



The Teachers' Education Institute

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Special Report: Volume 1 No 1 2004

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Special Report Volume 1 No 1, on student achievement amongst countries in the developed world

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Editorial

Welcome to the first edition of the TEI Newsletter. We all want the best for our children. I don't think many of us would argue that the main responsibility for any child is with the parents who brought the child into the world.

We all know of the enormous reservoir of love that we give to our children and we know that without it children would grow up with deep psychological problems. So let us assume that whatever the circumstances the majority of children grow up knowing they are loved not only by their parents but usually by various family members as well.

Why do I start at this point? Because it is clear that school cannot and should not replace the very close bond between parents and child. Yet the state takes the vast majority of children and has the responsibility of educating them. In one sense they are gifted to the state by the parents.

I believe that is the attitude we should nurture in our approach to children, namely they are a gift from their parents in order that they might be educated.

However next to the parents and perhaps some other family members who knows the children best? Yes it is, of course, the teachers who educate the child. It is clear that we need to give these professionals an excellent training **and then empower them to carry out the task of educating the children under their care.**

When we do this we find that the children learn and achieve. The more power we give teachers the more their children achieve. The less power we give them the less they achieve.

In this Special Report we examine a recent OECD study of student achievement. Finland and New Zealand came first and second amongst countries in the developed world outperforming students in the USA.

We also look at why teachers in England and Wales have voted to boycott tests.

These results tell their own story and it is why TEI exist and will continue to exist until USA teachers and students take their rightful place in the modern world.

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OECD study of student achievement amongst countries in the developed world (April 2004)

The recent OECD study: Knowledge and Skills for Life PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) published on Tuesday 6 April 2004 showed that Finnish teenagers are the best readers and their youth excel in science and mathematics.

All this in a country where per capita income is about two-thirds of the USA (The latest year where comparison can be made is 2001: Finland \$23,260 USA \$35,271 with California and San Diego higher.)

Yet imagine an educational system where:

- a) children do not start school until they are 7;
- b) spending is only \$5,000 a year per student;
- c) there are no gifted programs;
- d) class sizes often approach 30.

In the USA, we would say this is a prescription for failure, yet this describes the Finnish education system.

Furthermore, how can Helsinki, a city of around 550,000, support five symphony orchestras while nationwide, there are 21 more, as well as 12 regional opera companies? All this is happening in a nation of 5.2 million. Two-thirds of a total 250 Finnish operas have been composed after 1975.

As is repeatedly pointed out to visitors Finland **has devoted itself to music, not for any emotional or moral uplift, but because it is good for the brain. It is accepted that it is essential to the neurological development of children .**

As a spokesman stated, "When you invest in culture, it always comes back, always."

The source of Finland's success is empowering teachers resulting in flexible and individualized teaching. The USA, and certainly California, is focused on obtaining measurable teaching results by continual testing students of all ages.

The curriculum is test-driven and teachers are forced to employ standardized teaching in content and methodology.

However, Finland and New Zealand fully appreciate that learning patterns can be different.

In a recent article describing the situation in Finland, "So long as schools stick to the core national curriculum, which lays out goals and subject areas, they are free to teach the way they want.

They can choose their textbooks or ditch them altogether, teach indoors or outdoors, cluster children in small or large groups."

Ministry of Education, New Zealand state, "Successful outcomes for all students require a range of learning pathways. One size does not fit all. Children arrive at school with different early childhood experiences and different levels of development. How students learn, the pace at which they learn and their interests vary between individuals."

We find two countries whose students out-perform those of the USA possess quite different education administrative structures to those of the USA. In fact, we find that nationally and statewide the USA has been moving for some considerable time in the opposite direction to those of Finland and New Zealand.

Project fifty years in the future and which countries will be in ascendancy and which in decline?

See following articles for details of the Finnish and New Zealand systems.

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Education in Finland

Suutarila, Finland - Imagine an educational system where children do not start school until they are seven, where spending is a paltry \$5,000 a year per student, where there are no gifted programs and class sizes often approach 30.

A prescription for failure, no doubt, in the eyes of many experts, but in this case a description of Finnish schools, which were recently ranked the world's best.

