Abstract

This chapter presents the experiences of a British teacher and educational researcher living in Finland. The chapter begins with the first superficial differences noted between the two systems to a more thoughtful consideration of significant differences in the pedagogy and organisation of the two educational systems. The final discussion focuses on the significance of these differences when considering the relationship between education and democracy.

Living between two educational systems

I arrived in Finland as a newly qualified teacher in the summer of 1997. After teacher *training* in England, I was surprised to encounter teacher *education* in Finland. I arrived well-prepared for classroom management, syllabus development, lesson planning and engagement with pupils. My understanding, however, of what made my practice 'educational' was rather superficial. As a child, I thought that school should help pupils learn to live together. As a young graduate, I thought school should help pupils strive for more than life necessarily offered - whilst wondering why my education contained significant gaps such as little understanding of the political system of the country. Just before completing my teacher training, a political canvasser phoned to ask whether I would vote for Tony Blair in the upcoming elections, whether I was convinced by his manifesto of 'education, education, education'. I was convinced and, thankfully, left to start my teaching career in a different educational context.

I initially saw few significant differences between the Finnish and English educational systems. Schools still seemed to be schools – generally rectangular, built around a playground with classrooms, a dining hall, a sports hall, staffroom and head teacher. For a long time I did not recognise the hybrid space I was occupying. My classes and my educational thinking were physically located in Finland, warmed with a touch of intercultural curiosity, but interpreted through English 'teacherliness'. For example, textbooks seemed to be an anathema (e.g. Norris, et al. 1996), I believed talk should be ubiquitous (Mercer & Littleton, 2007), and sought to create a stimulating environment with posters and displays of work (Alexander, 2001) offering a range of different activities pupils could choose from. Whilst these educational features are not the sole jurisdiction of English education, I assumed that this was the way education worked regardless of context.

As I began to encounter educationally significant figures - Vygotsky, Dewey, Bakhtin, Kemmis - and different theoretical conceptualisations, I began questioning my own practice and understanding. As I entered classrooms as a researcher and my own children entered the educational system, the differences became more pronounced even though I had lived in Finland for over a decade. The liminal space between insideness and outsideness (McNess, Arthur & Crossley, 2015) became my lived reality. I began to consciously reflect on the differences between Finnish and English education, rather than to dismiss them as mere idiosyncrasies. Indeed, I have come to regard these differences as key landmarks in the space I now occupy, landmarks that can help concretise the often abstracted space of educational research that can all too easily avoid '…the task of democracy …[to create] a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute' (Dewey, 1939: 230). This chapter outlines how my naïve first impressions changed as I engaged with education through the different roles of teacher, researcher and parent in two democratic societies.

First impressions

My initial impression of the Finnish school system was very positive. The primary school children appeared calm and well-behaved within relatively informal classrooms calling teachers by their first name or “ope” [“Teach”]. The seven year old first graders seemed incredibly small making me wonder how four year olds could be in school in England. It seemed to make sense that the seven year olds by-and-large were more ready to learn to read than the four year olds and that the whole class usually learnt to read within the first school semester (also noted by Alexander 2003). This meant that the whole class could continue with similar tasks leading to the surprising finding that the Finnish system has managed to keep all pupils above the international average (Sahlberg, 2011) albeit with a large discrepancy between different pupil groups (Reinikainen, 2012). I wondered to what extent these early experiences of education set children up for success or otherwise in their ensuing school career.

A second initial observation was the way in which the Finnish staff in schools wore comfy indoor shoes as did the children, yet the children could get all their outdoor clothing on every forty five minutes for a fifteen minute break time. The children appeared to be quick and efficient at dressing and undressing and the classrooms more relaxed without outdoor shoes. It seemed strange that English, not Finnish, classrooms are carpeted although English school children and teachers wore shoes all day. A third observation that came as a surprise during the early days was the way in which a teacher produced a wall display within a fifteen minute break. She grabbed a box of dressmaker’s pins and pinned the children’s artwork to the wall. I wondered how she could trust the children with such easily available objects to stab one another, and then I was surprised that I would think children would stab each other. Why would they? Why would I expect them too? I thought of the hours I had spent helping teachers in England put up classroom displays with carefully chosen sugar paper backing and printed titles. I wondered why the Finnish display did not seem to be lacking and why English teachers worked so hard.

