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## Joyful Schools: What One U.S. Educator Learned From Teaching in Finland

By Kate Stoltzfus on April 19, 2017 11:24 AM

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When Timothy D. Walker, a teacher and a contributing writer for *The Atlantic*, moved to Helsinki, Finland, in 2013, he couldn't stay away from the classroom. Walker was no stranger to teaching in elementary schools in the United States, but he found many contrasts between his 5th grade English-speaking classroom abroad and his work back home. He began to informally **document the differences** he saw in Finnish vs. U.S. education on the blog *Taught by Finland*.

In his new book *Teach Like Finland: 33 Simple Strategies for Joyful Classrooms* (W.W. Norton, 2017), Walker expands upon his observations of Finnish education. Finland, which serves more than 550,000 students in 2,449 **comprehensive schools**, has built a reputation in the last few decades as one of the most successful examples of education. The country is **known for its high rates of student achievement** (though my colleague Madeline Will reported last year that Finland is **working to remedy a recent fall in PISA scores**). Walker, who also recently spoke with Education Week blogger Larry Ferlazzo, said Finland **does benefit from little poverty and minor diversity**, which is also worth noting when drawing conclusions about that nation.

However, there are still a variety of areas where Finland excels: Teachers have more rigorous teacher training (**acceptance rates into programs are around 10 percent**), but lighter workloads and time commitments. Teachers experience more autonomy and less accountability. Teacher retention rates are higher. In his book, Walker unpacks lessons American educators might glean from an internationally recognized education system, all with the purpose of bringing joy into the classroom—for teachers as well as students.

Walker recently spoke with Education Week Teacher about what teachers can take away from education in one of the **happiest countries in the world**. The interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

**You moved to Helsinki to teach in 2013 and for the past few years, have been publicly unpacking the differences between the U.S. education system and Finnish schools. You have also taught in classrooms in the United States. How were those experiences at odds with each other?**

There are so many major differences, but the first one I noticed was the drastically different teaching schedule. I was used to teaching somewhere close to 30 hours a week with my students in the United States, which is pretty typical for elementary schools. When the Helsinki principal handed me my schedule, I was shocked. Finnish educators had vacated for the summer. There was significantly less teaching hours than I used to have—only 18 hours of instruction (which is full time).

I also saw that in nearly 50 percent of the lessons I was teaching, I would be joined by another teacher. I had collaborated with other teachers before, but not to that extent. Finnish teachers and students also get 15-minute breaks throughout the day after 45 minutes of classroom instruction. I was not used to this idea of having so much free time. Teachers also rotate in watching each other's students throughout Finland.

Two or three teachers are out outside supervising 120 kids at a time, while many teachers are taking a break in the teacher's lounge.

**Finland's students have had excellent scores on international standardized tests such as the PISA for many years. Yet, U.S. schools are much more strictly focused on meeting standards through assessment. In the book, you discuss Finnish schools' relaxed atmosphere—shorter school days, less homework, soft starts to the school year, and very little standardized testing. Why do you think these methods work, and how should we be looking at standards and testing differently?**

There is such uniformity in Finland. Finnish educators seem to agree on good practices, learning materials, the curriculum framework that they're following. There is such diversity in the United States. You have incredible schools doing innovative things—project-based learning, social-emotional learning—but you find this disparity that doesn't exist in Finland. There is clearly a socioeconomic reason for it, but I also think that there's a level of dysfunction, a lack of agreement to say, "These are the things that work, let's decide to stick with them for the well-being of students."

**The book offers 33 strategies for bringing more joy into the classroom—from music to short "brain breaks" to more fresh air. How can teachers begin to adapt some of these practices in their own classrooms?**

My effort in writing this book is to think carefully about what American teachers can do right now without having certain policy changes implemented. One of the things I highlight is the importance of having a peaceful learning environment. More active teaching strategies seem to be celebrated in the United States, for example, turning and talking with a neighbor during a lesson.

In Finland, what I noticed is long stretches of time just to be quiet or do independent work, and children seemed to benefit from this. To focus on promoting a peaceful learning environment, one practical thing teachers can do is help students become aware of the noise level in the classroom. Have the kids create their own noise meter and have ownership in the classroom, moving the needle at times to indicate how loud the classroom is, and if it's too loud, call a timeout. Learning is certainly impacted by noise.

Another thing is mindfulness. That's such a hot topic right now, but I was blown away by the research that supports mindfulness. Implementing modest mindfulness practices in the classroom would also be another way to promote a peaceful learning environment. There's a nationwide initiative in Finland called **Schools on the Move**, which seeks to get kids to be more active in the classroom, and I was surprised in Helsinki how often I would ask my kids to sit down, how little time I'd actually give them to stand up and walk around.

