Sweden spends 1.8% of its GDP on primary school education compared with 1.4% in Finland. (2015)

Table 1: Spend, teachers’ pay and pupil teacher ratio

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>UK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spend on primary education</td>
<td>$10,804.3</td>
<td>$8,811.8</td>
<td>$11,367.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(per pupil per year)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spend on secondary education</td>
<td>$11,341.7</td>
<td>$10,387.5</td>
<td>$12,451.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% GDP spend on primary education</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% GDP spend on secondary</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary teachers’ salaries</td>
<td>$47,681.8</td>
<td>$42,963.0</td>
<td>$48,918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(US$) top of the scale (2015)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Secondary teachers’</td>
<td>$49,156.5</td>
<td>$46,400.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salaries (US$) top of the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scale (2015)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Secondary teachers’</td>
<td>$51,023.2</td>
<td>$50,087.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salaries (US$) top of the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scale (2015)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil teacher</td>
<td>12.8 pupils</td>
<td>13.6 pupils</td>
<td>16.4 pupils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>per</td>
<td>per</td>
<td>per</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ratio in primary schools</td>
<td>teacher</td>
<td>teacher</td>
<td>teacher (Teacher Census 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction time in primary school (hours per year)</td>
<td>766 hours per year</td>
<td>651 hours per year</td>
<td>Reform Scotland found a range of 851 – 1,000 hours per year for Scottish primary schools.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

OECD Education at a Glance 2017. UK figures have been given where necessary to ensure comparability in calculation with the OECD figures.

**Sweden**

Sweden, with a population of c.10m is divided into 21 counties and 290 municipalities with populations ranging from a few thousand to 800,000. About one third of the population lives in the three major cities of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmo. The counties are responsible for health care, but most public services are provided through the municipalities.

There are three stages to Swedish school education:

- Primary – three years from age 7
- Middle – three years
- Senior – three years (not compulsory, although c.90% of pupils stay on) There are 18 regular national programmes to choose from, 6 of which are preparatory for higher education such as university, and 12 of which are vocational.

Children between ages 6 and 13 are also offered out-of-school care before and after school hours.

**Governance of School Education**

At the national level, central government holds the overall responsibility for schools and is in charge of developing the curriculum, national objectives and guidelines for the education system. The Minister of Education is supported by four agencies at the national level.

- **The Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket)** was created in 1991. It has a school improvement function, registers teachers and is responsible for publishing national evaluations and school statistics. It also organises training programmes for school leaders and teachers - the Agency is responsible for the National School Leadership Training Programme.

- **The Swedish Schools Inspectorate** The agency is headed by a Director General appointed by the government; however, it is not a part of the Ministry of Education and Research, but an independent agency. Prior to 2008 school inspection of independent schools was the responsibility of Skolverket.

- **The National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools**
The Swedish Centre for Educational Research was started in 2015. This agency is commissioned to systematically compile research results and make them available to teachers, head teachers and other actors within the school system.

Municipalities

Schools are administered by the 290 municipalities. The municipalities are responsible for the majority of local public services including preschools, schools, social services and elderly care.

Independent Schools

Following reforms in the 1990's, Sweden developed a system of publicly funded independent schools.

Key stakeholders in Swedish education are:

- The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, SALAR, is both an employers' organisation and an organisation that represents and advocates for local government in Sweden. All of Sweden's municipalities, county councils and regions are members of SALAR. SALAR represents and acts on their initiative.
- The Swedish Association of Independent Schools has approx. 600 members across Sweden, and the establishments are run by associations, cooperatives, foundations and limited companies. In total, members run more than 1,200 establishments of varying sizes, pedagogical persuasions and working methods.
- the two national teacher unions: Swedish Teachers’ Union and the National Union of Teachers
- the Association of School Principals and Directors of Education
- the various parent associations and student councils
Table 2: Statistics on Swedish schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Compulsory</th>
<th>Upper secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
<td>899,185</td>
<td>351,641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel</td>
<td>74,359 (full time equivalent)</td>
<td>28,958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of public schools</td>
<td>4,114 (primary and lower secondary)</td>
<td>751 (upper secondary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of independent schools</td>
<td>790 (primary and lower secondary)</td>
<td>485 (upper secondary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average school size</td>
<td>Compulsory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>189 pupils in public schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>152 pupils in independent schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upper Secondary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>343 pupils in public schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>189 pupils in independent schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School governance before the 1990’s

