10. BASIC EDUCATION IN FINLAND (AGE SEVEN-16)

“The underlying values of Basic Education are human rights, equality, democracy, natural diversity, preservation of environmental viability, and the endorsement of multiculturalism. Basic education promotes responsibility, a sense of community, and respect for the rights and freedoms of the individual.”

(National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2004)

‘Peruskoulu’, the Basic Education system, or comprehensive school, was established in Finland in 1968 and began to operate in 1972.

Children in Finland begin their compulsory schooling at the age of seven when they enter Basic Schools in their local neighbourhood. It is an established principle that no child should have to pass a school to attend one further away. Children attend the same school until the age of 16 when the majority then move on to either general Upper Secondary or Vocational education. Until the age of 13, children will mostly be taught by the same class teacher for the majority of the 13 core curriculum subjects before being taught by specialist subject teachers in the final three years of their basic schooling.

Single lessons generally last 45 minutes and each lesson is followed by a 15-minute break, an innovation that the NUT delegation thought could usefully be adopted in British schools. During these breaks children play freely indoors and out, unsupervised by adults.

Children eat a hot lunch around 11am, which is provided free of charge and children serve themselves, taking as much or as little food as they wish to eat. A vegetarian alternative is provided daily and religious and health requirements are catered for. Staff and pupils sit together to eat lunch in the school cafeteria.

The NUT delegation visited two Basic Education schools: Aurinkolahden peruskoulu in the east of Helsinki and Ylä-Malmin peruskoulu in the south of the city. In both schools we met with the Principal, staff, students and OAJ union representatives; we were shown around the schools and sat in on classes.

SCHOOL VISIT: AURINKOLAHDEN PERUSKOULU

School Building

The modern and beautifully designed school building at Aurinkolahden provided an immediate first impression for the NUT delegation. The school was established in 2001 and comprises three buildings, built and designed by an architect following a design competition.

The main building is arranged on three stories in four sections and includes an observational tower for science experiments. Floor to ceiling windows provide a light and airy environment. A central atrium comprises a stage, hall, theatre space and cafeteria. As the NUT delegation arrived, towards 9am, children were streaming from classrooms in all parts of the school to congregate around the atrium where the weekly Monday
sharing assembly was about to start. Children sat below in the main hall or leaned over balconies on the floors above to listen to the recitals, presentations and music that were being shared by the students. The atrium was described by Vice Principal Katya as being “the heart of the school”.

School Community

Aurinkolahden educates 702 pupils aged seven to 16. The school population is mixed, ranging from fairly affluent families to recent refugees and diverse – pupils comes from 21 different nationalities including 107 pupils who have Finnish as a second language. There are 46 pupils with special educational needs, 21 of whom are taught in special classes while 25 are integrated into mainstream classes or occasionally taught in smaller groups. Its staff comprises 18 class teachers, 28 subject teachers, six special educational teachers, seven special educational assistants, four mainstream teaching assistants, four student welfare staff (a school nurse, a psychologist and two social workers) and a school secretary.

School Organisation

Class sizes range from 19-24 pupils but usually average around 20 pupils. In special education classes there is an average of eight to ten pupils supported by one special needs teacher and two special needs assistants. Teaching hours range from 20 hours a week for children in the first and second grade, 24 hours a week for those in grade three and four and 26 hours for children from the fourth grade upwards who learn an additional language. As children advance up the school, timetables become more flexible and children who are working independently can skip classes if they can convince their teacher that they have completed their work.

A student council meets weekly or fortnightly with two staff representatives. As well as proposing fun activities, the council also puts forward ideas for developing teaching and learning.

School Mission

The school’s aims are to achieve for its pupils:

- High standards of learning while promoting active citizenship;
- healthy self-esteem, good interpersonal skills, self-regulation of behaviour and emotional intelligence;
- Up to date IT skills, an appreciation of competitive technology and problem-solving capacities and innovation.

There is no detention. Children fill in an incident report if they behave inappropriately. Staff talk through the incident with the child who must explain her/his behaviour and motivation – a process “more powerful than detention” according to our hosts.

