What we learned from Finland
A Case Study
1.0 Introduction

This Learning Note shares the outcome of a Reflective Learning seminar convened jointly by Architecture and Design Scotland and Children in Scotland. The purpose of the seminar was to reflect on the learning from a cohort of Scottish learning and young people service practitioners who participated in a study trip to Finland to understand the Finnish Education system, its schools, spaces and systems.

The views described in this Learning Note do not mean that Architecture and Design Scotland or Children in Scotland necessarily support them. They simply reflect what has been debated and what those involved at the event considered useful learning and lessons from their perspectives.

1.1 What is this learning note about?

This Learning Note explores the culture and ethos of the Finnish education system, the way learner and community needs are met, workforce issues, and the typical spaces and environments of schools that meet these needs.

1.2 Where did this learning note come from?

Children in Scotland organised a study trip to Finland in Spring 2017 to focus on sharing best practice in education and learning, understand schools and settings for learning from early years to lifelong communities, and wider policies and interventions that support children and young people in their everyday lives. Annex 1 sets out a summary schedule of the places, people and experiences delegates on the visit engaged with, with weblinks.

Architecture and Design Scotland partnered with CiS to offer a space to reflect on lessons learned, and identify what is transferrable to the Scottish context, particularly around issues of space and design; and to distill down a set of questions to inform future study trips around specific issues in the learning estate.

The Reflective Learning seminar was hosted in Autumn 2017 at the offices of Architecture and Design Scotland. It broadly followed the principles of Kolb’s reflective Learning Cycle: [a] experience something [b] reflect on it [c] make sense of it [d] use the learning to inform further experiences.

The Seminar brought together three groups:

- People who had participated on the spring 2017 study trip
- People who were about to go on the autumn 2017 study trip
- Invited colleagues working in the learning estate from local authorities across Scotland

The Seminar opened with two context presentations. The first by Elaine Kerridge, Participation and Engagement Manager at Children in Scotland, set out ‘The importance and impact of putting children and young people at the heart of decisions which affect them’. The second by Diarmaid Lawlor, Director of Place at Architecture and Design Scotland, set out an ‘Overview of issues affecting the learning estate in Scotland’ drawing on project work and young people participation across Scotland. The Seminar then followed a World Café format and facilitated discussion. Annex 2 sets out a summary of the two context presentations.
2.0 Summary of Seminar Learning Points

In some settings, the design of learning spaces in Finland looked more ordinary than the new generation of learning spaces in Scotland. The key differences are around how the learners learn, and the culture of trust between learners, teachers and parents. The Finnish approach seems to focus on a whole person approach to learning from early years.

2.1 Meeting whole learner and community needs

Kindergarten is a key development stage, within which there are aspects of formal learning. The focus is to build a love of learning. The main education stage is in mixed age group learning communities, characterized by peer support, self-directed learning opportunities, high levels of parental participation, family support and community engagement.

2.2 Culture, ethos and trust

Building the culture and ethos of the school is a priority and ongoing activity. Trust building is a key focus. This is evident in the approach to learner and teacher autonomy, teacher qualification and support and continuity in policy.

2.3 Learning environments

Schools appear to be centrally located, at the heart of communities, with a mix of learning experiences indoors and outdoors, supported by high quality specialist spaces like CDT and STEM, and a range of informal settings to enable play and self-directed learning.

2.4 Key Questions for further study trips

- Deprivation: What is the approach to working with learners and communities in the more deprived areas, both rural and urban, and how are these learners supported across the different transitions in learning and work?
- Support: Are there subsidies and financial support for families, particularly in poorer areas?
- Rural: Are there different approaches in rural and urban schools; what is the rural story?
- Wellbeing: What are the different issues and approaches to mental health and wellbeing, and how does this compare to the Scottish experience?
- Early years: What happens at kindergarten, what aspects of formal learning are provided, how is the early years [0-3] phase managed?
- Post 16: What is the post 16 learner experience, and what are the different pathways and choices?
- Outdoor: How are these experience built and maintained at all learning stages?
- Ethos: How is the culture of trust and respect sustained?
- Policy: How has Finland achieved stability and continuity around education policy at all levels of Government?
- Success: How is this measured?
3.0 Summary of discussions at the Reflective Learning Seminar

3.1 Meeting whole learner needs

Learner journey

'The system seems to focus on meeting whole learner needs from an early age.'

