

Learning for life

Finnish schools are undergoing their biggest transformation since the 1970s. Blue Wings goes behind the scenes to find out what's on the new student-centric curriculum.

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This is what a modern classroom looks like. The Beatbox provided by Martela is Mandi Taino's choice when she works on her Olympic project at the English School in Helsinki.



Sofia Peltonen, Mandi Tainio, and Saba Nadew present their ideas on a project to teacher Marja Kokko.



WHAT IS THE “FINNISH SYSTEM”?

Teachers who hold academic degrees? Short school days? No standardised testing? No homework at all? Unfortunately, everything you hear about education in Finland is not true. Finnish children do get some homework – some more, some less – as their teachers work very independently. Tests and exams exist, but there is no compulsory national testing for students until the end of voluntary upper-secondary school (National Matriculation Exam).

However, most of what you hear is true. The vast majority of Finnish children are educated in the public comprehensive school system, and the teaching targets are set by the national curriculum. Within this framework, teaching is highly independent. There are no inspection boards visiting schools to monitor their performance or results. While teachers have a great deal of autonomy, they all have been trained at universities and have access to professional development. Unlike in many countries, teaching has always been seen as a prestigious profession in Finland. As a result, only about one out of every ten applicants is accepted to study to become a teacher each year.



Robin Ilola and Peter Kilo prefer to read away from their traditional desks.

For thousands of years, the Valyrians were the best in the world at almost everything. And then they weren't.” These lines from the TV series *Game of Thrones* refer to the ruined city of Valyria – but could almost apply to Finnish schools based on the results of the OECD’s latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests, which rank school systems worldwide every three years. After standing at or near the top of the world rankings since testing began, Finland dropped in the most recent 2012 results, though it was still the best-performing European country. Unlike Valyria, the Finnish school system is not in crisis. It is however seeking new ideas to meet the needs of a quickly-changing world.

Indeed, the redesign of schools has begun. Fifth graders at the English School of Helsinki are beginning studies in a new type of classroom. Within a couple of weeks, the room has taken on a completely new look: the walls have been repainted and the old desks have been replaced by new moveable furniture. Instead of groups of desks, there are now five separate learning stations, from which students can usually choose freely.

At the moment, the kids are working on an Olympic project. Some are crafting Olympic rings while others are editing videos that they shot earlier. Two children have taken over the easy chairs, moving screens in front to make it easier to practice a song written for the project. There’s no-one at the com-

puter at the moment, but as usual there is full capacity at the Beatbox, a set of shelves that convert into a casual mini-auditorium. Teachers **Marja Kokko** and **Mikko Kontto** are simply keeping an eye on the situation and helping as needed.

“I’ve realised that I have to be patient and wait until a student asks for help before intervening. If the work has been planned well and they’ve been given good instructions, they can solve the problems themselves,” says Kontto.

Bringing about this kind of creative chaos actually requires a lot of planning. “Although the teacher may not seem to be doing anything, he or she is constantly watching the pupils, keeping an eye on when someone needs help or should be challenged to get more out of themselves,” Kokko adds.

THINKING AND DOING

Classrooms are now being overhauled with good reason. The most recent brain research suggests that human thinking does not take place solely in the brain. What people do with their bodies plays a role in how they learn and remember. A specialist in this field is **Minna Huotilainen**, brain researcher and research fellow at Uppsala University’s Swedish Collegium for Advanced Studies.

“From the standpoint of the brain, small physical actions, tinkering and crafting are natural ways of learning. However many adults were accustomed to learning by just sitting still at school,” Huotilainen says.

The new model is not intended to turn the classroom into an amusement park. The aim is to give every stu-

Peter Kilo looks on when Luka Mansikka and Luca Elshout fine-tune their project, an animation on fair play.

The most recent brain research suggests that human thinking does not take place solely in the brain.

Juhana Kokkonen, Peter Kilo, Matias Häkkinen, and Makar Garanin make use of their mobile devices.



Nihan Suleiman and teacher Mikko Kontto exchange thoughts during the lesson.

WHAT IS PISA?

PISA (The Programme for International Student Assessment) is an international survey conducted by OECD which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students. The survey is held every three years, and so far about 65 countries or economies have participated.

