

Finland Study Trip Report

January 12-18, 2018

The first phase of

SPARKING DIALOGUE ON EDUCATION





Introduction

“Sparking Dialogue on Education” is a new HQSF program aimed at bringing together key players from the education ecosystem in Palestine for a national dialogue on ways to support education and work towards the education we want to see in Palestine. After careful study of several leading education systems around the world, HQSF selected Finland as a model to study and a source of inspiration for a national dialogue on education in Palestine. To give 25 program participants a first-hand experience of this world-class education system, HQSF organized a 5-day field study visit to Finland. The visit was planned in conjunction with Finnish education experts at Omnia Education Partnerships, and included an overview of the Finnish education model and a look at the reform process it underwent, visits to a number of schools and institutions, and finally a Hackathon where program participants brainstormed ideas to support the education system we want in Palestine.

This report includes a summary of all activities engaged in by participants, as well as some of the main takeaways and key points that they learned over the course of the visit.

DAY
01

Saturday Jan 13

Visit to Science Museum and Tour of Helsinki

Our first day in Helsinki started out on a fun and educational note: we visited the Heureka Science Museum. (Heureka is the Greek writing of the word Eureka, or "I have found it"). The museum is full of interactive exhibits where visitors can actually experience science in a hands-on way, not just read about it. Our participants were deeply impressed by the facilities and resources available, and spent the two hours there experimenting with different exhibits as well as attending a film about Dark Matter in the planetarium. We have three physics teachers in our group, and they were especially interested in the museum which inspired them with many ideas for many experiments they could reproduce in class.



We then had lunch at a Middle Eastern place called Habibi, as our hosts were certain that it would accommodate our tastes and dietary requirements.

After lunch, we embarked on a walking tour of Helsinki with our guide Emil, a half-Iraqi half-Finnish young man who spoke a little Arabic. He told us a lot about the history of Finland, which he explained was part of Russia from the 13th to the early 19th centuries, before it was ceded to Sweden, remaining under Swedish rule for another hundred years. In 2017, Finland celebrated its 100th anniversary of independence, and there were many events to commemorate this. Swedish remains one of the official languages of Finland, and nowadays English is also very commonly used.



Our tour lasted about 4 hours, and included a visit to the Media Hall in downtown Helsinki, home to a number of radio stations where Emil explained to us that in Finland there is absolute freedom of press, the media can say anything about any politician. We visited the main Railway station, as well as an interesting place called the Chapel of Silence. The Finns, Emil explained, are a people who love nature and love to be alone and introspective. To fulfil their need of being inward and quiet, they built a place in the busiest part of Helsinki where people can go to sit, to be still and silent and enjoy a moment of contemplation. As we were in Finland to learn about the education system, it was valuable for us to receive insight into the prevailing culture and nature of the Finnish people, in order to understand the context they are operating in, and how it differs from our own. We spent a few moments inside the Chapel of Silence to experience the tranquility it had to offer.

Our tour culminated in the convergence point of three major Finnish institutions: a square that is overlooked by the House of Parliament, a large and imposing Lutheran church, and the University of Helsinki (which we would pay a visit to later on in our trip).



After spending hours outside in the below zero temperatures, we were relieved to take a break in a warm and cozy coffee shop. We had a few hours of free time to shop and do a bit more sightseeing before meeting for dinner. This time it was not the Middle Eastern food that we were used to, but a typically Finnish place serving up the most delicious local delicacies. Our day concluded with our return to the hotel at 10 p.m.



DAY
02

Sunday Jan 14

Overview of Finnish Education System and Icebreaker activities at Omnia Vocational Institute

On the second day, we went to Omnia Education Partnerships, where the participants met two of our facilitators, Mervi Jansson and Anna Helenius, for the first time.

Introductory session

They started the introductory session with the question that was on everyone's mind: What is the secret to Finnish education? This is the million-dollar question, and surely it was the reason we had travelled all the way from Palestine to visit Finland....

