

**LEAP Action Learning Report 2014**

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| Topic area  (What) | An exploration of possible links between school leadership and student outcomes as demonstrated in Finnish schools. |
| Context  (Where and When) | The Finnish education system has received significant international acclaim largely due to the performance of Finnish Year 9 students on international PISA assessments. Hence there has been increasing interest in identifying what it is in Finnish classrooms or the Finnish schooling that can account for this level of student achievement. There is also considerable local Finnish acclaim for the high standard of teacher training due to the fact that all teachers hold a masters degree or higher and all principals must hold a leadership accreditation before appointment to the position.  The investigation described here was part of the LEAP 2014 program organised for educational leaders within the NSW DEC. After an initial visit by a Finnish principal to NSW in July 2014, the same principal hosted a comparable visit during September-October 2014 primarily to his school in Helsinki, Finland.  The visit to Finland (Pop: approximately 5.5 million) was largely centred on the capital city Helsinki (Pop: approximately 1 million). The host principal was the leader of a small secondary school (400 students) catering for Years 7- 9 students of low-middle socio-economic background, with about 30% of the students of non-Finnish origins.  Short visits to other Helsinki and Espoo schools were also arranged including a Year 7-12 bi-lingual school in Helsinki East catering for around 770 mostly upper middle class students. Another school visited in Helsinki catered for about 800 mostly middle class Year 7- 9 students. Also in Helsinki, a visit was arranged to a specialist sport high school catering for elite athletes from across Finland enabling them to complete both their sporting and high school commitments.  Two other schools visited were large vocational schools, one in Helsinki and one in Espoo, catering for Year 10-12 students choosing a less academic pathway in their high school years.  Additionally there was an opportunity to speak with other educational trainers and leaders. These included a Director and Assistant Directors for Helsinki Education, Head of School and lecturers in the Education Faculty at Metropolia University in Helsinki, Director of Education in Espoo City, Head of School in Education and Professional Learning at Jyvaskula University (north of Helsinki), the Head of the Finnish National Board of Education and the President as well the Head of International Programs for the Finnish Teachers Union. |
| Research methods  (How) | Due to the nature of the visits and the reliance on the organisation being provided by the host principal, research methodology was largely restricted to direct observation and discussions. Some limited statistics related to student performance was available on request, but this was somewhat piecemeal and not directly comparable between the various school contexts.  In most cases direct observations of classrooms, student, teacher and school leader behaviours were recorded via note taking. Additionally some prepared material was provided on various site visits. Photographs were also taken were possible as a means of recording the physical learning environments as well as observations of interest to an audience of Australian educators.  Additionally there was an opportunity to teach some English classes in some of the schools visited. While the lessons were not strictly appropriate for the specific learning programs at the time, the lessons mostly provided detailed background in English language as it related to the Australian context and culture. These lessons also provided another valuable source of direct observation of student achievement levels and classroom/school culture in Finnish schools. |
| Findings  (So what) | In summary the following findings were apparent:   * The type and standard of school leadership observed in the Finnish schools visited is significantly different to that regarded as exemplary in school leadership in NSW schools. * The role of the Finnish principal, as discerned through observations of the daily tasks completed, appears to be primarily focussed on management of the school rather than on the leadership of education for that school and its students. * The school climate and school culture seem to be directly related to the leadership style and competencies of the principal. * While not universally observable given the limitations of the research methodology, the leadership of the principal via the created school culture, possibly links student outcomes and school leadership. * Some quality programs do exist in Finland, which directly assist the ongoing development of school leaders. * The credentialing of principals alone has little bearing on their ability to lead a school, but does provide some assistance in developing management skills. * The educational provision in the vocational education context appears far more innovative and engaging for students than most of the more academic oriented schools visited. * There is some reason to doubt the authenticity of the results obtained by Finnish Year 9 students on international PISA assessments. |
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