Looking beyond the classroom walls

Robbie O’Leary and Birthe Wilczek travelled to Oulu to investigate the Finnish education system.

It was 8.30 am when we left for school, travelling by car through the ‘White City of Oulu’. We were in Oulu, 550 km north of Helsinki, a magic ingredient of the Gulf of Bothnia, and a frozen sea that stretched all the way across to Sweden. The temperature in the car was in the -10 degrees Celsius range, making it an ideal day to observe the school system from the comfort of a warm car. As we arrived at the school, the driver (the school principal) barely noticed us, as he was busy checking on the students who were making their way into the building.

The Finnish teachers we spoke to offered the following suggestions in relation to the mechanics of the educational system:

**Preschool education**

All Finnish children attend preschool from the age of two until they start school at six, which is much later than in many other countries. The preschool system is free, as is the school system, and all children attend. The school principal stressed that the education system in Finland is designed to prepare students for the next level of education, not to assess them. There is no standardised testing at school, and the main emphasis is on learning and development. Children are encouraged to express their opinions and ideas, and teachers work closely with parents to ensure that children are supported in their learning.

**The Finnish language**

Finnish is a unique language that is not easy to learn. Most Finnish children learn it from a young age, and they are taught to read, write, and speak it from an early age. The language is supported by international studies and is considered to be an important part of Finnish national identity. Finnish is spoken by nearly 6 million people, of which about 4 million live in Finland.

**Cultural traditions**

Finnish culture is highly valued and emphasized in schools. Students learn about the history, traditions, and famous people of Finland. Many of these traditions are celebrated in school, and students are encouraged to participate in cultural events and activities.

**Assessment and evaluation**

There is no high-stakes testing in Finnish schools. Teachers are encouraged to assess students using a variety of methods, including rubrics, rubrics, and peer-assessment. The main focus is on providing feedback to help students improve their learning.

**The economy**

Finland is a highly-valued, knowledge-based economy. Education is a priority, and the government invests heavily in education. The country is known for its high-quality education system, which is considered to be one of the best in the world.

**School education should focus much more on children than on middle-class education.**

The Finnish government invests in the long-term development of its teachers and administrators, and in the infrastructure of its schools. The system is highly decentralized, with each school having a great deal of autonomy. Teachers are highly respected and valued for the important work they do. They are given the support and resources they need to do their jobs effectively.

**Conclusions**

Finnish education is a model for other countries to follow. It is characterized by a focus on learning, openness, and collaboration. Teachers are encouraged to be creative and innovative, and students are given the freedom to explore and develop their own interests. This approach has resulted in a high-quality education system, which is considered to be one of the best in the world.

On a professional level, we left Finland with a great deal of new information and understanding, but much to ponder in terms of how applicable the elements and operations of the Finnish educational system would be to ourselves. On a cultural level, there was time, outside of school hours, to take part in some traditional pursuits that would normally be alien to those of us living in a temperate climate, driving through a frozen landscape on snowmobiles, husky-sledding and traditional sauna were all experiences (suitably attired, of course) to remember – as were the experiences at home, searching for the magic formula that might transform our schools and help bring us on to even further heights. Pupils wear their ordinary clothes (school uniforms are unknown) and only stockings on their feet at school, but make sure to bring their mobile devices such as phones and tablets, and, of course, desktop and laptop computers. Classrooms and corridors were adorned with art and craft work, which was, in fact, country art and craft work that we had made as part of an EU grant-funded project in Ireland, and that we had the opportunity to visit and see for ourselves.

On a social level, the harshness of the Finnish climate stands in marked contrast to the natural beauty and comfort of our own environment, warm and inviting, with tall trees and a beautiful landscape.

On a professional level, the mobility was funded as part of an EU transnational project, coordinated in Ireland by Léargas, www.leargas.ie. The full length version of this article can be found on the website of The Irish Times.