There are also other international comparisons in education, for example TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), ICCS (IEA International Civic and Citizenship Study), and the data provided by UNESCO and the EU.

“There’s plenty of research indicating that music and exercise in particular improve learning skills such as memory, observation and concentration,” she says.

ENTHUSIASTIC LEARNING

The English School’s 5A and 5B classes spent a few weeks in their new shared classroom before the summer. The experiences of these 11- and 12-year-olds are a valuable resource in planning the next school year. The room is also serving as a pilot for the school’s future, as it faces a move into a new building.

“Now when we’re still in this phase of initial enthusiasm, new things like the Beatbox are of course fascinating. It seems however that most pupils prefer to work in groups of 2 to 4. There are also those who prefer to study quietly by themselves,” Kontto says.

Two fifth graders, **Julia Dietz** of 5A and **Dylan Riihelä O’Kane** of 5B, opt for group tables. During this class, Dietz is creating a comic strip about the Rio Olympic mascot, while Riihelä O’Kane is making a video about football’s Fair Play Regulations.

Asked why he chose a group workspace, O’Kane replies: “When you’re there, you can ask others for help or give other people advice or just talk.”

Dietz says it’s important to be able to choose where to work. “The tables on wheels are the best, because you can move with them,” she says.

Neither can think of how the classroom could be further improved. They consider it normal that 5A and 5B hold some classes together. And noise – well, it was noisy in their old classrooms, too.

Their teachers are also more than satisfied with the new arrangement. Kontto points out that the environment in and of itself doesn’t guarantee anything.

“I strongly believe that enthusiasm and motivation lead to better learning. It’s a different question as to whether that learning is directly reflected in better test scores. Test results always depend on what’s being tested and how,” Kontto says.

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

The classroom redesign is part of a broader ongoing change. This autumn, Finnish comprehensive schools and upper secondary schools are adopting a new national core curriculum, which will guide teaching at the grassroots level for the next decade. The cur-

dent an opportunity to learn in ways that are natural for him or her, including those who are motorically active. For many of these, being forced to remain seated at a desk can be miserable.

“In the future, learning will be more doing and the classroom a space for doing. So it’s important that classrooms are more adaptable,” says Huotilainen.

Above all, it is important to forget the old division between the mental and the physical.

“The divide between thinking and doing is an old one, but it’s unfounded. Think about the village blacksmith’s work in the old days, for instance. A large part of the work was what we now call information work – planning and designing, while only part of it was physical work,” notes Huotilainen.

The new classrooms are also intended to have a more appealing look than the old rows of desks. That’s significant, too, says Huotilainen.

“The classroom can now be arranged so that the teacher and students are comfortable. The way in which a pupil perceives his or her learning environment plays a role in how they start learning,” she says.

The new learning environments of course have their challenges, too. There is noise, which is often otherwise a problem at schools, as it adds to students’ cognitive burden and undermines learning. Adjusting to constant change is not easy for everyone, either. On the other hand, learning to cope with change must be taught along with other skills.

Schools can support learning through doing in other ways besides renovating classrooms, too. One is teaching concepts as parts of broader phenomena rather than maintaining strict boundaries between subjects. Huotilainen also speaks of the importance of the arts and skill subjects.

Ayda Biltekin updates her project’s status on the whiteboard.



Heta Salonen and Heta Peltonen hide behind a movable felt room divider.





Alex Lohman and Samu Tuominen assess their task with teacher Marja Kokko.



Saba Nadew and Mandi Taino have settled in at the Beatbox and work on a project.

TREATS IN NEW CURRICULUM

The national core curriculum which guides Finnish schools is renewed roughly once in a decade. The latest curriculum took effect in August this year. The local school-level curricula are based on the national curriculum.

The new curriculum, known as “OPS,” introduces certain phenomena that have not been in general use in Finnish schools. From now on, all children will learn how to code and use new technology. Teachers are encouraged to create new kinds of learning environments both in and outside schools.

One of the key words in the new curriculum is phenomenon-based learning. In this approach, a classroom observes a real-life phenomenon and analyses it through an interdisciplinary approach. The focus of the Finnish media and the general public has been on the interdisciplinary aspect of this approach, as teaching in Finland has traditionally been subject-based. However, for students this approach also involves other new aspects such as project planning and self-assessment.