A final observation from the early days relates to the timetable. I was commissioned to teach different grades in a local school. With the early grades I often found that I was asked to teach the same lesson in the same class on the same day, once at 8am and the second time at 12pm. This was possible because classes were regularly divided in half with one group of children arriving and leaving earlier than the other half. This seemed like such a practical way to give a teacher the opportunity to work more closely with the pupils, getting to know them in a small group rather than with the whole class. On the other hand, this meant that different children started and finished school at different times on different days. How could parents keep up with when to take and collect their children, where was the ensuing chaos? Amazingly parents do seem to manage with timetables that start and finish at different times on different days, although I know that it can require some adjustment when children start school and sometimes parents do get confused. Indeed the use of time is an interesting contrast between the two systems. Whereas the standard number of lessons in English schools remains the same throughout primary school in Finland the number of hours incrementally increase from 20 x 45 minutes a week in the first and second grades to 24+ x 45 minutes in grades five and six. The number of hours per week in the later years of schooling can vary greatly. Moreover, Finnish teachers are only obligated to work the hours of the teaching timetable, whereas teaching obligations only amount to half of the salaried working hours for English teachers (OECD, 2011). Whilst I am sure teachers in both contexts often work more than these designated hours, the length of the working day differs in the contexts suggesting different conceptualisations of the teacher’s role and duties.

After some initial adjustments – pupils without uniforms, first name acquaintances, shorter lessons, flexible timetables and no hierarchical positions for teachers except for the head – I settled into life as a teacher in Finland. Overall my experiences as a teacher in Finland were mainly positive with

little critical reflection. It was only when I began to enter Finnish classrooms in a different role that I began to recognise more significant differences between the two school systems.

A new perspective: from teacher to researcher

Over the last decade I have observed classes, visited different schools in England and Finland, talked with many colleagues and teachers, read various academic texts and followed my children's education primarily in Finland but also in English schools. I no longer consider myself an 'insider' in the English system – many changes have taken place over the last nineteen years within the rampaging educational system of England. Nor do I consider myself a Finnish 'insider' – too many things still surprise me. Indeed, I find myself in a somewhat alien place in which similar landscapes can hide profound differences and raise unexpected questions.

During the school year 2009-2010 I recorded and observed two science courses increasingly fascinated by the presence of the textbook. In 1996 Norris et al. observed that

> whole [Finnish] classes following line by line what is written in the textbook, at a pace determined by the teacher. Rows and rows of children all doing the same thing in the same way whether it be art, mathematics or geography. We have moved from school to school and seen almost identical lessons, you could have swapped the teachers over and the children would never have noticed the difference (Norris et al., 1996: 29)

and a decade later, little appears to have changed (Atjonen, et al. 2008). I was particularly confused by the way in which the textbook appeared to rival, rather than resource, the teacher. The lessons were built around the chapters of the textbook, most of the tasks originating from the textbook, the learning conversations of the classroom often based on the textbook. How could teachers suffer this intrusion into their pedagogical space? How did pupils know how to expertly use the textbook, at least as assumed by teachers and textbook authors? How did textbooks come to occupy such a privileged position? I continue to seek answers to these questions but what began to intrigue me was the cultural hue of my reaction. Why was I offended by the presence of seemingly prescriptive textbooks when my national culture had one of the most prescriptive curriculum systems in the world policed by inspectors – an anathema in Finland, inspector-free since the early 1990s?

Over time I have come to better understand the value of a text-based system. It does, nevertheless, seem strange that a system which invests so much in teacher education with class and subject teachers holding Master's degrees and a non-prescriptive, beautifully open-ended curriculum would not foster greater variety between teaching methodologies. I rather suspect the answer may in part lie in the history of Finnish education and in the teacher education system. Attached to the University of Jyväskylä, for example, is a 'normal school', a practice school with nigh on 1000 pupils aged 7-19 where 900 student teachers annually complete their teaching practices. With such a high turnover of student teachers, the textbook offers continuity between pre- and in-service teachers. It is perhaps the continuity provided by the textbook, however, that 'produces conforming and loyal teachers rather than critical teachers' (Rautiainen & Räihä, 2012: 16), yet I would be hesitant to suggest that obliging teachers to produce their own materials creates a more democratic school system.