Until the early 1990’s, Swedish schools were highly centralised. Almost all schools were public schools with admissions based on catchment areas rather than pupil choice. Teachers were employed by central government, which also funded schools directly.

Governance Reforms in 1990’s

Three major reforms in the early 1990’s changed the governance of schools in Sweden. These were:

- deregulation and considerable decentralisation from the state to the municipal level
- liberalisation of rules for establishing and running independent schools
- introduction of free school choice for students and parents

School funding changed from direct transfers by central government to lump-sum grants to municipalities. School choice, based on a voucher system was implemented at the same time. The new governance structure meant that national goals were 'steered' by the central administration while decisions and responsibilities on how to reach those goals were left to the municipalities. Schools were given extensive autonomy in shaping teaching content, materials and methods to reach the centrally set objectives. (OECD, 2016). The OECD comment that:

"without explicit guidance on the process, a number of ad-hoc governance arrangements emerged at the municipal level."

and that

"the sudden shift meant that municipalities faced numerous challenges and had trouble adapting to their new autonomy."

The OECD suggested that:
The reforms were hampered by lack of time for municipalities to develop strategies for coping with new obligations. The reforms resulted in ambiguity in roles and potential shirking of responsibilities. Reform efforts were unenforced and capacity building was not provided. (OECD 2016)

Other reforms included:

- creating an inspectorate in 2008 (responsible for which had previously been with Skolverket)
- introducing a new curriculum in 2011 with mandatory national tests in years 3, 6 and 9
- requiring, from 2012, teachers to have a degree qualification, specialised for their type of school and age group.

The OECD comment that the governance reforms led to:

- ambiguity about responsibilities between the national and municipal level
- ambiguity about responsibilities within the municipal level

(For a more detailed discussion see OECD, 2014, "Shifting Responsibilities, 20 years of education devolution in Sweden").

PISA 2012 and Subsequent Reforms

Following falling scores in PISA and TIMSS, and a critical report from the OECD in 2015, the Swedish Government established a ‘School Commission’ which reported with recommendations in April 2017. (Summary in English available at pp 35 – 54 here).

The Commission report notes that the recent scores in both PISA (2015) and TIMSS (2015) show an improvement, but that:

“pupils’ family background has gained a greater significance in terms of learning outcomes.”

Some of the key themes echo the kinds of policy debate happening in Scotland. For example, the summary describes how:

“there is a low degree of co-operation, collaboration and collective efforts to improve between different schools and education providers”

and those weaknesses in the system include:

“capacity deficiencies, resource allocation, the attractiveness of the teaching profession, co-operation and weaknesses in the evaluation system”

The report recommends the need to:

“develop a more coherent and purposeful system of governance”

and
“strengthen the autonomy of head teachers and school leaders.”

From the summary report of the Commission, it appears that policy debates in Sweden are similar to Scotland – especially around equity, teacher recruitment and governance models.

**Governance Issues**

The report recommends that: “Education providers will be strengthened through central government support and collaboration at the regional level,” which is interesting given the debate in Scotland about Regional Improvement Collaboratives.

Other governance related recommendations include:

- increased national responsibility for school funding, whereby central government sets a minimum level of funding for teaching and for school health and welfare services.
- a central government grant based on socio-economic indicators. The proposed amount was SEK 6 billion (£525m)
- stronger national responsibility for upper secondary schools “Many municipalities are not able to offer their pupils a complete range of upper secondary school programmes.”