Education is a priority from birth onwards. Parents are actively involved. From 0-7, there is a kindergarten stage. This includes aspects of formal learning, but the focus is on enjoying learning, play, and real-world learning. For example, children build familiarity with tools and making in kindergarten.

Formal school starts at 7, and this transition happens very smoothly. Learners are ready to learn. At this stage, learners move into learning communities 7-16, with mixed groups providing peer support. Business and localities are involved in shaping the curriculum. There are fluid pathways between academic and vocational learning.

Parental participation

'Partners supporting the learner experience'

Parents are seen as integral to the learner experience, and are welcomed into the school. They interact in learning spaces, lunch with children. From an early age, Dads are supported, with visible presence of Dad's participation in kindergarten activities.

Family support

'At the heart of the community'

Family support is available in all schools, for every child, not just special needs. The service is beyond just counselling; there is a mix of informal chat, support on day to day welfare queries, special services, early intervention services to meet people needs. This service is accessible and available to families and learners.

There are multi-agency teams within each school, including psychologists who are viewed as an integral member of the teaching staff, not perceived as a negative factor or associated only with bad behaviour. The focus is on partnership, and early intervention. There are no waiting lists.

Community hub

'Schools are centrally located'

Participants on the study trip observed that often, the school seems to be about the same size in the different communities they visited, and typically, are centrally located within walking distances. The schools are hubs for community services. Children often walk to school, on their own, and move fluidly between the school and adjacent community resources and clubs as part of their day.

3.2 Culture, ethos and trust

Culture and ethos

'Trust and quality in relationships'

A key observer by the Learning seminar participants was around the level of trust between the learner, the teacher and the parent. The quality of relationships was evident in the various interactions observed in the different learning settings. For example, learners move in and out of classrooms as they need. Parents and community are in the school spaces. Self-directed learning is promoted, supported by messy materials in different spaces to encourage a sense of 'anywhere as learning'. Positive risk taking by learners is encouraged. Behaviour issues seem very low, from a few minor incidents a week, to very occasional bigger problems. There doesn't seem to be an issue around exclusions, punitive or a culture of disciplining the child. There appear to be no private schools, and no placing requests.

Building the culture and ethos of the school around learner, teacher and community needs is a priority, ongoing activity. It drives the way buildings are made.

Frameworks and responsibilities

'Take away fear'

Clear frameworks support the way schools manage and support staff, learners and the wider community. The emphasis is on taking away the fear, supporting, not worrying about failure. The narrative of how the system operates appears fluid, but there are clear expectations around autonomy at the level of learners and teachers in particular, and the things that have to be done.

Policy and politics

'Continuity'

Finnish education policy appears to have been kept consistent for a long period of time, enabling the culture of learning and management. Education policy does not appear to change when a new government is formed.

Teachers

'Trusted and empowered by the Headteacher and parents'

Teacher trust is supported by a continuous process of professional development, a focus on excellence and support for improvement. Typically, a qualification in teaching is supported by knowledge or a qualification in a specialist area. Teams are carefully selected. Teachers have high levels of autonomy over the timetable, and the approach in classrooms.

Teachers are addressed by first names and sit with children during lunch times in the same spaces. Kindergarten is a key developmental stage. However, attitudes, support and development of the workforce at this stage appear mixed.

3.3 Learning environments

Location

Schools and learning facilities are often 7-16 learning communities, sized to accommodate about 800 learners, centrally located in communities, connected to walking and cycling routes.

Welcome

The school entrance is a welcoming experience. Sometimes, these spaces are very big, multi-use spaces. Sometimes, they contain intimate settings, like cosy cushions. One school, had a stove at the entrance. The sense of welcome is well designed.

Learning spaces

A surprise for participants on the study trip was the 'ordinary-ness' of many of the learning spaces in many of the schools. Classrooms were common. There were seats in rows. Participants felt a big contrast with some of the new generation of Scottish learning spaces. The big difference in the Finnish spaces was the level of trust between teachers and learners, the fluid way learners came in and out of learning spaces, and the choice of learning experiences around the school, indoor and out.
Informal settings

Throughout many of the school spaces, there appeared to be non-precious and fairly random objects to play and build with. Low tech, self-directed play, is facilitated by large amounts of indoor and outdoor space. Elements of risk are managed through education such as firepits in the playground.

Specialist spaces

From primary school, learners use excellent CDT workshops, centrally located in the school. From kindergarten, children have built up familiarity with tools. In primary school stage, competence builds up several levels, facilitated by soldering, cutting, fabrication, coding and technology. Problem solving and problem based learning are supported etc. at secondary stage, there is mastery, and innovation around problem solving.