Finland topped a respected international survey last year, coming in first in literacy and placing in the top five in math and science. Ever since, educators from all over the world have thronged to this self-restrained country to deconstruct its school system - "educational pilgrims," the locals call them - and, with luck, take home a sliver of wisdom.

"We are a little bit embarrassed about our success," said Simo Juva, a special government adviser to the Ministry of Education,

summing up the typical reaction in Finland, where boasting over accomplishments does not come easily. Perhaps next year, he said, wishfully, Finland will place second or third.

The question on people's minds is obvious: how did Finland, which was hobbled by a deep recession in the 1990's, manage to outscore 31 other countries, including the United States, in the review by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development last September (2003)

The rankings were based on reading, math and science tests given to a sample of 15-year-olds attending both public and private schools. United States students placed in the middle of the pack.

Finland's recipe is both complex and unabashedly basic. It is also similar to that in other Nordic countries.

Some of the ingredients can be exported (its flexibility in the classroom, for example) and some cannot (the nation's small, homogenous population and the relative prosperity of most Finns, to name two).

If one trait sets Finland apart from many other countries, it is the quality and social standing of its teachers, said Barry Macgaw, the director for education at the O.E.C.D.

All teachers in Finland must have at least a master's degree, and while they are no better paid than teachers in other countries, the profession is highly respected.

Many more people want to become teachers after graduating from upper schools than universities can actually handle, so the vast majority are turned down.

"Teaching is the No. 1," Outi Pihlman, the English teacher at Suutarila Lower Comprehensive School, said about a recent survey asking teenagers to name their favorite profession. "At that age, you would think they would want anything but to go back to school."

The Suutarila school - cheerful, well lit, nicely heated - is typical of Finnish "comprehensive schools," which run from first to ninth grade.

The students, who number about 500, pad about in their socks. After every 45-minute lesson, they are let loose outside for 15 minutes so they can burn off steam.

Others are allowed to practice their music, and they file into classrooms, sling electric guitars across their chests or grab drumsticks and jam.

Children here start school late on the theory that they will learn to love learning through play. Preschool for 6-year-olds is optional, although most attend. And since most women work outside the home in Finland, children usually go to day care after they turn one.

At first, the 7-year-olds lag behind their peers in other countries in reading, but they catch up almost immediately and then excel. Experts cite several reasons: reading to children, telling folk tales and going to the library are activities cherished in Finland. Lastly, children grow up watching television shows and movies (many in English) with subtitles. So they read while they watch TV.

So long as schools stick to the core national curriculum, which lays out goals and subject areas, they are free to teach the way they want. They can choose their textbooks or ditch them altogether, teach indoors or outdoors, cluster children in small or large groups.

While there are no programs for gifted children, teachers are free to devise ways to challenge their smartest students. The smarter students help teach the average students. "Sometimes you learn better that way," said Pirjo Kanno, the principal in Suutarila.

Students must learn two foreign languages - Swedish is required by law, and most also take English. Art, music, physical education, woodwork and textiles (which is mostly sewing and knitting) are obligatory for girls and boys. Hot and healthy school lunches are free. There are also 90 computers scattered about the school, and students are free to attend homework clubs staffed by assistants after school.

Despite the accolades, Finnish officials say they are far from perfect. Boys, for example, perform much worse than girls in reading, and with so many wanting to become teachers, too few are willing to leap outside the social service sphere. "We're trying to get them to start their own businesses," said Kirsi Lindroos, the national board of education's director general.

Suutarila Journal April 9, 2004 - Educators Flocking to Finland, Land of Literate Children by Lizette Alvarez

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Education in New Zealand

The Picot Commission was set up by the New Zealand government in 1987. At that time schools came under different school districts based on different local authority areas something akin to the USA system,.

The Picot Commission recommended doing away with this structure. Each school was to be community based and have its own charter. It was to be run by a Board of Trustees (usually five) each of which had to be a parent of a child attending that particular school together with the Principal and a trustee elected by the school staff.

The Board could co-opt other persons to the Board on a temporary basis if they required certain expertise. The Board establishes a Charter, a type of contract where the Board undertakes to the Minister to take all reasonable steps to administer the school in accordance with the purposes contained in the charter.

Boards are required to update their charters annually and also to provide annual reports on how well they have achieved against their charter goals and to account for their spending of public money.