It doesn't take much to increase the level of activity in class. It just requires a little thoughtfulness on the part of the teacher, allowing kids to get up and move when they need a break, but also building physical activity into lessons. For example, a "gallery walk": Instead of at the front of the class, each child could present their poster in the hallway, and the whole class is rotating and walking around and experiencing presentation in an active way.

**Teacher-training programs in Finland are highly selective and require five years of preparation. But unlike the United States, you note that Finnish teachers live much more relaxed lives once they're in the classroom. They go home at the end of the day with students, they don't work around the clock, there's more professional freedom and less accountability. What lessons can we learn here?**

Perhaps one of the most obvious lessons is that training is important. Teachers need to feel a sense of expertise, to feel confident in their abilities, and have certain areas of teaching developed before they step foot in the classroom. There are great teaching programs in the United States, but some programs are not helping inexperienced teachers develop or making sure that teachers enter the classroom with basic teaching skills.

This goes back to the point I was making about the importance of agreeing about certain practices. One thing I noticed is that teachers often rely in Finland on commercial learning materials such as textbooks and teaching guides. Before I came to Finland, I had this idea that they were using more up-to-date teaching practices, but you still see some teacher-centered practices: desks arranged in rows, textbook-driven instruction. But textbooks, although they're not the flashiest way of teaching, are definitely a way for a teacher to pace lessons and takes pressure off the teacher to start from scratch.

How is it possible that Finnish teachers seem relaxed and have autonomy? They're using what's already out there and not putting pressure on themselves to launch different initiatives. In the United States, it's not just teachers who gravitate toward innovative methods, but district-wide pushes. You see much more initiative being taken by individual teachers, schools, and districts, and that adds a lot of stress. You don't see that

same level of eagerness to experiment all the time in Finland, in a way that helps teachers to stay balanced and focused on the most essential things in the classroom.

My first year of teaching in the United States was rough. I would work without limits and think about teaching all the time. If I had to suggest different strategies for staying balanced, one thing is setting a deadline for yourself. Jot down the essential tasks. If you finish those around 3:30 or 4 p.m., you have an extra hour to go crazy planning that unit or doing something beyond the essential. I was inspired by my Finnish colleagues because they just seemed so relaxed and took breaks, but were also so efficient with their teaching, making copies during the day instead of after school.

One other thing that is so important is to connect with other teachers on a regular basis. In public and private school settings in the United States, I found it was really hard to have a few minutes to chat with other American educators. We'd have staff meetings, but I often wouldn't have lunch with colleagues. I was choosing not to collaborate. I think that feeling of burnout can stem from being disconnected from others.

It's important to disconnect after the school day and step away from work, but the key ingredient of happiness is belonging. The way we do that is setting aside a little bit of time on a regular basis to sit down and chat with each other. It doesn't have to be so structured, we don't have to take out our planners. Collaborate over coffee.

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Alicia S

1:19 PM on April 20, 2017

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I agree that some of Finland's practices would benefit teachers in the United States. I think the way they structure time throughout the day makes much more sense, and their emphasis on co-teaching and peer observation would enhance our instructional practices. To implement either of those changes in the United States would come at a financial cost and require some restructuring of American schools, but perhaps that could be accomplished.

I do not believe that is true, however, when it comes to the lack of innovation in Finnish schools and textbook-driven instruction. The reason those traditional approaches work so well in Finland is due to the country's relatively small, socioeconomically and culturally homogeneous population; not the effectiveness of those practices.

It is a distinctly American challenge to try to meet the needs of every child within such a massive and limitlessly diverse population. That means that we cannot afford to be as complacent about our instructional approaches as the Finnish can; we cannot hope a good textbook and silent work time get the job done.

Do all the new initiatives make U.S. educators and students less joyous? Probably. But they also help us reach students that traditional textbook-driven approaches could not reach. I have seen that of teachers who have only taught traditional

traditional instruction never could, and develop our expertise far beyond that of teachers who have only taught traditional textbooks to traditional students who sit in rows of desks.

What remains is for our country to stop judging our educational system solely against the performance of students in other countries where the population and circumstances are so different from our own. While there is plenty to learn and consider from studying the instructional practices of countries like Finland, we must not forget who we are, or why we do what we do. We are innovative in the United States because it is what we do best; it is what our student population requires.

Our constant innovation may be one reason why we have a higher percentage of adults with tertiary degrees than Finland does, why we are the world's number one destination for international students, and why 52 of the top 100 universities in the world are American.

We American educators are very likely less joyful than our Finnish counterparts, but overcoming the challenges in American schools is not for the faint of heart. We are as tough as nails, can bend like rubber bands, and will move mountains to reach a struggling student.



[Thomas Fowler-Finn](#)

10:09 AM on April 21, 2017

Alicia is spot on.

Score:

1

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