

Interview with Markus Kokko, Press & Culture Counsellor, Finnish Embassy

The Innovative Finnish Education System

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

The Finnish education system consistently produces high results, both in terms of global test scores and a highly productive populace. Editor-in-chief Naoyuki Haraoka visited the Finnish Embassy in Tokyo to speak with Markus Kokko, press & culture counsellor, to learn more about what makes schools in Finland stand out on the global stage.

(Interviewed on Jan. 10, 2018)

Achieving “Well-being”

JS: Education is very important for Japan today because the economy is in transition and we need structural reform. I think it is natural to look towards Finland because the country is well known for its high-tech prowess and the world is currently moving towards a Fourth Industrial Revolution. Things like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Internet of things (IoT) have the potential to completely transform our economy. In order to adjust ourselves to those changes we need a robust education system.

Kokko: That's right.

JS: So education is at a crossroads of many important challenges in the global economy. That's the reason why we picked education as the cover story for this current issue. I recently saw the movie *Demain* (Tomorrow) and was very impressed by its depiction of the Finnish education system. Particularly, how the movie raised “well-being” as a core concept of how students are treated. While economic issues are related to many things, I think that ultimately the economy should lead to well-being. The Finnish education system is noteworthy as having successfully achieved this.



Markus Kokko, Press & Culture Counsellor, Finnish Embassy

Kokko: I agree.

JS: But enough about what I think. Please tell us about your work and its relation to Japan in particular.

Kokko: Thank you for coming once again. I'm the counsellor for press and culture here at the Finnish Embassy. I have been in Japan two years and four months. I greatly like being here. Prior to Japan I was based in Helsinki. I am not actually a

career diplomat but someone recruited for this position from the private sector. This is my first public sector job.

My prior relations to Japan are not particularly deep. I had visited a couple of times but actually living here has really been a learning experience for me. I am hoping to be able to spend some more years here, but of course that remains to be seen.

The Global Success of Finnish Education

JS: The Finnish education system was evaluated as one of the best in the world by the OECD's PISA. What is your reaction to this?

Kokko: As a Finn, I'm really proud of this result. I think all Finns are. Finland is known globally for its education system. And this is largely as a result of the publication of the PISA results.

At the same time, Japan is doing well in PISA as well, so are other countries. What's remarkable is that there are some things that make the Finnish system somewhat unique. The Finnish philosophy is to

emphasize play and free-time. We also start public school education at age seven, which is late compared to other countries.

It's a different system from many other high-scoring countries (on PISA) so it's an example of different approaches yielding good results. In Finland we really do believe strongly in education and consider it to be a cornerstone of our economy and society.

JS: Japanese education also has a long history. In my opinion, we used to have a highly regarded reputation. Unfortunately, right now that is no longer the case.

The History of Finnish Education

JS: I am curious about the history of Finnish education. When I watched *Demain* I learned about Finland's free and liberalized education, which I believe is an important characteristic. But according to the movie, this was not so in the past. Is it true that things have changed?

Kokko: We just celebrated our 100th anniversary of independence. So over 100 years ago, we were an autonomous part of the Russian Empire. At the time, Finland was a very rural country and our sense of national identity was in the process of developing further. We used to be part of the Kingdom of Sweden and although the Finnish language itself was spoken, it was not part of the formal writing system.

After a long process, our first schools were established in the 19th century. After we achieved independence, one major milestone that happened was the 1921 law mandating compulsory education for all children. At the time I believe there were six grades. However, the system only provided a basic education, so if you wanted to continue beyond that your parents or family had to have a certain amount of finances to secure this.

What really established the Finnish education system as we know it today was in the early 1970s, when the country engaged in comprehensive reform of education and education legislation. Comprehensive education was provided for everyone, regardless of their financial situation or access to resources. This is something crucial to the Finnish education system: the philosophy that it is free to all and not dependent on a student's wealth, background or status.

Core Elements of the Finnish System

JS: So is equality the main reason for its success?

Kokko: Of course, it's difficult to identify any *main* reason. But I believe there are important elements. One element I think is the most important perhaps is the *autonomy* in the Finnish system, allocated to both the schools and especially to teachers. In the Finnish education system, the state sets guidelines and targets, setting the framework of what is to be taught. Then the national board of education creates a core curriculum based on those guidelines. But after them it's the individual municipalities who are each responsible for organizing the schools within their boundaries and how education is carried out there.

Individual municipalities and schools — particularly schools — have a lot of freedom in deciding how to attain those goals: like what materials to use and what methods to use. I think this raises teachers' morale, as well as the quality level. In Finland, all school teachers have masters degrees, so this means they are both highly educated and motivated because they have a lot of individual freedom to decide what goes on in their classrooms. I think that's a cornerstone of our success.

Another one is, as you say, equal access for all people to high-quality education. In Finland, the school you attend is the one closest to you. And because there are no elite or lower-ranked schools, the educational standard is the same across the country. Additionally, all schooling is free from the primary level up to university. So this ensures all people have access to quality education.

JS: Japan is now about to reform education in making all schools free, even universities, but the policy is controversial. Do you think free access to college is important in achieving success?

