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Author(s): Sääkslahti, Arja; Duncombe, Rebecca

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Finland: an international approach to physical development

Arja Sääkslahti and Rebecca Duncombe

Personal reflection (Arja Sääkslahti)

As a physical education (PE) teacher, I have researched the area of early childhood physical development for 30 years. During this time, I have been fortunate to visit many different countries and cultures to explore the different ways in which education and PE is delivered. Through these international visits, it has been possible to see my own culture and the PE practices within it in a different light. The old expression “From the distance, it is possible to see more clearly” is relevant here, and my visits have helped me to clarify many things and to reflect on why and how we provide physical activity and physical development opportunities in Finland in the way that we do. I was asked to write this chapter to provide an international perspective, and I hope that the practical examples provided will be helpful to those attempting to meet the physical development needs of young children in different countries and different contexts. We are lucky in Finland as we have a culture that is based outdoors; it is normal to be outdoors and we are generally not put off by the weather! Being outside and enabling children to be

outside are part of the ethos of the country, and this has not always proved to be the case in other countries that I have visited.

My informal observations of children playing, both indoors and outdoors, have helped me to reflect on the practices that do and don't encourage physical activity.

Many Finnish early years settings have a large outdoor space as well as access to forests and woodlands. On average, our young children spend four hours a day outside engaged in active play. It would be hard for them not to be active with opportunities such as this provided for them! I have seen fidgety children play for hours, being constantly on the move until they have refined their gross and fine motor control over many months to a point where they can finally sit and stand still (a skill that is unbelievably hard until the body becomes physically developed enough to cope with it). There are many differences between our system and those of other countries including the United Kingdom; it is not my place to say which is the best approach but Finnish children are renowned for their educational success and I hope by sharing what I have learnt, others may be able to change some or all of their practice to better suit the children in their care.

Introduction

In 2013, the United Kingdom was ranked 24th (out of 29 "rich" countries) for its education and 16th for overall child well-being (UNICEF, 2013). This was in

comparison to Finland (the focus of this chapter) which ranked 4th for both education and overall child well-being. The Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) sheds further light on academic achievement in the two countries. PISA is a worldwide research programme focussing on the learning outcomes of 15-year-old students in 73 countries (www.oecd.org/pisa). The Latest PISA results ranked Finland 5th and the United Kingdom 14th (PISA, 2015, Results in Focus, OECD 2018). The education ranking from both studies is of particular interest when you consider that Finnish children don't start (formal) school until they are 7, they typically have a shorter day with longer breaks and they don't do homework. In the years prior to formal schooling starting, approximately 70% of young children (aged 0–6) in Finland attend pre-school. Clearly there are some stark differences between the Finnish and the UK system with the Finnish approach appearing to take the lead in both education and overall child well-being. So, what is it that contributes to Finland's success? How can Finnish children do so well when they are at school for less time?

This chapter will attempt to highlight differences between the two educational systems by outlining the situation in Finland and then examining why this approach may be a more suitable one for young children's education, physical development and general well-being. The following are put forward:

- Education, teachers, PE and physical activity are valued;

- Education is continuous and progressive from ages 0 to 8;
- Appropriate pedagogies are employed;
- Facilities provide opportunities for physical activity and development;
- Clothing is appropriate for the outdoors;
- Physical activity and physical development are a requirement.

Education, teachers, PE and physical activity are valued

In Finland, teaching is a very attractive profession, with just 10% of applicants admitted to be trained as teachers (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017). Teachers for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) study for three years at university gaining a Bachelor's degree and it is not uncommon for teachers to also hold a Master's degree (i.e. five years of study at university). The latest educational strategy in Finland has increased the number of teacher training places in early education and set a target of having half of the staff members in childcare centres with a university education. Teaching is valued as one of the top four professions in Finland (Suomen Kuvalehti, 2018), and PE teachers belong to this highly valued group requiring a five-year Master's degree. It is also a highly competitive profession with just 5% of applicants being accepted to study PE in 2018. PE is considered one of the five main areas of the curriculum in primary and secondary schools and accounts for a third of the total amount of lessons (after

Finnish/literature and mathematics). Whilst a teacher training course at university level lasting 3+ years is commonplace in the United Kingdom for primary school teachers, practitioners in nurseries typically do less than this. Likewise, much has been written about the low status of PE in English schools and especially in the primary setting (Duncombe, Cale & Harris, 2016; Griggs, 2007) – see also Chapter 9.