More recently I have been wondering whether the textbook explains the absence of a meta-text in the classroom; that is, a 'red line' that weaves together the different parts of the lesson maintaining continuity in the learning conversations and activities of the classroom. Observing classes in

England, teachers often stated the aim of most lessons, by-and-large reiterating this point at the end of the lesson. In Finland lessons 'aims' can all too easily be defined by textbook chapters, homework given as textbook pages and test revision as textbook sections rather than the topic or the purpose behind the series of lessons. It is perhaps of little surprise that pupils can begin to equate learning a subject with covering the contents of a textbook (Aro, 2009). The full significance of these differences is not clear, but the absence of the meta-text demarcating the area for participation in Finnish schools may contribute to the passive participatory culture of Finnish schools in which it can be seen as 'a virtue to dutifully achieve learning outcomes and not, for example, to talk about learning objectives and whether they were sensible' (Rautiainen & Räihä, 2012: 10). Furthermore, textbooks can be used a tool for classroom management (Tainio, 2012) adding authoritative overtones to pedagogic action - an interesting contrast to teachers within English-speaking contexts that tend to use turn pedagogic talk into a tool for classroom management (Alexander, 2001).

Another noticeable difference between lessons in England and Finland is pace. I suspect a significant difference exists in the pace of life in the two countries as a whole, but it is particularly marked in school. English lessons seem to be fast and furious to keep pupils on track, on task and on their toes. Breaks between lessons are carefully designed to allow pupils to move from one classroom to the next but little else. As a girl in England I remember a morning break of 15 minutes, a lunch break of an hour and a second afternoon break. The morning break appears to still be in place with the addition of a healthy snack, free or affordably priced, whereas the afternoon break seems to be shorter or non-existent. Finnish lessons are generally on task, but pupils are not kept 'on their toes'. Textbooks are expertly divided into sections following the school year and even if there is concern that the textbook might not be completed by the end of the year, the Finnish curriculum provides the space for teachers to dwell on topics or areas of difficulty depending on the pupils. Absent pupils can catch up by following the textbook without parents being fined. I do not mean to suggest that absenteeism is encouraged in Finland, but a sense of urgency does not underpin the educational system. Finnish pupils start to read, write, learn multiplication tables and scientific formulae later than their English peers, but they catch up bringing the race of the hare and the tortoise to mind.

It is perhaps worth asking whether a gentler pace allows for deeper thought or engagement. Student teachers in Finland have a five year period to engage with educational theory, to critically consider their options as teachers, as pedagogues. Whether these student teachers are fully prepared to take advantage of this opportunity, I cannot say and I doubt that theoretical understanding alone necessarily creates a democratic or innovative educational system. Student teachers in England, however, if on a fast-paced, practice-oriented, evaluative, year-long course arguably have little time nor incentive to look at the bigger picture. Indeed, keeping teachers, parents and pupils bound to a furious pace can be rather cynically viewed as a convenient way to keep bigger educational questions from being asked, such as what is the purpose of education (Biesta, 2016)? Does this educational system 'form people so that they can live well in a world worth living in' (Kemmis, 2014: 31)? The demanding pace of education in England seems to rather conveniently complement the removal of theory from teacher training in the 1990s (Alexander 2008: 19-20), limiting the theoretical tools as well as the temporal space for participating in democratic discussions around education.

A difference that has been pointed out in the literature is the role or presence of testing within the respective educational systems. Finland has no (obligatory) national tests until the matriculation exam at the age of nineteen. Entry into high school is determined by grades awarded throughout junior high school. It is not the case, however, that there are no tests in Finnish education. Tests are built into the school year on a regular basis with test weeks featuring four-six times a year by

seventh grade and on. Our two children in the local lower comprehensive school also have regular tests in each subject bringing the printed copies home to be signed. In this way Finnish pupils are carefully socialised into educational tests, encouraging them to review a recent topic concluded with a test. The key difference, perhaps, is the lack of published results, the absence of school assessment based on pupil achievement, in this way tests become part of the day-to-day study experience not a threat. As parents we encourage our children to prepare for tests, but need not worry that they will be excessively stressed by the tests unlike their cousins in England. Finnish teachers are also trusted to be able to judge the quality of pupil work with the national curriculum only detailing the basis for a grade 8 on the scale of 4-10 used to grade Finnish pupils (FBE, 2014).

