Premier’s Special Education Scholarships

Implementing Evidence-Based Research in Teaching Beginning Reading

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Introduction

As a trained special education teacher and a kindergarten teacher engaged in beginning literacy development, my interest in undertaking a Premier’s Special Education Scholarship was primarily to investigate the factors contributing to literacy success in Finland. I was also able to include the United Kingdom (UK) in my study tour for comparative observations.

Like many other educators, so many that the Finns call us ‘PISA tourists’, I wanted to know more about Finland’s international status in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), specifically in reading. My focus was investigating support mechanisms for beginning readers who demonstrate learning difficulties, particularly as ‘it is the bottom quintile of Finnish students who outperform the most, and thereby raises the mean to the top of the international league tables.’ 1

Finland is of particular interest due to its unswerving adherence to its own internal objectives; it is not a follower of international trends such as national testing programs. In contrast, the UK is imposing an expanding regime of national tests on its schools with a corresponding increase in teaching time devoted to the skills to be tested.

PISA results indicate which nations’ policies are most effective but do not explain why. Going far beyond finding answers to my initial questions about early reading strategies, my program of school and university visits revealed a multiplicity of factors which create the quality of the Finnish education system; factors highly distinct from the current prerogatives of English speaking nations.

Study Tour

My study began in Jyvaskyla, a city north of Helsinki with a long tradition of educational research, especially in special education. It is the home of the renowned Niilo Maki Institute and the Finnish Institute of Educational Research where PISA is conducted and analysed. It is also where the first teacher training college in the nation was established.

I was able to meet with researchers from both institutes as well as from the university. I also observed literacy support lessons given by trainee teachers at Normaalikoulu, an impressively well-equipped primary school in the university campus which is also a teacher training school. To observe the standard of education outside the city, I also visited a rural school of 80 students.

Prior to attending formal schooling, six year old children can attend a year of free, non-compulsory preschool and I was able to observe at one centre the system of integrated language learning whereby English is incorporated into daily play and living situations.

From Jyvaskyla, I travelled to Hull in England to meet a phonics researcher at the university and to observe the implementation of her work, *Fast Phonics First*, at a local school with a disadvantaged student population. In London, I had observation visits to a range of schools which had tailored their literacy programs in relation to their student body within the context of government policy on teaching phonics. The prescriptive government document, *Letters & Sounds*, identifies developmental phases in the acquisition of letter-sound correspondences. This can be used as an entire teaching program or teachers can utilise other programs as long as phonics teaching can be demonstrated.

On returning to Finland, I spent a week visiting the University of Helsinki and associated schools, including another teacher training school. I had extensive discussions with principals, university lecturers, class and student teachers and university staff members who tailor and deliver professional development programs to practising teachers; that being an ongoing, direct process with no intermediary level of the education system interpreting and delivering research to teachers. From all of these educators, I obtained a remarkably consistent and, to them, uncontroversial explanation of how education is done in Finland and why the system is so successful.

Observations & Findings

Education in Finland is a top national priority and since the major restructure of the 1970s when the comprehensive system was introduced, Finnish students up to at least the age of sixteen have experienced teaching and learning that has in more recent years proven to be amongst the best in the world. The opportunity to spend time in schools and universities there was immediately indicative of a higher-order culture of learning; successive meetings, discussions and classroom visits only served to confirm first impressions.

Beginning with the Finnish approach to learning in early childhood and progressing through each stage up to teacher education in universities, I will describe key organisational and cultural differences in their system as a whole and identify some relevant contrasts to current systems in the UK.

A well-known fact about Finland is that children do not start formal learning until the age of seven. What is less well known is what they do up until that age, a point of great interest here with our current focus on early learning, early intervention and student well-being. I was fortunate to be able to visit an early childhood centre and observe how children are prepared for academic life.

The Finns have a phrase for this process; ‘suunnattu tarkkaavaisuus,’ but interestingly preparation for school bears more resemblance to life at home than in an institution. Children can attend a year of pre-school in their sixth year; it is not compulsory but it is free for all parents.

There, the program is simply to play, eat and sleep in a nurturing, well-resourced environment with extensive space for indoor and outdoor play. Hot, nutritious lunches are free to all children and in the afternoon they have a nap in proper beds, thereby learning about healthy living and well-being.

During play and other activities, informal language development occurs through contextual references in both Finnish and English, with many of the visual charts and posters in English. Time for imaginative play and social development is very important and children are individually assessed for emotional and social maturity as indicators of school-readiness. This assessment is also used to provide information to the schools to facilitate early intervention in any developmental delays.

Well-being continues to be a priority throughout the school years. The seven year olds have an early lunch; again, the free hot lunch in school cafeterias, and finish their school day at 1pm for the whole first year at school. The free hot meals continue right through primary and high school. Throughout primary school, children have forty-five minute lessons with a fifteen minute break after each one, thereby creating breaks from mental concentration and time for physical activity outside.