Teacher CPD
Staff told the delegation that Helsinki city provides substantial professional development opportunities for its teachers. Teachers can be released to attend these and the city will provide substitute teachers. A new draft curriculum was due to be published the week of the NUT's visit to Helsinki and we were told that in the two year lead in period prior to its implementation, teachers would be released to work on curriculum design.

**Challenges and Opportunities**

Finland is not immune to the economic recession and like most countries, is experiencing a period of austerity. This is impacting on education along with other public services. Teachers at Aurinkolahden were clear about the value of having one education trade union for all teachers, giving them strength as educators when negotiating with the Government. Budget cuts were being made and municipalities were trying to save money by laying off teachers for two to three weeks at a time. Teachers also feared that cuts might mean larger class sizes and they were concerned about the impact of this. Although the value of daily free meals for all pupils was recognised, teachers expressed concern that cuts had compromised the quality of these.

However, despite these challenges, there was unanimity that teaching remained a very attractive profession, involving a high degree of skill but numerous rewards, and that once trained, teachers tended to stay in the profession for their whole career.

**SCHOOL VISIT: YLÄ-MALMIN PERUSKOULU**

Like Aurinkolahden, Ylä-Malmin provides Basic Education for children aged seven to 16 but occupies a much older building compared with Aurinkolahden and lies in the north of Helsinki.

**School Organisation**

The Head Teacher, Mr Tomi Ojanen, provided the NUT delegation with a brief introduction to the school which has 540 students, who live locally; and 80 staff including 51 full time and 12 part time teachers, 14 special needs assistants, a psychologist, social worker, public health nurse and doctor. The average class size is 16 pupils.

The school is split between two sites – an upper and lower school. Lower school pupils are generally taught by the same class teacher while the upper school educates those in the final three years of Basic Education where they are taught by specialist subject teachers. However, some subject teaching for older lower school pupils takes place in the upper school and teachers move between the two sites to teach. All children learn English from the second grade onwards, Russian or Swedish from the fourth grade and French, German or Spanish from the seventh or eighth grade for those who have achieved sufficient proficiency in Swedish.

The NUT delegation was then welcomed by Ms Päivi Lyhykäinen an English teacher and member of the board of HOAY, the Helsinki teachers’ union. Members of the delegation toured the school in small groups and observed different lessons including maths, science, geography, P.E, Swedish and English. In terms of class sizes we noted a physics class of 14 pupils; a Swedish class of 14 pupils; and a home economics class
for four pupils with special educational needs taught by one teacher and two teaching assistants.

During its tour of the lower school site, the NUT delegation observed a religious education class and an ethics class. Religious education aims to develop an understanding of the Christian faith and is largely based on the teachings of the Lutheran Church, the predominant faith group in Finland. Parents can opt their children out of religious education and they instead take part in ethics classes. Ethics aims to develop children's awareness of moral and civic questions. Finnish Schools also provide religious education for the Muslim and Russian Orthodox faiths where a school has more than five per cent of children of these faiths.

The visit ended with a coffee break during which the delegation spoke freely with students who had accompanied us on the tour.

**Impressions**

The delegation made the following observations:

- There were no physical boundaries to the lower school site i.e. no fences or walls in front of or around the school or in the playground. Children of different ages are given boundaries where they can play which they learn to observe.

- Children had access to equipment such as skis and sleds during lesson breaks.

- When the school day ends for primary children (this is at 12noon for the youngest children but there are additional “flexible” classes until 3pm), the children simply leave the classroom. Teachers do not escort them to meet parents or usher them out of the school.

- From a young age children bring themselves to school and walk home at the end of the school day. One girl we spoke to said she had done this since the age of six.

- Teachers are allowed to take unpaid leave during term time subject to the approval of the school and the local authority which arranges a substitute teacher.

- Most pupils live locally and priority is given to these children. However, families are free to select schools based on a specialism.

- There are no official limits to class sizes but most classes were small by British standards. However, when a pupil with special needs is included in a class it cannot exceed 19 children.

- Schools do not have sports teams or compete with one another in team games. Although they are able to study PE, children generally play team sports outside of school.