Another absence that I have been trying to understand in the Finnish system is the absence of marking. Finnish teachers do on occasion mark pupils' activity books that accompany textbooks, but there are no piles of books in staffrooms patiently waiting for busy teachers to find time to sit down, to add marks and comments, acknowledging pupils' efforts and providing recommendations. In my observations the marking of pupil work is not a key feature of the teachers' workload perhaps because pupils are taught as quickly as possible to be responsible for and to mark their own homework. In practice this means that pupils revisit the material as the homework is marked within the public space of the classroom all together. In this way the independent marking of pupil work remains part of the learning conversation in the classroom. Teachers ask and survey whether everyone has completed the homework and incomplete homework is marked into the electronic register system - Wilma. It does appear, however, that textbooks extend the 'learning space' of education beyond the classroom. As educational policy in England increasingly calls all participants to account - pupils to teachers, teachers to inspectors - one wonders at what stage pupils are encouraged to be independent or recognise their responsibilities as members of a democratic society.

The practical, pedagogically beneficial solution to the issue of marking does not mean that pupils always complete homework prior to lessons nor that Finnish pupils necessarily learn how to actively participate (Rautiainen & Räihä, 2012). This point returns to a perhaps more fundamental difference between Finnish and English educational systems and the respective emphases on reading and writing. The full scope of this difference cannot be addressed here, but it is a point worth raising. It is the printed word in Finland that is the pedagogical guide at all levels of the Finnish educational system from the careful development of ABC readers in grade one with textbooks for practically all curricular subjects throughout the school system to book exams on theoretical literature in teacher education. Whilst quality texts are of great important in the development of reading skills, a text-based system does not necessarily require pupils to produce text. Answers to questions in textbooks rarely require more than a sentence or two, socialisation into reading comprehension does not automatically lead to text production or critical engagement. I have often thought that combining the productive writing and speaking that is encouraged in the English system with the solid reading and independence of the Finnish system might well produce a powerful educational system. This might, however, be the aspiration of a parent caught between two educational systems.

The lived perspective of a parent

Our children attend the local school, as do most children in Finland although this is slowly changing as school profiles differ. The specialised music classes, the Christian and the Steiner schools and the international classes of the town, for example, cross local boundaries. My first parents' evening in Finland, however, took me by surprise. Before long we were discussing the challenges of peeling boiled potatoes for new school children and the unsavoury alternative of slimy potatoes at the bottom of the vat for the final diners of the day. Perhaps that explains the mash and chips of English

schools, I thought. I should quickly add, however, that school dinners are a point of pride in Finland. From the inception of the school system, free school dinners were to be provided for all pupils, a principle that continues today with the legal proviso that the meals meet nutritional requirements. These free school dinners are, therefore, a statement reiterating the responsibility of schools to cater for the physical as well as intellectual needs of children whilst also avoiding socio-economic labels for 'haves' and 'have nots'.

In Finland children generally walk to school or, from the third grade on, they can cycle once they have passed a proficiency test. The independent to-ing and fro-ing to school in Finland complements the more flexible timetable of the school day and encourages children to be independent, and perhaps alone, from an early age. For first and second graders after school clubs exist offering a variety of activities and a daily snack for a reasonable fee. In our experience this is a wonderful complement to the more formal school day. The children at the afterschool club are well-catered for, yet free to choose their activities and level of participation. Homework can be completed at the club with help available if needed. Some third graders also attend, although the numbers are few. I confess I do wonder how many nine year olds manage at home, sometimes from 1pm onwards on a daily basis. When our daughter was a third grader she struggled to be home alone after school, not because she is unsafe, but just alone. With our now third-grade son the struggle is to keep him off screens from 1pm most afternoons. This can create an uncomfortable feeling for a parent torn between responsibly caring for one's child and responsibly completing duties as a full-time employee.

