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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