Teachers' salaries would still be paid on a national basis through the Ministry of Education. Educational Review Officers (EROs) were established (something akin to Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools in the UK) to oversee the whole system. Numerous layers of administration became superfluous including about half the Ministry of Education!

The funds were given to school directly and they could hire (together with other schools if this was appropriate) whatever consultants they needed on a needs basis.

New Zealand Ministry of Education issues a set of national administration guidelines that provide a framework within which school boards need to operate. It also has a national qualifications system and it was agreed that a national examination structure should still exist for students reaching the end of high school.

Even today when most of the developed world is obsessed with testing students of all ages the New Zealand Ministry of Education fully appreciates that learning patterns can be different, "Successful outcomes for all students require a range of learning pathways. One size does not fit all. Children arrive at school with different early childhood experiences and different levels of development.

How students learn, the pace at which they learn and their interests vary between individuals. These differences are recognized, to an extent, through the current system.

This gives teachers and schools responsibility for organizational and teaching decisions and through provision for immersion learning and designated character schools.

However, the current system needs to continually look for ways to provide flexible pathways, especially for learners with diverse needs." *Ministry of Education, Statement of Intent, 2003-2008, Building Learning Pathways.*

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Education in England and Wales: Teachers poised to boycott pupil tests

The biggest teachers' union is set to carry out its threat to boycott classroom tests next year, disrupting the Government's target setting agenda. Leaders of the National Union of Teachers are likely to announce a ballot on industrial action next month after a survey of members showed overwhelming support.

More than four in five of the 30,500 teachers questioned said they would support a boycott of tests for seven-year-olds, 71.4 per cent those for 11-year-olds and 64 per cent those for 14-year-olds. They said the tests were unreliable and caused stress for pupils.

Results in the tests are used to judge the performance of schools and form an important part of local and national league tables.

Ofsted uses them to help decide how well schools are doing in comparison with others in similar circumstances and to help identify weak teachers.

Charles Clarke, the Education Secretary, responded furiously to the threat, saying tests were a fundamental part of raising standards. They helped teachers see what progress pupils were making and were particularly important for children in the most disadvantaged areas. "Testing tackles the low expectation culture that used to hold back these children. Parents, too, value the information testing provides and we have no intention at all of taking this away.

It would be an absolute betrayal for teachers to boycott these tests and I hope that teachers throughout the country will vote against strike action. This sort of strike would damage a generation of children."

National testing was here to stay, he said. "We are not going back to the bad old days when no one knew what went on in the classroom."

The survey follows a vote for the boycott at the union's annual conference last Easter. The leadership decided to test support by a wide scale survey before drawing up the terms of the ballot. The union has to decide whether to ballot on a boycott of all three sets of tests or those for younger children. It must also choose whether to ballot only teachers involved in setting tests or the full membership.

Doug McAvoy, its general secretary, said there was no threat of strikes. "Parents will continue to receive information on pupil progress. Teacher assessment, which gains much support in our survey, will be the basis for all pupils in Scotland and is the basis for seven-year-olds in Wales. "The Government is adopting a blinkered view, refusing to look at any system which would achieve those aims except its own discredited testing regime." (Daily Telegraph UK)

Teachers denounce national tests

Teachers would prefer to assess pupils themselves. Compulsory national tests for schoolchildren are an unnecessary and stressful burden, according to a survey of teachers in England and Wales.

Only 6% thought the tests a reliable way of evaluating pupils' achievements. More than eight in 10 of the 30,500 teachers surveyed for the NUT union felt tests were stressful to children.

There was strong support for a boycott of the tests - but the government has said that would be an "absolute betrayal" of pupils and parents.

The NUT's general secretary of the union, Doug McAvoy, said: "This survey underlines the strong criticisms teachers have of these tests. "They narrow education, limit use of professional judgment, place unnecessary stress on pupils and add significantly to the workload of teachers without producing any benefits."

The tests regulator, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, said its annual evaluation, published on Thursday, "shows that the majority of teachers surveyed feel they are appropriate for assessing pupil performance, and are motivating and engaging for pupils."

On the contrary, said Mr. McAvoy: "The government would be hard put to find a teacher who thinks they are beneficial, improve achievement, or promote a broad and balanced education for our children.