WORLDWIDE SUCCESS

This year **Pasi Sahlberg**, former teacher and author of the award-winning book *Finnish Lessons*, won the \$100,000 Lego Prize, while fellow Finn **Maarit Rossi** was among the finalists for the million-dollar Global Teacher Prize 2016. Rossi and an American colleague developed the Paths to Math digital teaching materials. Meanwhile **Henna Anunti** was a finalist in the EU-funded Learning Scenario competition for a learning concept based on tracking the seasons with mobile devices.

riculum provides a general direction, this time urging schools to create innovative learning environments, for instance.

Huotilainen, who has served as a professor at the University of Helsinki and the National Institute for Health and Welfare, summarises the new curriculum principles in two general categories.

“One major thing is learning by doing and the associated learning of broader phenomena. The other one is bringing digitalisation more prominently into schools,” she says.

Finnish schools will not change dramatically though. Many of the ideas now being stressed are ones that many teachers have used before – even as far back as the 1970s, points out University of Helsinki docent **Jari Salminen**, who has researched the history of Finnish education.

“One could say that with the new curriculum, teachers are now being given permission to do what many of them have already been doing,” says Salminen.

One of those who have tried out ideas in practice is **Maarit Korhonen**, who alongside her work as a classroom teacher has spoken and written widely about the need for change in schools. She also has words of reassurance for teachers and municipalities struggling with meagre budgets. Changing the learning environment is not necessarily expensive: Her own classroom was overhauled in a day at no cost after the children’s enthusiasm carried over to their parents.

“The most important thing to think about is what kind of environment you’d want your own child to spend his or her own school day,” she says.

Korhonen, honoured as Classroom Teacher of the Year 2016 has encountered a wide array of learners over the decades. She has observed how finding one’s own way of learning can give a child wings. But Korhonen emphasises that you cannot always succeed.

“We can then together consider why things have gone the way they have, and acknowledge that at least we tried this or that idea,” she says.

REFORM, COMPROMISE, VISION

The much-praised Finnish school system is a result of an earlier sweeping reform. The redesign of comprehensive schools in the 1970s guaranteed all children nine years of free basic education and the same

opportunities for further studies, regardless of family background or place of residence.

In an article for the American magazine *The Atlantic*, New York-based Finnish journalist **Anu Partanen** points out that “the goal of the programme that Finland instituted, resulting in so much success today, was never excellence. It was equity.”

This succeeded so well that the ostensible American dream of equal opportunity for all has been best realised in Finland, Denmark, and Norway, argues **Miles Corak**, professor of economics at the University of Ottawa and formerly at Harvard.

In these countries, there’s significantly more chance of rising to a higher socio-economic class than in the US. As Corak sees it, Finland has succeeded in this through its egalitarian education system. Schools have always been a compromise between various interest groups.

The new millennium has brought new challenges to Finland, as elsewhere. What Korhonen finds most important in the new curriculum is the concept that each student has the right to find his or her own strengths and passions. To support that, she is calling on the state to articulate a clearer vision of where the school system is heading.

Huotilainen agrees. “I want the vision to include an idea of where everyone’s passion leads. As far as I can see, the only answer is this: making a living while benefiting others and society. The feeling of being useful is important to us humans,” she says.

Moving from vision to practice is often a long journey. Professor of education **Hannu Simola** offers

teachers these guidelines based on a quote from his book *Koulutusihmeen paradoksi*: “Love change, withstand chaos, develop yourself, and push your boundaries – and do all of this in collaboration with others.” These guidelines might have helped Valyria, too. ●

Also interviewed for this article were **Petri Vuorinen**, principal of the English School, and **Matti Mäenpää**, sales director of *Martela*, which supplies modular school furniture to improve learning environments.

BEHIND THE SCENES



Anu Piippo

is a Helsinki-based writer with university degrees in journalism, education, and English. This is the first time these three fields meshed into a single piece of work.



Piia Arnould

is a Helsinki-based photographer who has fond memories of her childhood spent in a small local school with no more than 35 students.