Mervi and Anna, however, gave us a very realistic answer. "There is no secret. We are never happy with our education system. The world is changing constantly, so education also needs to change constantly. If we don't do this, we'll end up like the Swedish company Nokia: it was the leading cell phone company in the world, until the smart phone came along and completely changed the game."

Icebreaker activity

Mervi and Anna gave each of us Post-It notes and asked us to write down the following:

- Name and job title
- Where we are from
- Our dream for education in Palestine.



After that, each one of us took turns going up to the front of the room and reading our notes. We then posted our notes on a map of Palestine according to where we are from. Through this activity, we were able to get to know each other a little better, as well as start to share our dreams for education in our country. One participant shared an ambitious dream of having “an education system in Palestine to rival that of Finland – and not the one that exists currently in Finland, the one that will exist 5 years from now.”



Using Kahoot.it to review what we had learned

After lunch, Anna told us we were going to have a quiz to see how much we had retained about the education system and about Finland in general. However, the quiz was going to be delivered in a fun way. First we all downloaded an app on our phones called kahoot.it. Then we logged into a specific game that Anna had created. After that Anna would display multiple-choice questions on the interactive white board, and on our phones we would choose the right answer. After each response, the white board displayed the correct answer, as well as our scores based on accuracy and speed. It was an extremely fun and engaging activity, we were all on our feet, laughing and competing to beat each other. It brought the whole energy up. Some of the questions included:



- Which is NOT an official language of Finland? Finnish, English, Russian or Swedish.
- When did Finland gain independence?

Afternoon session on Finnish education system

Anna continued her overview of the education system in Finland. She said that because Finland has received so much attention in the last few years after its high performance on PISA tests, many myths have sprung up about education there. Some of the myths are that there is no homework, and that teachers are paid as much as doctors. There are simply not true. So Anna wanted to convey to us the reality of the Finnish education system. Below is a summary of our take-away from the sessions of the day.



Fidaa was the winner of the quiz with the most correct answers in the shortest time. Her prize was a chocolate bar.

Some of the main features of the Finnish education system →

Decentralization

The learning outcomes which are required are the same for all students, but the curriculum is localized and decentralized. Teachers and schools have a lot of autonomy in determining their own lessons and methods.

Reform

The education system in Finland underwent its first major reform in the 70s. Prior to that, the system was very rigid: students had to choose between vocational and academic tracks at age 10. The new system was designed to give students choices and opportunities all the way through school. They don't need to choose between vocational and academic tracks until after 9th grade, and even then they weren't "sentenced" to a certain track, they could still switch over in University. The curriculum is constantly updated, it is basically renewed every 10 years. The curriculum does not equal textbooks, rather it is the learning outcomes. In general, there is great importance given to constantly evaluating and reforming the education system to keep up with current and future needs.

Value given to teaching profession

In Finland, being a teacher is a socially valued position, it is not considered as "less than" any other profession. The process to become a teacher is quite competitive, only 1 out of 10 applicants to the Teaching Program at the University are accepted. It's a long-term commitment, where teachers in training follow a 5 year track: 3 years Bachelor's degree +2 years Master's degree (Ms. Ed for classroom teachers grade 1-6 and Master's in a specific subject for subject teachers grades 7 and up). One of the reasons that teachers are valued and given importance is cultural: in Finnish culture, traditionally there were two important people in the village: the priest and the teacher. That's partly why teachers are still valued to this day.

Emphasis on learning for the real world

There is the idea that learning should be immediately connected to the real world, to help kids relate to the world. So the practice of phenomenon-based learning is strongly emphasized, children learn by doing and by experiencing, rather than simply from books. As Mervi said, "We're education for the world, we're not education for education." There was also a debate on the place of digital tools in the classroom: some teachers embraced them, while others banned them. In the end, through dialogue, they came to a consensus that the classroom should not reject the current reality of the world, but rather teach children how to best use digital tools to interact with the world. Finland then came up with national recommendations for digital devices in the schools, so this meant that all teachers started incorporating these devices into their classrooms.