**Training and continuous professional development**

The report identifies the need for: “initiatives to increase the number of qualified teachers and school leaders” and that: “it is very important that action is taken to make it attractive for qualified teachers to want to work as teachers and to make it easier for qualified teachers who have left the profession to return.”

Teacher training recommendations include a higher ‘per student’ allocation for funding teacher training institutions. It also notes that admissions criteria may be considered and that there is a need for a greater focus on “practical skills and school placements.” (Teacher training was last reviewed in Scotland by the Donaldson report (2011), and there are a number of initiatives to increase the availability of teacher training. The quality of teacher training was also raised in the Committee’s recent inquiry into teacher workforce planning).

The report emphasises research based practice and a number of recommendations relate to strengthening the research capacity of schools and disseminating research findings to teachers.

It recommends a “national professional programme for teachers and school leaders” in order to promote professional development.

Other themes in the recommendations include:

- proposals to achieve a greater social mix through admissions procedures and developing ‘value added’ measures of performance to inform parent choice
- health and welfare provision in school – particularly in mental health and preventative measures

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• improving school discipline
• improving provision of additional support for learning

Since the Commission reported, there’s been consultation on the report and various recommendations are been taking forward through legislation this year.

**Finland**

Finland is a country of 5.5m people, divided into 19 regions and 311 municipalities. Child poverty is around 10%\(^2\). In the early 2000’s success in PISA led many to look to Finland for education policy ideas. However, in the last few iterations of PISA, Finland’s scores have declined.

**Finnish school education is divided into 3 stages**

Basic, compulsory education comprises 6 years of primary school (starting from age 7) and 3 years of secondary school. Almost all pupils stay on for either general or vocational education in upper secondary. Upper secondary lasts generally 3 years and comprises ‘general’ (leading to the National Matriculation Examination) or ‘vocational’ leading to a variety of different qualifications. Approximately 1/3\(^{rd}\) of pupils take the vocational route.

**Table 3: Structure of Finnish school education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic, compulsory</th>
<th>6 years primary</th>
<th>Age 7 to 12 inclusive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 years lower secondary</td>
<td>Age 13 to 15 inclusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
<td>Either general</td>
<td>Generally age 16 – 18 inclusive but could be older</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Or vocational school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is also possible to do an additional, voluntary year at the end of lower secondary.

There is no external examination at the end of compulsory education and very few pupils leave at this stage. In 2013, 94.8% of young people completing basic education continued their studies in the same year in general upper secondary education, vocational education and training (VET) or voluntary additional basic education.

Within compulsory education (i.e. up to age 16) all assessments are based on teacher judgement rather than external tests. The grades in the basic education certificate, the final certificate given at the end of year 9, (and end of compulsory schooling) are given by teachers. (Statistics Finland). Only 9.5% of 18 – 24 year old Finns leave at the end of compulsory education without going on to do further education (whether general or vocational) (Finnish Board of Education).

The only externally assessed qualifications are in upper secondary. There is a ‘general matriculation exam’ or various vocational qualifications at the end of upper

\(^2\) % population under 18 in households with below 60% median income) (Statistics Finland) In Scotland, relative child poverty (2015) is 19% before housing costs and 26% after housing costs.
secondary. Around half of students enrol in vocational\(^3\). While these programmes are nominally 3 years, there is a strong emphasis on lifelong learning in Finland which means that people can complete upper secondary qualifications beyond the age of 19. (Vocational education is intended for the adult working population as well as for 16 – 19 year olds).

While in Finland socio-economic background has less influence on education than in many other countries, there is still an effect. For example, 57% of students with no upper secondary educated parent complete upper secondary by the age of 19 compared to 78% for pupils whose parent has a degree (OECD, 2017 education at a glance).

