

Educational Leadership

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A Land of Readers

Finland has made a commitment to literacy—and it shows.

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Once every three years, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests 15-year-olds in various countries around the world in reading, math, and science. According to the 2000 and 2003 PISA surveys, young Finns are the best readers in the world.

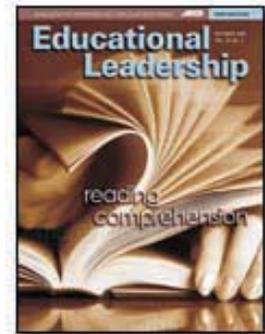
The PISA surveys included approximately 40 industrialized countries. Schools surveyed had comparable school characteristics, yet the number of extremely low achievers was smaller in Finland than elsewhere. Differences in family socioeconomic status among Finnish students had little impact on the country's results, showing that an education system can provide equal opportunities for education while instilling good reading skills in all its students.

Equal opportunities for education have been the leading principle in Finnish education policy since the early 1970s, when the nine-year basic education system—comprehensive school—was extended to all students ages 7–15. Comprehensive school has become a place in which teachers have extensive authority to interpret the content they teach. Teachers do not divide students into ability groups in any subject area, and no school inspection system controls what schools teach. Responsibility for organizing teaching lies with Finland's 432 local municipalities, although high learning standards are set at the national level and are followed throughout the country.

A Commitment to Literacy

Since the mid-1990s, Finland has committed to promoting literacy on a number of fronts. In addition to popular library reading campaigns in schools, both the Finnish Newspaper Association and the Finnish Periodical Publishers' Association organize reading weeks for schools once a year, which target such general literacy skills as fluency and critically reading text. During such weeks, newspapers and periodicals are delivered to schools along with exercises testing both reading comprehension and media literacy skills. Being media literate refers to the student's ability to understand the purpose and construction of a given article, the choices the author made in the course of writing it, and the impact of the article's visual and textual components. Editors visit schools and explain to students how news articles evolve through several revisions.

Finnish School Television, the educational television service of Finland's public broadcasting



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company, produces education programs on literacy as well as related supplementary print and Web materials. It also conducts inservice training in schools and encourages class trips to its facility. Finnish School Television recently launched a writing campaign, called "Open Story," on the theme of tolerance. Schoolchildren were invited to write open-ended stories—stories with no conclusion—about children ages 7–12. Selected stories were then made into a series of short interactive television films.

The Finnish National Board of Education implemented its latest reading literacy project, Reading Finland, between 2001 and 2004. One of its primary objectives was to engage struggling readers. Both national and international assessment studies showed that 15-year-old Finns are good at basic reading skills but encounter difficulties with texts requiring more advanced reading abilities. The Reading Finland project sought to improve students' deductive and critical reading skills by implementing targeted inservice training for teachers and by using strategies known to help struggling readers, such as summarizing text, using mind maps, and reading in pairs. The project also focused on developing reading strategies that specifically targeted boys.

A Culture of Reading, Not Testing

Finns are a reading nation. Eighty-five percent of Finnish families subscribe to a daily newspaper. Only Norwegians and Japanese subscribe at a higher rate. A typical Finnish family starts its day at the breakfast table by reading the morning paper and commenting on the day's news. The number of books published annually in Finland is high given the size of the population, and each Finn borrows 21 library books, on average, each year.

Approximately half of Finnish tele-vision broadcasts are in a foreign language. Most programs are in English, but Swedish, German, and French programs are also popular. The programs have Finnish subtitles instead of dubbing, so children need to read even when watching television. They learn to read quickly—favorite television programs are much more motivating than any speed-reading exercises assigned in class.

Finland does not administer any national reading comprehension test during the nine years of basic education, nor are there national tests in other subjects. The Finnish National Board of Education evaluates learning results on the basis of a sample, which represents approximately 10 percent of a given age group. At the end of basic education, when most students are 15, students in sample schools are evaluated in the Finnish language, reading, and mathematics. School results are confidential, and schools are not compared with one another. The information is available only to the National Board of Education and to the school in question. Individual schools use the results to improve their teaching practices. The Board of Education uses the entire sample to develop national teacher training programs. Teachers can, at their discretion, test their students for reading proficiency, but they use other forms of assessment as well, such as classroom observation and student work.

Finland has achieved its excellent reading results through a systematic focus on reading at all levels of its society. One of our challenges going forward is teaching reading comprehension strategies to all content teachers so that teaching these skills becomes the work of every

teacher in every school.

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