Value given to vocational education

After 9th grade, students choose between either a vocational track or an academic one. Over 50% of students choose vocational education, and there is an incredible range of vocational tracks to choose from, ranging from ICT and digital skills training to masonry and carpentry, hotel and restaurant services, beauty services, clothing design, etc. The facilities and conditions in which students study vocational education are extremely well-designed and professional, as we saw with our visit to Omnia Vocational Institute, one of the largest providers of vocational training in Helsinki and Espoo. At the end of the vocational track, students can either continue on to a vocational higher education institution, or apply to an academic track in university. In this way, there are no "dead ends", students have a great flexibility throughout their learning career. The dropout rate in Finland is incredibly low: 94.% of students obtain a basic high school diploma. It is problematic, according to Mervi, that the vocational track is more fulfilling. She said "we should make the academic track more attractive and more hands on, so it's not just all mental work, there should be more practical modules."

Trust, autonomy and joy

School is meant to be fun and rewarding, not a punishment. There is a conscious intention to create an atmosphere that promotes students' autonomy by placing a great level of trust in them, by teaching them life skills from an early age, and making school a joyful experience. There is trust among all stakeholders including teachers and parents, principals, etc. Support is provided for students who are struggling academically or socially, and it is given freely, there is no need for a formal diagnosis. If the student is performing poorly, this is addressed, instead of needing to prove that he or she has a specific learning disability. The parents and teachers are empowered to decide. Treating the symptoms is enough, without labeling the child.

DAY
03

Monday Jan 15

Visit to Etelä-Tapiola upper secondary school and Omnia Vocational Institute facilities

On our third day in Finland, after hearing so much about the many wonderful features of the education system, we were eager to see the place where it all happens: the school itself. So we embarked on a visit to our first school, the Etela-Tapiola upper secondary school. We were greeted by the principal of the school, who gave us an overview of the school's operations as well as sharing his thoughts on education in general.

Here are some of the highlights of his presentation

Finland used to be one of the poorest countries in Europe, but became of the richest in the 1980's. One of the ways this happened was through education. He said "Education is an investment, not an expense. I strongly recommend that Palestine embraces this idea."

The school, which is housed in an old printing factory, has 500 students. About 80% of them follow the Finnish national curriculum (taught in the Finnish language) while the other 20% are enrolled in the International Baccalaureate program (taught in English as per international norms). It is the highest ranked school in the country in terms of test scores, and boasts the best school library in Finland (in 2015), offering a mix of books and media.



As Finland moves towards more activity in the private sector, Etela-Tapiolan school has placed great emphasis on teaching and encouraging entrepreneurship. He gave many examples of successful businesses started by the students, including:

- Cricket protein bars: a student business where students raise crickets and use them for food. The students invented an energy bar that uses cricket powder as a base. Crickets are 60% protein, which is a good solution for feeding the planet in the future.
- I'm Blue, a blueberry soda invented and produced by students.

Other notable achievements by students and former students of the high school include:

- Zozua design: a student won best design for a new Mercedes car contest. Mercedes offered him a 4-year scholarship to study in Germany.
- Another student became a successful race car driver, after being encouraged to follow his passion.
- Students at the school support a school in Tibet, as part of a sustainable development initiative, on condition that half of the students in the Tibetan school be girls.



After the principal's presentation, he took us on a tour of the facilities. We visited the third floor, a large open multipurpose space that included a classroom made with moveable walls (we interrupted a physics lesson in progress), a Film production studio, a stage for theater and performance, and cozy cubbies for studying alone or in small groups.

After wrapping up the visit to the high school, we returned to Omnia for lunch, followed by a presentation by Omnia general director Sampo Suihko and then a tour of the vocational institute facilities.

Presentation by Sampo Suihko

Sampo Suihko, general director of Omnia Vocational Institute, explained Omnia's mission, which involves providing vocational training, as well as professional and adult education, to around 40 000 people in the city of Espoo. He considers Omnia to be a unique organization, the "testing laboratory" of Finland, in providing the different types of education needed



by the population. Companies, he said, play a vital role in determining educational outcomes, that's why Omnia ensures that companies are present and have a say in what is taught. This way, students are being prepared according to market needs.



