OECD Insights: Human Capital

VIEWPOINT Dženet Koen (Janet Cohen)

Why do Finnish 15-year-olds do so well in

international tests? Janet Cohen, a reporter
with the BBC’s The World Tonight programme,
went to Finland to find out (edited extract).

Reporter: It’s 8 in the morning in inner-city
Helsinki. Here at the Arabia School that means
it’s time for ice hockey. The children here are
aged from 7 to 16 and most of them live

locally. Supervising them, their teacher Mikko Autio believes in starting the day with sport. Autio: It is very important, you know. After this sport when we go back to school they are fresh and they are awake to study.

Reporter: It’s obviously worth the effort. Young
Finns are among the best in the world at
maths, reading and problem solving, up with
countries like Korea and Japan. Even more
interesting, they have the smallest number of
low achievers, and children from poorer
homes do nearly as well as the better off. So,
what’s the secret? The head of the Arabia
School is Kaisu Kärkkäinen. Her answer is
simple:

Kärkkäinen: Firstly, I have to say the teachers.
And secondly, the teachers. And thirdly, the
teachers. It’s most important. And then, we
take good care of children with special needs,
and we put a lot of teaching hours into helping
them.

Reporter: Upstairs, Mikko Autio’s class is
working on projects about Nordic culture, from
authors to theme parks. There is a national
curriculum, but UK teachers would be amazed
by the freedom Finnish teachers have.
Autio: I’m not following to a weekly schedule. If
there’s an area we have to do more in, say,
mathematics, sometimes we learn

mathematics the whole day! And sometimes, if
we want to go skiing for the whole day, it’s OK.
Reporter: Downstairs in the English class,

these 14-year-olds are interviewing each other
about their hobbies. There is grammar to
study, but the emphasis is on what interests
them. There is testing, but it’s low key. There
are no SATs, no league tables and no grading
until matriculation at 15, and no school

inspections. The English teacher, Riitta

Severinkangas, says teachers are in the driving seat.

Severinkangas: I think we are quite trusted
professionals, and we are very autonomous.
So, I can be very creative … if I want to.

Reporter: Of course, it’s not foolproof. A few pupils do end up in a small special needs class. … On the whole, though, mixed ability classes are the norm. If there’s a child with problems, the class gets an extra teacher, and the child gets an individually tailored curriculum drawn up by the school’s welfare team of

psychologists and support workers. On top of
that, all teachers get training to teach special
needs. The class teacher is Eine Liinanki.

Liinanki: Finnish teachers are very highly
educated, and the government has put a lot of
effort to make this system and make it work.
Reporter: In Finland, teaching is a Master’s
degree. It lasts up to six years and it’s free. Not
surprisingly, the students are queuing up, and
only 13% of them get in. … The job has status,
and that’s rooted in history according to Patrik
Scheinin, Professor of Education at the
University of Helsinki.

Scheinin: The church in Finland used to
support being able to read. You had to be able
to read something of the Bible before you could
get married. That’s a strong incentive. Later,
that was used by the national movement in
Finland, so that the Finns built their literature,
their school system, their teacher training to
become an independent state, and teachers
are something of national heroes even still.
Reporter: So, teachers rule. In Finland, there’s
one teacher for every 14 children, compared
to one for 20 children in the UK. It’s all aimed
at eliminating failure as an option. Cynics say it
brings universal competence at the expense of
excellence. But calls for league tables and a
more centralised curriculum have been muted
by Finland’s success in the international
comparisons, and above all by its faith in its
teachers.

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4. Off to School

Further Reading from the OECD

 Education at a Glance

(annual)

Governments across the OECD area are seeking policies to make education more effective while

searching for additional resources to meet

changing demands for

education. Education at a
Glance offers countries a
chance to judge their

performance in an

international context. Using a rich, comparable and up-
to-date array of indicators, the book shows who

participates in education,
what is spent on it and how
education systems operate.
The book also looks at the
results of education,

ranging from comparisons of student performance to the impact of education on earnings and adults’

chances of employment.

 Learning for

Tomorrow’s World: First
Results from PISA 2003
(2004)

Are students prepared for the challenges of the

future? Are they able to analyse, reason and

communicate their ideas effectively? Are they ready to continue learning

throughout life? These are
questions that parents,
students, the public and
those who run education
systems continually ask.
Learning for Tomorrow’s

World presents initial

results from the PISA 2003
assessment, going well
beyond an examination of
the relative standing of

countries in mathematics, science and reading to shed light on countries that

succeed in achieving high
performance standards
while providing an equitable
distribution of learning

opportunities. Learning for
Tomorrow’s World is just
one of a large number of
publications from the

OECD’s PISA programme.

 Teachers Matter:

Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective

Teachers (2005)

A comprehensive,

international analysis of
trends and developments in
the teaching profession in
25 countries around the
world. Teachers Matter
looks at research on

attracting, developing and
retaining effective teachers,
innovative and successful
policies and practices that
countries have

implemented, and teacher policy options for countries to consider. While

documenting many areas of concern about teachers and teaching, the report also provides positive

examples of where policies are making a difference. At a time when many

countries are facing an

ageing teaching workforce

and having trouble

attracting new recruits, this book provides insights into how governments can

successfully deal with these
issues.

 Formative Assessment:
Improving Learning in
Secondary Classrooms
(2005)

The achievement gains
associated with formative
assessment - the frequent
assessments of student
progress to identify learning
needs and shape teaching -
have been described as
“among the largest ever
reported for educational
interventions”. While many
teachers incorporate
aspects of formative
assessment into their
teaching, it is much less
common to find formative
assessment practised
systematically. Formative
Assessment features
exemplary cases from
secondary schools in
several countries to show
how formative assessment
can be put into practice.

Also mentioned in this chapter:

 The New Economy:
Beyond the Hype: The OECD
Growth Project (2001)

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