While the classroom atmosphere is in some ways very relaxed with 15 students in year 1 and 2 classes, no school uniforms and shoes off, lessons are conducted and listened to with intense focus. Learning is taken very seriously and is never referred to as ‘fun’, nor are lessons interrupted. Teachers and trainee teachers are caring, encouraging and quietly spoken. Students behave with diligence and respect.

An important element in primary education is not just literacy but foreign languages as well. It is expected that children develop their reading skills in Finnish during their first school year and this is generally a straightforward process due to the phonetic regularity of the Finnish language. Despite having many very long words, they are decodable for children once they learn the set of letter sounds and syllable sounds that are consistently utilised in every word. Therefore, there are not media debates or the plethora of commercial programs we have here about how to best teach reading. However, the application of technology in education is ubiquitous and well-resourced, so students are able to learn through the adaptations to literacy that a combination of research and computer access facilitates. Schools are therefore shifting away from handwriting and traditional reading methods to a creative, play-based literacy model from research in Norway by Arne Trageton using computers to learn letters, words and text construction.

Anyone who encounters difficulty with their early literacy is immediately provided with support from a highly qualified, full-time special education teacher. There are no specific programs such as Reading Recovery for which a child must qualify and which are available on a limited basis. Any students who are not keeping up with class work are given individualised learning support for as long as necessary and are always involved in the team meetings about their learning priorities. Students diagnosed with significant disabilities are mostly included in mainstream classrooms with the provision of a full-time assistant.

Students go on in year 2 to learn English and Swedish and may learn other optional languages in later years. There are specialist language teachers in schools but it is not an extra subject; languages are core curriculum and students with learning difficulties in this area are also given special education support. The expectation that everyone can and should have an equal standard of education is followed through with the resourcing to raise the standard of lower-achieving students.

By year nine, students can read and converse well in English as evidenced by a lesson where students discussed the advantages of reading literature in its original English rather than in translation. The content of their textbook work involved interpreting information about Tolkien’s use of various real languages in his fiction. They then deciphered a passage of old Anglo-Saxon into modern English.

After year nine, students can choose to go on to three years of upper secondary school leading to university or to follow a vocational stream. It is at this point where compulsory schooling ends and there are concerns that too many students, especially boys, leave school at sixteen with no qualifications and are highly likely to be unemployed. Finland is currently considering raising the leaving age.

However, throughout the compulsory years, learning a traditional curriculum emphasising languages, crafts and music, national achievement is very high. Not only is the rest of the world curious as to how this has come about, but it seems to have taken the Finns themselves by surprise. In pursuit of both humane and practical considerations; the policies of equity which enact the understanding that exclusion is more expensive than education as a spending strategy for the overall well-being of society, they have inadvertently produced standards of excellence in schools.

Also, despite clear and agreed national objectives for education, it is worth noting that principals and teachers fulfil their mandates with extensive autonomy. The most frequently reiterated explanation given for their high outcomes was that across all sectors of the community, educators are totally trusted to perform without national testing to compare schools, school inspections or observations of teachers by principals. In contrast, the UK is on a trajectory of less trust and more tests. While the current emphasis on phonics in early literacy is research-based as it is here, the formal learning starts in prep at age four. Due to the introduction of national phonics testing, children are spending significant time learning for the test including the recognition and decoding of non-words. Large class groups of 30 mean that untrained teaching assistants are often taking half the class or focus literacy groups in any space available, including noisy corridors and bathrooms.

Reading Recovery has also been implemented in many British schools but suffers from underfunding, again leading to teaching assistants taking Reading Recovery (RR) lessons instead of the trained teacher in an attempt to extend support to more students.

One school in the East End of London has set its own course and declined to have a RR teacher. With 1000 students almost entirely of non-English speaking background, often with poor literacy standards in the home, the Principal confidently asserts that every child in his school learns to read.

After observing lessons in ten early years’ classes it was evident that they are achieving outstanding outcomes by making literacy top priority across the day. Children who are behind go to ‘catch-up’ groups in the afternoon as well as their morning literacy block. Where further remediation is required, the Principal is budgeting to pay teachers to give extra tutoring on weekends which is free to students.

All classes and support groups are consistently using the same Ruth Miskin literacy program, *Read, Write, Inc.* across the school. This requires the daily regrouping of all classes across each grade into ability groups for reading and writing time. Every aspect of literacy including sight words, phonics work and writing tasks are linked to the reader being used, enabling systematic teaching and learning with a predictable structure. To enhance teachers’ understanding of the principles informing the program, its author Ruth Miskin regularly visits the school, observes the implementation of her program and gives guidance to teachers.

The benefits of this connection between research and classroom practice was evident in the confidence with which teachers there were able to address the learning needs of all children and it was not surprising to see that the school is ranked as outstanding in their Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OFSTED) report.