Kokko: I think each country is its own case, so it's hard to say what works in other countries or other demographics. In Finland we feel that it's crucial to have free access to good-quality education. In Finland equality is an important value and we feel equal access to education is part of our society's foundation. And we also know, of course, that achieving this is not cheap and actually requires a lot of public money. In Finland, 11% of all public spending is on education.

It's expensive but we do not consider this a cost but an investment. If we invest in our 5.5 million Finns now, then in the future we will achieve growth, prosperity and well-being.

Policy Solutions

JS: Two things you just said caught my interest. One was education for teachers, which I feel is key. Primary school teachers in particular must be good psychologists, perhaps.

Kokko: Yes, yes.

JS: So does that mean that studying the psychology of the young is part of the minimum requirement for teachers?

Kokko: Teachers who teach in the first six years have a master of arts in education and have studied pedagogy. Their core competence is in how to teach children. For the first six years, these teachers teach all subjects. Subsequently, you have teachers specializing in one subject. So the elementary teachers are generalists and other teachers are specialists. Of course they're all highly trained but the elementary teachers may have more of a focus on pedagogy.

JS: So they must be well paid.

Kokko: I don't think anyone gets rich teaching. Maybe their salaries could be considered mid-range. And some teachers complain they don't get enough pay, of course. What's important is that teaching as a profession is respected within our society. It's actually very popular. There are five times more applicants for teaching qualifications than there are spots in university courses that grant them. So it's not the salary that motivates people. It's the passion.

JS: Another thing that attracted my attention is the role of municipalities. That seems to be very important.

Kokko: Yes. By law, the municipalities are responsible for organizing education. The state lays the framework but it's the municipalities that finance and are responsible for the actual activities. The state subsidizes these but it's the municipality's budget. So they have significant leeway and freedom in how schooling actually takes place.

Finnish People's Beliefs on Education

JS: Our conversation has focused on policy but you mentioned something about Finnish people, that they consider education a very important investment. Is that a national consensus?

Kokko: Yes, you could say it is. That's something everyone agrees on, that we should take care to ensure education remains a priority, even though of course we have other challenges, like any society, such as financing public services and an aging society. There's a consensus in Finland that we need to take care of education. Finland

has few natural resources: trees and brains. We don't have many people, only 5.5 million in the whole country, so if we want future success we need to invest in brains.

JS: So this is part of why Finland is known as such a high-tech country?

Kokko: Yes, I think that's a very important part of it. We are high-tech and we provide a good-quality education. A lot of our technical universities rank high internationally. The foundation of a good-quality education for all is certainly a crucial part of this.

Diversity

JS: Going back to the film *Demain*, what most impressed me about Finnish education was its recognition of diversity. Diversity seems to be very respected in Finnish education. Is that right?

Kokko: That's right. In the Finnish philosophy of education, we are encouraged to see each other as individuals — who have different capabilities, aspirations and interests — and encourage them to learn more. But we also understand that people and children are different. It is an environment to encourage willingness to learn for all. So yes, it's an important philosophical aspect.

JS: In Japan, diversity is becoming a more important concept. As you know, Japan is a very homogeneous country. But Finland is not exactly heterogeneous, correct?

Kokko: Well actually in that respect Finland is changing rapidly. We were very homogeneous 30 years ago. But this changes and continues to change because of migration. As you know, Europe has faced challenges recently concerning refugees and Finland has been taking in asylum seekers and other immigrants. So Finland is not as homogeneous as it used to be. It's changing quite rapidly.

There are positive aspects to this but challenges as well due to the rapid intake of people from foreign cultures.

The Power of Play

JS: Individualism is certainly an important factor with regards to Finnish education. Regardless of racial difference, individual human beings have natural differences from one another. Respecting these differences seems to be very important in ensuring

that students meet their creative potential. What do you think?

Kokko: I think that's one important aspect. But also, like I mentioned before, a big philosophical thing is play. Play breeds creativity, so we let young children spend their time engaged in playful activities. We don't enforce strict academic programs on small kids too early.

As you know, in Finland official education starts at seven, which is pretty late compared to other countries. But we have good results at the end of the full educational cycle. So if we speak about creativity, respecting individuality and personalities is important but it is *also* important to let children play and thus breed creativity. It's not good to be too tight.

JS: So the children learn by playing.

Kokko: Yes, that's very important for early childhood education.

JS: But in that regard teachers must be very well trained.

Kokko: Yes, that goes back to my earlier point about teachers' training and autonomy.

JS: I am very impressed by the crafts created by Finnish children.

Kokko: Yes, that's very important. Of course, one can't always have fun. But if you do have fun by learning or working, then you are more efficient. And if we can create an environment where kids are enjoying learning — maybe through play — that's very efficient.

Finnish Education & Entrepreneurship

JS: I think entrepreneurship in Finland is outstanding as well. Do you think there is something about Finnish education that relates to entrepreneurship?