Visit to Omnia Vocational Institute facilities

The Omnia building where our workshop took place is enormous. It houses around 40 different vocational education tracks. On our tour, we visited the building and masonry facilities, a large, well-equipped warehouse type of room. The instructor showed us different stations the students were working on, including a station where each student had to lay a foundation for a structure. Afterwards, the instructor would come and measure all the different lengths and angles, to make sure the foundation is up to standards, and awards a certain number of points to the student for the completed work. If the student receives a passing grade, he or she can move on to the next module, each at their own pace. In this way, students are doing their personal best, not trying to keep up with the pace of the class.

We also visited the gardening and landscaping area, where students were preparing to take part in a national vocational competition: they were practicing laying a flagstone patio and building a garden wall. We also visited the sewing workshop, where students were learning how to construct historical costumes (for movies, plays, etc.) Our tour concluded with a visit to the student gift shop, where students were able to market the objects they made during their studies. Overall, we were incredibly impressed by the level of sophistication we witnessed, including the facilities, equipment, highly trained instructors and the degree of excellence being targeted inside Omnia.



DAY
04

Tuesday Jan 16

Visit to Opimaki International School and the University of Helsinki Education Department

Opimaki International School

After our visit to a high school the day before, we were very eager to see what a primary school looked like. Our visit to Opimaki International School was truly magical and inspiring. The campus spans several buildings that include the school, a library, a gym and an auditorium, which are all open to the community (after school hours). Opimaki is an international school which means the curriculum is taught in English, and it has grades 1 through 9. Like all schools in Finland, Opimaki is a free school, meaning anyone can attend so long as they pass the entrance exam, which includes a test of English proficiency. We were received by one of the school's administrators who gave us an overview of the system with a special focus on support for children with learning difficulties.



Support of students with learning difficulties

In Finland, there is 3-tier support, i.e. three different levels of support depending on the severity of the situation. She explained that every student is entitled to general support, which is usually provided by subject matter teachers. The next level of support involves other parties such as: special education teachers, the school psychologist, and school welfare officers. There is a total collaboration that includes the parents as well. The third tier is special support, or what is sometimes called an IED (Individualized Education Plan). In extreme cases, the school gathers information on why the student needs this level of support and presents it to the city for approval. Our presenter said that "Some students need a little bit more in order to get as much as the others."

The presenter asked our participants if there was similar support for students in Palestine, one teacher answered that yes, there is support for students with disabilities.

Class atmosphere questionnaire

students are given a digital survey that includes questions such as, how do you feel about the class? Are you being bullied? The good thing about this is that it can be done for each class, each time slot, so that if there is a problem, it can really be pinpointed. The results are then discussed with the teacher.



Visit of Opinmaki facilities

After the presentation, we were introduced to our guides: the 5th grade students would be taking us on a tour of their school. We split into small groups, where each group had a few students as guides. They were very enthusiastic in showing us their school, and it's obvious that they felt very comfortable there. Our tour included a peek at the room where the 3D printer was kept (they were still too young to use it), a visit to the auditorium where they present their class shows, and a trip to the library, where anyone who has a library card can let themselves in, even if there is no attendant, and check out books whenever they like (the trust system is very strong). At the end, we lined up alongside the kids at the school cafeteria to join them for lunch (spinach pancakes and mashed potatoes). We observed the children serving themselves autonomously as well as eating and cleaning up after themselves. All in all, the atmosphere inside Opinmaki is incredibly warm, cheerful and positive. The setting is not luxurious, as in some private international schools, but there is everything that is needed for a full and rich learning experience.

Visit to Helsinki University Education Program

After lunch, we headed by bus to Helsinki University, to hear about the teacher training program at the Education Department. We were received by one of the department's researchers, who gave us a presentation on education and teacher training.

She noted that ever since the high PISA scores back in 2006 that showed Finnish students at their peak, there has been a decline in learning outcomes, greater disparity between schools, and a growing concern for student disengagement. This might be due to socio-economic differences between neighborhoods and municipalities, and also the possibility that the Nordic welfare state as a whole might be detrimental to kids. Finland may have also become complacent after ranking first in education.

