

# The Secret of Finland's Educational Success

*Professor Hannele Niemi of the University of Helsinki in Finland, was at the National Institute of Education in October 2010 to give the fourth CJ Koh Professional Lecture and also spoke on Multidisciplinary research on learning for promoting quality in teaching and learning.*

## A Background Note

*In a World Bank paper, it was reported that "In early December, 2001, Finnish educators received some stunning news: their students have outperformed peers in 43 other nations – including such powerhouses as the United States, Germany and Japan – on a new international assessment of reading, mathematics and science skills. Finland,*

*the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study named PISA declared, produced the world's most literate citizens. What's more, Finnish schools were uniformly good, displaying the narrowest gap between high and low scorers. There was barely time to digest these unexpected results before the first of more than 100 official scholars, policymakers, researchers, even journalists from such prominent publications as The Washington Post and The New York Times have flocked there ever since. What all these "educational pilgrims," as Finns dubbed their visitors, hoped to discover was: How did this small and remote country, with its reputation of average education performance and relatively meagre per-pupil spending, suddenly surge to the head of the class"*

The report of Professor Hannele Niemi's visit was provided by NIE's Office of Education Research, reproduced below.

No examinations and hardly any homework for students. A decentralised school system with no inspectorate. High student performance with few differences between schools. These qualities of Finland's education system never fail to impress educators each time they are recounted. Finnish Professor of Education, Professor Hannele Niemi, says she is often asked:

"What is our secret?"

Is it the free lunch that every student is entitled to each day? The free transport and provision of basic materials for school? Or the high level of autonomy given to schools and teachers? "The main reason for high quality learning outcomes is high quality teachers," says Professor Niemi.

Speaking to an audience of over 200 teachers and teacher educators, Professor Niemi shared insights on the successes and challenges of Finland's education system. While there is "a complex of practices" and "mutually interactive factors", she noted that the trust invested by Finnish society in the teaching profession is vital.



*Professor Hannele Niemi (above) is a Professor of Education at the University of Helsinki. She is also chair of the Cross-disciplinary Initiative for the Collaborative Efforts of Research on Learning (CICERO) Network, which does multidisciplinary research on learning. Over the past twenty years, she has played a leading role in shaping education in Finland, and published widely in the area of educational research and teacher education.*

"We, as a society, see them as intellectuals and professionals," she explains. "We support and respect them as role models." The teachers, in turn, are highly committed and have a strong sense of responsibility to

their stakeholders – students, parents, and society at large.

“What about Finnish policies?” asks a member of the audience. “Education policies must constantly adapt to the education landscape,” says Professor Niemi. She emphasised that it has taken over 35 years for Finland’s education system to develop into what it is today. The decentralisation of control to individual municipalities and schools occurred gradually as their teachers became increasingly qualified.

This has been due in large part to Finland’s teacher education programme. All Finnish teachers undergo a five-year research-based Master’s level programme that integrates theory and practice. This not only ensures that they are grounded in the latest research on pedagogy, but also equips them to seek and use evidence to analyse the complex situations that they face as teachers.

Professor Niemi also spoke on the topic of “Multidisciplinary Research on Learning for Promoting Quality in Teaching and Learning” at a seminar for NIE

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staff on 27 October 2010. She explored how learning environments and the very concept of learning have changed radically, and what this means for teaching and learning today.

The challenge, as Finland has discovered, is to see “life as learning”. For teachers, this means equipping students with skills for “boundless learning” throughout their lives. Finland’s success continues to challenge us to redefine the boundaries of teaching and learning.

*Sources:*

1. *The report of Professor Hannele Niemi; s visit to NIE and the photograph are reproduced here by courtesy of by NIE and its Office of Education Research.*
2. *“Policy Development and Reform Principles of Basic and Secondary Education in Finland since 1968”, World Bank Report.*

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