"Throughout the report, teachers emphasize the waste of time and energy these tests represent for no real return." He said the government should let teachers use their own assessments to determine pupils' needs and inform parents of how their children were coming along.

But the Education Secretary, Charles Clarke, said tests were a fundamental part of raising standards in schools. "Many parents will be alarmed at the threat of preventing them knowing how their children are doing at school. It would be an absolute betrayal for teachers to boycott these tests." He hoped teachers would vote against such action - "strike action", as he called it, though the union said there was no question of that. A spokesperson for the NUT said: "Parents will continue to receive information on pupil progress.

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A Different Approach: Testing around the UK

"Teacher assessment, which gains much support in our survey, will be the basis for all pupils in Scotland and is the basis for pupils at Key Stage 1 in Wales."

The survey was organized for the union by Sean Neill of the Institute of Education at Warwick University. He found that teacher assessment was seen as a viable alternative to tests by 85% of the respondents.

Dr Neill commented on a recent international evaluation of testing. **"Though the effect of continued testing is to raise test standards, some of this effect can be attributed to increasing familiarity with the test methods by both teachers and learners, increasing emphasis on preparation for the tests, and instruction specifically focused on the predicted outcomes of the tests."**

Some anonymous comments from teachers were included in his report. "Raising standards can effectively be done in schools with good monitoring and self-evaluation practices," said a primary school leader. Another, teaching infants, said tests "rule" all teaching in a school where children come from poor backgrounds.

"They need enrichment far more than brighter children from more educated families, yet they get less. Save money from SATs and give us support and resources to improve standards."

Almost everyone - 91% - said the tests placed an additional workload on teachers. A similar proportion of primary teachers, and 85% of secondary teachers, said they were stressful for pupils.

Some felt they managed to insulate the children from this. But others said parents bought revision aids and private tutoring and offered children "bribes" to do well - even in the youngest age group.

Some 90% of teachers felt the tests diminished pupils' access to a broad and balanced curriculum.

Boycott

The survey showed substantial support for a ballot by the NUT to boycott the tests.

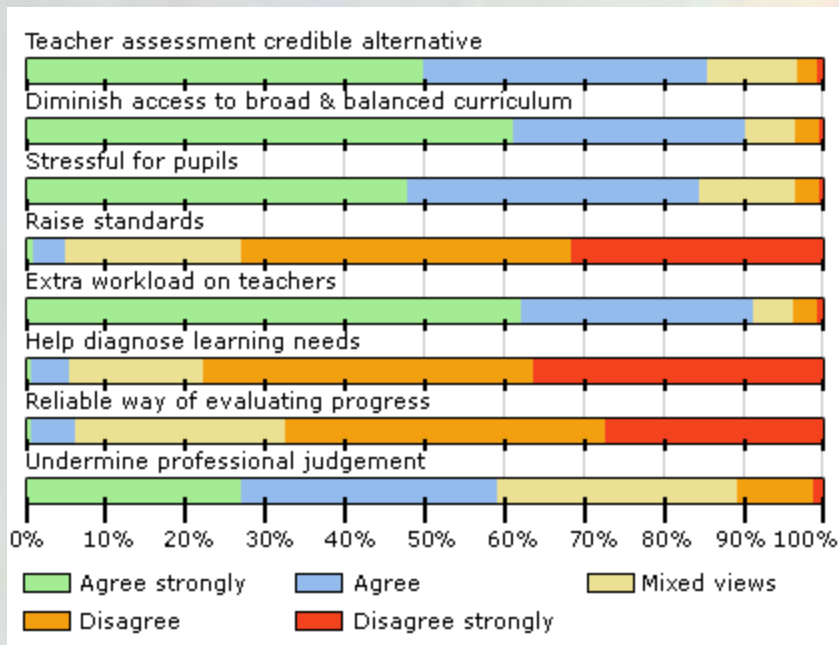
Support was strongest (82.5%) for a ballot to boycott Key Stage 1 tests - the youngest children. In Wales those tests have been dropped.

The support was 71.4% at Key Stage 2, when the tests form the basis of the primary school performance tables. In secondary schools support was 64% in favor of a Key Stage 3 boycott.

The majority of respondents - 67.9% - had more than 11 years' experience in teaching. Most were in England; 4% in Wales. About 57% were in primary schools. (BBC UK)

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How teachers responded to statements about the test



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