Almost all pupils attend their nearest local school, although there is parental choice of school. Upper secondary admissions are selective - student selection to upper secondary schools is mainly based on the students’ grades in their basic education certificates. The selection criteria used by vocational institutions can include work experience and other comparable factors, also entrance and aptitude tests. (Statistics Finland). (PISA tests pupils at 15, so just prior to the upper secondary stage).

Less than 2 per cent of each age cohort attends private schools. Most private institutions do not differ from those that are publicly maintained. They follow the national core curricula and qualifications requirements. They also receive public funding. (Statistics Finland).

**Governance**

Education policy is the responsibility of the Ministry Education and Culture. The Finnish national agency for education is a national development agency responsible for pre-primary, basic and upper secondary education as well as for adult education and training. It does not cover higher education. It draws up a national core curriculum and produces indicator data but more specific curricular are created at local level (National board of education).

There are no inspections (the inspectorate was abolished in the 1990’s), but there is still evaluation of schools, including national sample surveys of attainment, and a strong focus on self-evaluation. There is an annual national sample survey of attainment (either literature or maths). As it is a sample survey, it cannot be used to rank schools. (In Scotland the national sample based survey of literacy and numeracy has been replaced by annual reporting of teacher judgements for the entire cohort).

School education is organised by the 300 municipalities which employ the teachers, decide on local curricula (within the national framework), allocate funding and assess quality. They can delegate responsibilities to individual schools and in many cases for example budget management, acquisitions and recruitment is the responsibility of the schools.

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Central government funds around a third of the cost of basic municipal services, which includes basic education. The funding for upper secondary education and vocational education and training is based on the number of students reported by the schools as well as on the unit prices set by the Ministry of Education and Culture. (National Board of Education).

**Finnish Success**

Sahlberg⁴ has discussed some of the key features in Finnish school education although he notes that:

> “it is impossible to give a precise description or answer to the question of why Finland is doing well in education.”

Until the early 1980’s, the Finnish school system was highly centralised. Over the next ten years, (notably during a period of economic recession and public budget cuts in the 1990’s) a more autonomous, ‘trust based’ culture was developed. Sahlberg notes that:

> “in education systems that undergo wave after wave of reforms, frequent emphasis often is on implementation and consolidation of externally designed changes. The main result is often frustration and resistance to change rather than desire to improve schools. In Finland, however, education policies have increasingly invited schools to design their own development plans and implementation strategies based on the national curriculum and policy frameworks and oversight systems. These frameworks serve as guiding principles for municipalities and schools.”

Two interesting features are the high level of trust and respect for teachers (who are highly qualified) and the large number of small schools.

**Teaching as a high status profession**

Teachers must hold a Masters degree. The teaching degree converted from a 3 year to a four or five year programme in the early 1970s. Sahlberg notes that:

> “classroom teaching is considered an independent, high status profession that attracts some of the best secondary school graduates.” (See also TALIS results above).

There is competition for entry into teacher training, so “university teacher education departments can select some of the nation’s best students from among top scorers on university entrance exams.”

Statistics Finland states that:

> “Teaching is regarded as one of the most valued professions in Finland. Becoming a primary school teacher is a very competitive process and only 10 per cent of all applicants are accepted in teacher education programs in university.

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Salaries are not the main reason young people become teachers in Finland. More important than salaries are such factors as high social prestige, professional autonomy in schools, and the idea of teaching as a service to society and the public good.”

Teachers continue to study and engage in Continuing Professional Development throughout their careers.

Perhaps because of this, the education system is characterised by high levels of teacher autonomy and a distributed leadership approach.

“Teachers could see that the system believed that schools and communities are the places where decisions concerning the curriculum and overall arrangement of schooling should be made.” (Sahlberg, 2009)

The only ‘high stakes’ examination is the General Matriculation Exam at the end of upper secondary.