As for the teacher training program, she explained that about 20% of students out of high school apply to the education program, and out of those top 10 percent are retained. So you aren't necessarily getting the best in the class, but you're getting the best who apply. Applications are reviewed based on the matriculation score (high school graduation score), and following that, there is an interview aimed at assessing the candidate's aptitude and personality for being in charge of children. Our presenter noted that teaching is the only profession that has this type of personality screening, no other profession has it, not even a doctor or psychologist.



Becoming a teacher is a long-term commitment, it's a 5 year track: 3 year BA + 2 year Master's degree. For classroom teachers, i.e. grades 1-6, they get a Master's of Education, whereas for subject teachers, grades 7+, they get a Master's degree in the subject they teach. Anyone with a Master's degree can also apply to become a teacher.

Because there is so much screening and selection early on, there is virtually no inspection or training once the teacher begins teaching. Inspection was abolished in 1985.

Our speaker highly recommended the following book for anyone interested in learning about the reform of the Finnish education system:



Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?

By Pasi Sahlberg

DAY
05

Wednesday Jan 17

Hackathon

What is a Hackathon?

The idea behind a Hackathon, Mervi explained, is a group of people who come together to brainstorm solutions or improvements for a certain system. It is done in a short period of time, usually just a few hours or a day, and participants are there on a voluntary basis. They can be – but are not necessarily – experts on the topic they are hacking. There are no “bad ideas” or “wrong answers” in a Hackathon, hackers should give themselves free reign to dream, to imagine the impossible, to think beyond the traditional ways the problem has been addressed in the past.

Our Hackathon theme: How do we build the future of Palestinian education to, as HQSF’s new mission states, “produce a disruptive generation of educated, innovative and engaged youth capable of shaping the future of Palestine”.

First, we were split into five different groups of five people, with each group asked to think about a different aspect of education:

1. The education ecosystem
2. Leadership
3. The teacher
4. The learning environment
5. Reform



We worked in our groups during a morning session, then had a break for lunch, before working some more in the afternoon. At the end, each of us designated a spokesperson to present the ideas we had consolidated. The goal of the Hackathon was not to arrive at concrete ideas yet, but simply to get everyone thinking and talking about education from different perspectives, in preparation for a more in-depth exploration during the workshops to be held in Palestine.



As a final chapter, participants met the five facilitators who will run the workshops in Ramallah.

Mervi gave some homework for the next workshop, which will include a "Frugal Innovation Fair". The homework question was: What is your recipe for something you feel you or your school does extremely well? Our description needs to be very specific, enough details to be able to replicate the good practice.



Conclusion

The Finland Trip was incredibly successful in inspiring our group on many levels. Some of the main things that we especially appreciated (based on the feedback forms) were:

The exceptional organization, professionalism and attention to detail exhibited by the entire HQSF team. The logistics of the trip were all well-planned and smooth, allowing us to enjoy the experience and fully focus on learning and absorbing as much as possible during our short time in Finland. We felt relaxed within our group, and were fully supported by the HQSF team in all of our needs. The pre-planning that went into making the trip happen is much appreciated, in terms of the selection of facilitators and visits.

The school visits, which were the highlight for many of us as we got to see first-hand the level of trust that exists between teachers, students and principals as well as how students are being equipped with 21st century skills. We saw the true joy that the children have in going to school and throughout the educational experience, and how the children are valued for their unique skills, encouraged the follow a track that they love and that they are likely to succeed at.

The overall grasp that we now have of the Finnish education system and the reform process it underwent. Over the course of the lectures, we received a very comprehensive overview of the system, and were able to ask the many "burning questions" we had about this successful, efficient and high-ranking system. We were able to form a full picture of the entire thought process that got Finland to where it is today in terms of education.

The Finland trip was the perfect starting point for having our own dialogue around the type of education we want in Palestine. With the inspiration and knowledge we received, we are eager to go back to Palestine and look forward to the in-depth workshops in Ramallah.



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