The contrast with England is vast. Our children first attended a country school in a small village surrounded by fields. The gate for the school was unlocked ten minutes before the school day began and the children were collected from the yard at the end of the school day once the teacher had seen the legally assigned guardian. The city school that the children attended the following year also had locked gates and only released children to the assigned guardian but this school was not surrounded by fields. It was surrounded by a high brick wall and an electric gate. On one occasion parents were invited in to watch puppet shows the Year 2 children had produced. A group of parents and grandparents gathered at the gate. At the appointed time, the gate opened and we walked through the outer courtyard to sign our attendance into the school register. Returning to the yard we waited at the inner gate electronically opened from a distance. We marched towards the main door of the school and waited for the deputy head-teacher to unlock the door. Standing aside she greeted us each in turn. We entered the lobby and waited for the inner door to be unlocked. We walked through the hall to the classroom, sat, watched, and left through the various doors and gates. In Finland I had found Foucault's comparison of school and prison difficult to comprehend. I know felt that I had visited my six year old in prison.

Was our son safe, however, in that setting? What if a fire had broken out – how would the children leave the building? And surely, if someone really wanted to harm the school, these security measures would not stop them. The wall, gates, electronic systems, signings and monitoring created such a sense of dis-ease, but for what purpose? And yet, it seemed so normal for the general populace. It would be a grave disservice to English teachers, however, if this anecdote was not quickly followed by the great investment that is made in imaginative freedom that is still fostered in English schools. In Finland our children – and I am aware that this is very based on personal experience – rarely speak about what they are learning, rarely show enthusiasm even if school is going well. In England our children were excited. Of course for them it was stimulating to be in a different language environment but when they came home they carried on with school-like activities. One Saturday we woke to hear the children writing stories. Our six year old in Finnish pre-school was only required by the Finnish curriculum to learn the alphabet and to count to 10. As a Year 2 pupil in England he was required to write up experiments and to produce short stories. His

then eight year old sister was writing down his story as he dictated it, he was then copying out what she wrote. When we returned to Finland I asked how many stories our then second grade daughter had written in school – three, in a year and a half. Something was happening in the English classrooms to prompt imagination and the desire to share stories and developing understanding.

The English classrooms were also full of displays. Often, not only were the walls covered with displays, lines were strung across the ceilings and full of spelling words, illustrations of topic work, important reminders for the production of 'good' text. Indeed the displays often seemed to be a curious combination of celebrating children's work and reminding them of rules, requirements and expectations reflecting the cross-currents and contradictions of the wider system – as noted elsewhere (e.g. Alexander, 2001). These contradictions, however, also seem to be reflected in the pedagogical activities of the classroom. Each morning on arrival at school, for example, our son selected a hand-writing template and repeatedly practiced letter formation tracing over the letter template. The templates illustrated cursive writing rather than printed letters almost as though the children were expected to immediately learn cursive writing to save time in an over-crowded curriculum. In Finland even the hand-writing textbook is pedagogically oriented. The textbook was not merely a place for the practice of motor skills, but it encouraged the children to critically consider why the height of a letter should be clear and whether letter formation helped to convey understanding. A similar observation is made with regard to mathematics in a report by OFSTED inspectors (2010). It seems in some ways ironic that the system that invests heavily in teacher education would also 'rely' heavily on textbooks. Surely within any system some teachers will be better than others and perhaps textbooks compensate for any pedagogical lacks. On the other hand, it makes sense that a system invested in teacher education would also care enough to provide quality materials even if the relationship with the materials should be based on critical reflection rather than assumed usage. The need for critical reflection in both educational contexts is the focus of the final section.

Closing remarks

In 1940 Dewey stated that, 'The present state of the world is more than a reminder that we have now to put forth every energy of our own to prove worthy of our [democratic] heritage' - (ibid., 278) a statement no less true today. For me, living between two educational systems has highlighted the way in which many different aspects of education are not because they have to be, but rather because they have *come* to be. This appears to be the case in the more open-ended Finnish educational system as well as in the driven educational system of England. It is, however, when 'we are not aware of what and why and how [– –], we cultivate a mindlessness that, in the end, reduces our own humanity … even when it is not intended' (Bruner 1996: 79). It is this lack of awareness that can perhaps allow democratic values to be chipped away from educational systems, as pupils, teachers and other educational stakeholders conform to what is, without considering what could be. If, however, democracy is a way of life based on a working faith in the possibilities of human nature (Dewey, 1940), it is perhaps this working faith that prepares and trusts teachers to do their work well, preparing and trusting pupils to participate well in an educational system that is prepared to face the challenge of living well in a world worth living in.

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