**Schools as communities**

Class sizes range from 20 to 30 students. There are no regulations governing class size and the education providers and schools are free to determine how to group pupils and students. In pre-primary education, children study in teaching groups of less than 15 pupils on average. In basic education, the average size of teaching groups was 20 pupils in grades 1-6 and 17 pupils in grades 7-9 in 2013. (Statistics Finland)

Primary schools typically have fewer than 300 pupils. There are many very small secondary schools (2008, just 4% of all schools had 500 or more pupils)

**Table 4: Pupils and schools in Finland**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>pupils</th>
<th>schools</th>
<th>Average size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary and lower</td>
<td>542,932</td>
<td>2,633</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
<td>103,914</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(general)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
<td>321,736</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>1,277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(vocational)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Statistics Finland)

Sahlberg notes that: “because most Finnish schools are small, they often forge close educational communities of teachers and pupils.”

All pupils receive a free, two course warm meal daily, free health care, transportation, learning materials and counselling in their schools.

Educational guidance is seen as essential to help every pupil and student to perform as well as possible in their studies. Guidance and counselling is seen as the work of all education personnel. All pupils and students have the right to educational support. (Finnish Board of Education)
Recent fall in PISA results

Finland has recently seen a decline in its PISA scores although it remains near the top of the rankings. In 2015 Finland came in fourth in reading, fifth in science and twelfth in mathematics.

Commenting on this in interviews, Sahlberg referred to:

- lower attainment of boys
- other countries have reformed their systems in the light of PISA results, Finland has not
- shrinking school budgets
- a shift from paper and pencil to online assessment may have affected results

(Sahlberg, Q and A with SBS news).

In an article in the Straits Times (Singapore) Sahlberg expands on these points, but also emphasises that the PISA results do not lead policy in Finland:

“Pisa is not seen in Finland as a trigger for education reforms. There will be no new policy changes that would be inspired by Pisa in Finland. The Ministry of Education has launched a national programme that aims at improving primary and lower secondary education.

This includes more student-centred pedagogies, strengthened student engagement in school, more physical activity for all students and more technology in classrooms.”

[...]

The country’s early-childhood education, highly regarded teaching profession, strong focus on well-being and whole child development, and alternative models of accountability still continue to be useful areas of interest for others.

I would argue that it is now very interesting for others to take a closer look at how Finland will deal with this new situation of slipping international results.

[...]

Finally, what Finland should learn from these recent results is that reducing education spending always comes with consequences. It is very short-sighted to think that high educational performance and continuing betterment of schools would be possible when resources are shrinking.

In an article in the Helsinki Times, (December 2016), the Minister of Education and Culture (Sanni Grahn-Laasonen) said that:

“The primary school is in need of an urgent reform, as too many have lost their motivation [to study].”
A current Finnish education policy is the **New Comprehensive Education**. The reform focuses on three things:

- new approaches to teaching (pedagogy),
- new learning environments and
digital learning.

As part of this reform a new core curriculum was introduced in Autumn 2016. The reforms include a focus on collaboration.

“The New Comprehensive School action plan provides the guidelines for the support and implementation of the new core curricula for Finnish basic education. The objective is to turn the Finnish comprehensive school into a learner-centred education system with the most competent teachers in the world and an open and collaborative school culture.”

The **goals** of the reform include creating a system where:

“Collaboration between schools and homes is close. Operating practices are regenerated by means of curricula and learning environments that have been created locally and by networking within and between schools and by participating in international cooperation.”

An **EC 'Education and Training Monitor'** briefing on Finnish education (2017) notes that:

“The new teacher education development programme follows multiple goals. By upgrading teachers’ competences and carrying out research on maintaining a high quality of teaching, Finland aims to continue to attract the best to become teachers. Innovative learner-centred pedagogics facilitate collaboration among teachers, supported by well-trained school leaders. The new comprehensive school initiative aims to give educators the ability to teach the new curriculum in a way that inspires students’. However, all in all, the lack of a clear understanding of the causes of increasing inequality in Finnish education is the main current challenge. Measures will in particular have to address the concentration of poor performance among boys and migrants.”