In one school, biology lessons were delivered in a greenhouse, to facilitate real world and applied learning.

Dining spaces

Dining is well managed through the day. There appear to be no surges. At busy times, there is a sense of calm. Teachers, learners and community often dine together. Managing food is a learning experience; learners are encouraged to take responsibilities around the daily food choices they have in the dining area. Waste seems to be well managed.
Annex 1: Sites visited on the Finnish study trip

- Kallahti Comprehensive School
- Meri-Rastila Comprehensive School
- Summer High School Association (Kesälukioseura)
- Familings Oy
- KiVa anti-bullying programme
- Saunalahit school - The first multipurpose school building in its area integrating a full day daycare centre, school, public library, youth centre and many after-school activities.
- Aseman Lapset - Pro-actively supports a personalised and effective dialogue between adults and adolescents to promote wellbeing, prevent marginalisation, violence, crime and substance abuse.
- Playful Learning Centre
- International Childcare and Education Centre
- Finnish Association for Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome
- The Finnish Baby Box
- MoovKids - MoovKids also offers a unique online teaching programme focused on the physical development of three to seven year old children.
- Me & MyCity - Me & MyCity is a Finnish education innovation aimed at school children, covering society, working life and entrepreneurship.
- Development Centre Opinkirjo - Opinkirjo is a service organization which promotes the wellbeing of children and young people working with stakeholders in education and parenting.
- Finnish Youth Corporation
- Department of Early Education and Care, Helsinki Municipal Service
- The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture

Annex 2: Summary of context presentations from the autumn reflective learning seminar

Engagement and Decision making – working with children: Elaine Kerridge

- Children should be involved throughout the whole of the design process rather than a piecemeal contribution at the beginning or end of the process. It’s imperative that design decisions are explained and feedback is provided as to the nature of those decisions allowing children to better understand the reasoning behind the design development of their environment. This process also develops an understanding of when and where their comments have been incorporated or otherwise discounted.
- The selection and presentation of venue plays an important role in children’s level of comfort and subsequent engagement. Perceived ‘adult’ environments can be temporarily altered to accommodate this and if a familiar environment such as a school setting is to be used the space or manner in which the interaction is conducted should differ from children’s primary experience of the space. Some examples include a less formal approach, using forenames, playing music in the background, differing seating arrangements, the use of tablecloths and more interactive or creative forms of engagement.
- Consider any potential barriers to disabilities or learning that may hinder individuals, some with dyslexia may find different coloured paper a benefit if tasked with reading.
- Discuss with the children that opting out of the event or a specific task is acceptable and will not be looked upon badly.
- Don’t change the feedback – present it as it is recorded.
- Consider any religious needs that may be pertinent to a child taking part during the timing of the event.
- Although suggestions from the children may not be taken forward and implemented, it’s important to highlight the skills and wider benefit that they will be exposed too e.g. graphic design, communication, confidence (listening is important, it’s not always about the end result).
- Pupil Councils should be representative of a cross body of the school not simply the high achievers.
Challenges facing Scottish learning spaces today: Diarmaid Lawlor

Working with schools and local authorities across Scotland, Architecture and Design Scotland observes 5 key issues informing discussions about the shaping of learning environments, linked to attainment needs and whole person development:

- **Attendance:** 'the design of welcome', so all learners, at all stages of the learner journey feel welcome; and the reach of the learning service beyond the reach of the traditional school building,
- **Comfort:** the basic environmental conditions that support learning and concentration
- **Engagement:** this is the practice of learning and teaching enabled by different types of learning space: 'visible learning' Learning happening
- **Integration:** how learners integrate learning into their own experiences, real world learning
- **Family:** this is about integrating the family into the learning process, which might be about engagement on learning tasks in the home, or supporting mum and Dad in their own learning, or mentoring.

Participation with learners, the experts in their own lives, provides rich insights into needs and possibilities. Working with Midlothian Council as part of the Inspiring Learning Spaces project, young learners articulated a clear sense of how learners learn, as well as needs around where they learn.

Our experience is that often, an incremental approach to testing possibilities around these issues is helpful. This is demonstrated in projects like the Campbelltown Try Before You Buy, or the Speyside High School Settings project. We have collected together some guidance to inform thinking about the conversations to drive the design of learning settings, supported by our Tests of Change service and prompts for thinking about the outdoors as an extended classroom.

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