The same benefits were also evident in Finnish schools and the strength of that connection instrumental to their teacher training system. High general regard for teachers and trust in their professionalism, more so than high rates of pay, mean that teaching is the most popular profession amongst high school graduates. 26% would like to enter a teacher-training course while only 15% would like to be a journalist or an architect.2

Given that in Finland, teachers must complete master’s level qualifications to teach in either primary or high school, or as a special education teacher, it is astounding that demand for these courses is such only 10% of applicants gain a place. They do so, not so much on the basis of their matriculation result; although due to the demand for places, higher-achieving students can be selected, but must demonstrate aptitude for teaching through a three-fold entry process.

Applicants must do an exam based on their analysis and synthesis of five or six research articles, they must attend an interview to explain why they would make a good teacher and also complete a challenge in a group with other applicants to demonstrate their interpersonal attributes. Three university assessors make independent evaluations without discussion.

Once accepted, trainee teachers spend the first three years of their five-year program actively engaged in research. They do not give practice lessons in that time but develop observation and research skills during placements in the teacher training schools. Final evaluations are on student research work and no marks are given for practice teaching. Extra support and time is available for students who need to improve classroom skills and each student has a mentor throughout their studies. Given that there are no fees for university education and a student allowance for five years, there is no imperative to finish training in the minimum time, thereby encouraging students to reach a strong skill base before beginning teaching.

This emphasis on ensuring every practising teacher has research capabilities has developed a culture in the whole education system that keeps schools and universities working closely together in a two-way process of professional development.

Teachers not only see themselves as the purveyors of research-based practices in the classroom, but are the source of hands-on expertise with whom university staff collaborate. Together they produce updated assessment materials and the evidence base for the academic advice that guides national educational priorities, such as the legislation for intensified support in classrooms ensuring that no child waits for help.

Recommendations

My own experience as a teacher who has a strong interest and practical involvement in the development of trainee and new teachers provided me with a comparative basis for my observations of teacher training programs in Finland. It is clear that the success of their education system and the effective support given to students with learning difficulties all stems from their high quality teacher training practices and high calibre students in training. The clear points of difference from which we could benefit in NSW schools are:

* **Designated teacher training schools with highly trained and experienced teachers who are prepared for their extra role in guiding and mentoring student teachers**. Our system of finding practicum placements for trainee teachers wherever a teacher is prepared to have them is ineffective. There is no guarantee that the trainees are getting quality role models or adequate advice. If existing local schools within proximity to universities were given a specified role hosting student teachers and were staffed accordingly, there would be no need for universities to be always searching for student placements, or, as is the case for external students, finding their own placements.
* **Quality control through closer involvement with university supervisors.** In NSW, too much responsibility for monitoring and feedback to student teachers is left to the host classroom teacher who may have neither the time nor the experience to provide structured critical analysis of a student teacher’s lessons. That giving them a grade for their overall practicum is also left to the class teacher’s judgement is allowing student teachers to pass their courses with inadequate skills, especially in self-monitoring and reflection.
* **Setting the tone for high expectations.** With a network of local schools affiliated to universities, we could attain much closer supervision of student teachers by university staff involved in a reciprocal developmental role with the staff of those schools. Not only would student teachers obtain a more direct and consistent level of monitoring and feedback on the criteria that the university has identified, they would also benefit from a narrowing of the huge gulf that still exists between educational research and its application in classroom practices.
* **Systematic** **application of research.** Student teachers need to be explicitly taught the relevance of research and to see it applied in real classrooms by experts. They would thereby become stakeholders in raising classroom standards through the application of current knowledge, rather than perpetuating the practices of whichever teacher in whichever school happens to host their practicum.
* **Raise the standard of students accepted to teacher training courses.** We are currently accepting people who have been poor students themselves to become future teachers. Teaching is a complex profession which requires the development of such a plethora of skills that people starting out with a weak school achievement level and low self-monitoring skills will struggle with the demands of both their university course and teaching as an occupation, in which they are unlikely to remain.
* **Focus on learning and consistency.** In setting literacy acquisition as the top whole-school priority over and above all other school activities, a London school is producing astonishing results within a difficult socio-economic context. Similarly, the classrooms I visited in Finland demonstrated very high expectations of students with corresponding results. The focus of individual teachers supported by a whole-school culture of focus on research-based learning was evident as the reason for this success.
* In NSW, teachers are labouring to maintain focus on learning under too many conflicting demands and activities which interrupt classes. For many children, especially those who suffer learning difficulties and behavioural and attention deficits, we need to prioritise core literacy learning to ensure their future as literate citizens.

Conclusion

At every level from pre-school to university, I have had the privilege of observing Finnish students in educational environments with resources and teachers of exceptional quality. As a total package, the level of educational opportunity for all citizens is impressive; however it is their management and resourcing of special education that is most outstanding.

Their provision of highly qualified special education teachers who engage in ongoing collaboration with university research, combined with the emphasis on individualised early intervention in learning difficulties are two observably effective features of support services in schools. They demonstrate how a cohesive system of public education can prioritise welfare and equity in a context of high general standards, enabling all learners and ultimately all citizens.

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1. Sabel, C. et. al., (2010) p. 2

2. Kansanen, P., (2008) p. 50

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