Kokko: What you mention is a fairly recent phenomenon. It's flourishing now but this sort of entrepreneurship started about 10 years ago, which is manifested visibly by the international Slush event. It's gained traction through cycles of success that are picked up by the media, like a virtuous cycle. Young people see other people's success and since they also want to succeed in the future, they become interested. I believe that our education system was fundamental in catalyzing this change. It is part of the foundation of things like the movement to encourage entrepreneurship.

This movement started about 10 years ago in Finland. There were a couple of older people involved but it was driven by university students and it still is. So it's really a lot to do with individuals getting creativity and responsibility at a young age. It's very important for Finnish society to have this kind of movement.

JS: Come to think of it, Finnish politicians are all very young aren't they. I have heard there was a very young minister who actually showed up at the Slush startup event.

Kokko: Regardless of age, all ministers know the significance of this student-driven movement. So it's a consensus that this is a good thing.

Gender Equality

JS: I heard that they show up without wearing a tie and are very informal — even casual. I've also heard that there are many female ministers and that some of them are raising babies while actively working. So in the minister's office, there is a baby bed and sometimes a changing table.

Kokko: That's right. We are proud of our gender equality in Finland and that's an important aspect across all of our society. Education is of course the foundation of that as well. We have put in a lot of effort to allow women to combine their careers with family. We have a lot of infrastructure built around that, such as daycare, maternity clinics, paid parental leave and so on.

JS: I heard one Finnish female politician say that in Finland the situation wasn't like this about a decade ago. This is recent?

Kokko: That's right. Our society is constantly developing. We have not always been so gender-equal. It's a long-term development that has occurred over decades. My parents were raised in a different environment, but of course the change is gradual. When I see things in Japan I see change in this regard.

JS: As you said, this is a recent phenomenon. So Japan could be changing as well.

Kokko: Absolutely. The entrepreneurs' event which has been established in Tokyo recently is another example of change taking place.

JS: So you think these changes, these revolutionary changes in Finnish society, were originally produced by your educational system?

Kokko: They're inter-combined. Our philosophy of education — for everyone, for free, and equal — that relates to gender issues. You can't really separate these. From the beginning, Finnish equality included equality for women. We were the first country in the world to give full political rights to women in 1906: women got the right to vote and be elected. In the first parliament, many women MPs were elected. So it goes a long way back.

Preparing for More Change

JS: This Fourth Industrial Revolution seems to be different from previous technological innovations, in particular with regard to AI, which will replace human workers. It's positive progress but at the same time we may have to worry about rising unemployment. In that sense do you think that any new change is necessary in Finnish education?

Kokko: Absolutely. We all know that society is changing; all societies do, and it happens rapidly. And technological change is driving this, as you say. The challenge is that we don't know exactly what will happen, and it's important that Finnish educational authorities understand these possibilities when planning — that is, we don't know today what jobs children will have when they join the labor population. So it's hard to say.

In Finland we had a major reform of the core curriculum that was implemented in force in 2016, so this was very recent. The basic idea behind it is that we don't really know the future — but we do know it's changing — so we should reform our educational system. We are therefore going from teaching traditionally organized subjects in classroom environments to cross-cutting themes and moving teaching outside of classrooms to more directly-related environments so students may learn from society directly. This is a big philosophical change as well and I believe the intent of this reform of the core curriculum is to emphasize the skills of the future.

We know that social skills are important: people need to interact. It's not so much about memorizing things by rote but learning where to source information, how to evaluate its reliability and how to cooperate with others to create added-value. We are moving towards more project work, more clustered work and not on strictly delineated subjects but phenomenon-based learning where students look at something in society or the environment and combine disciplines.

One part of this is computer programming. The logics of programming have been introduced from the 1st grade, going the whole way through the comprehensive level. Of course, 1st graders aren't using actual computers but they do learn the thinking behind this skill: how computers work and logic-based thinking.

JS: Computers have the potential to fully customize education to each individual. What do you think of this? Minimizing the student-teacher ratio is important to raising quality, is it not?

Kokko: Well, I'm not sure. These are probably connected. But in Finland we see computers as tools in learning, not actual educators. We should try to create a system that can teach our youngsters to be individuals who can cope with technologies like computing and computers. But I think that the computers themselves are more tools to find and process information than replacements for human teachers. A lot of information technology is used in Finnish schooling but it shouldn't be given too much of a role or there is a risk to interaction, creativity and critical thinking. But overall, it's a tough question.

Well-being

JS: My last question has to do with happiness, or well-being. In policy terms, it is an important concept used to assess the outcome of an economic policy, along with GDP. Do you think the current Finnish educational system is successful in promoting such a concept among the people?

Kokko: Finland has certainly been scoring well in happiness reports, in the top 10 or five. So if you think of the basic needs of people, I believe the answer is absolutely, yes. I believe you are familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of basic needs. One of the needs is self-fulfillment and your potential and education play a crucial part of this. If you have a population whose average level of education is high and they thus have high potential to fulfill their dreams and life, that's a big driver.

JS: Thank you very much for your time, Mr. Kokko. JS

Formatted by Naoyuki Haraoka, editor-in-chief of *Japan SPOTLIGHT* & executive managing director of the Japan Economic Foundation (JEF).