Another factor illustrating the value that is placed on teachers in Finland is the freedom they are given to teach in a way that they see fit. As such, there is no national inspection system, and teachers have autonomy to choose how they will fulfil the national curriculum for the ECEC. In Finland, the quality of the education system and ensuring the curriculum is fulfilled are measured by a survey conducted in randomly chosen childcare centres and schools. The focus of this survey varies from year to year, for example, in 2017, the survey aimed to find out how communities implemented the new curriculum that was launched in 2016. In contrast, a very rigid inspection system is in place in the United Kingdom (Office for Standards in Education – OFSTED) with schools being inspected approximately every three years. Following the inspection, schools are given a qualitative judgement and reports about the inspection are published publicly on the inspection website for others to read.

Physical activity has always been valued in Finland but this has increased further in recent years. This has partially been fuelled by growing research evidence highlighting the link between physical activity and overall learning prerequisites (Donnelly et al., 2016) as well as learning outcomes in academic subjects (Haapala et al., 2018; Hillman, Kalaja, & Liukkonen, 2015). In support of this growing understanding of the link between physical activity and academic outcomes, the Finnish government launched “Joy in Motion” as part of their strategy in 2017. The purpose of this programme is to encourage all day care centres to take care of children’s physical activity, and all childcare centres are supposed to follow this program by 2022.

The UK physical activity guidelines are outlined in greater detail in Chapter 4; these recommend that children capable of walking and aged 0–5 should engage in at least 180 minutes a day of physical activity and that children aged 5–18 should engage in 60 minutes each day. The Finnish physical activity guidelines follow the same recommendations (in terms of minutes of physical activity), but how do the two countries compare in relation to the percentage of children achieving these recommended amounts? Finland’s Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth (2018) identifies that approximately 40% of Finnish children (aged 7–15 years) do achieve the 60-minute recommendations and that 54–59% of younger children (<6 years) achieve the 180-minute guideline. In the United Kingdom,

these figures are concerning: in 2012, just 21% of boys and 16% of girls, aged 5–15, met the 60-minute recommendation, whilst in the younger 2–4 age bracket, 9% of boys and 10% of girls met the 180-minute recommendation (Townsend, Wickramasinghe, Williams, Bhatnagar, & Rayner, 2015).

Education is continuous and progressive from 0–8

In Finland, early education covers the 0–8 age range and is designed to provide continuous and progressive education and care from the early years, to pre-school (6 years) and through to the early part of primary school (7–12 years). Early education is seen to be part of an important continuum of education that starts from the very beginning of life. The system in the United Kingdom is less progressive with numerous changes in the way in which education is provided for the 0–8 age range. For example, very young children and babies may be cared for in nurseries until they reach the age of three when they enter the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and their first experience of more formal schooling begins. Young children start school in the academic year that they turn four and continue with the EYFS but in a new setting. Just one year later, they enter Key Stage 1 (years 1 and 2, ages 5–7) and just two years after this, they enter Key stage 2 (Years 3–6, ages 7–11) and this is sometimes accompanied with another change of setting (some primary

schools in the United Kingdom are split into Infant and Junior schools; each responsible for a different key stage).

Appropriate pedagogies are employed

The aim of ECEC in Finland is to promote the holistic growth, health and well-being of each child as determined by his or her age and development. This is delivered through pedagogical activities based on play, physical activity, the Arts and cultural heritage. ECEC staff, in their training, are encouraged to provide developmentally appropriate activities that promote learning in a healthy and safe environment. Physical activity, physical development and movement are a core part of Early Childhood provision in Finland.

The aims of the EYFS in the United Kingdom are to provide:

- Quality and consistency in all early years settings so that every child makes good progress, and no child gets left behind;
- A secure foundation through learning and development opportunities which are planned around the needs and interests of each individual child and are assessed and reviewed regularly;
- Partnership working between practitioners and with parents and/or carers;
- Equality of opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice, ensuring that every child is included and supported.

Whilst there is an acknowledgement that provision should be based on the needs of individual children, the focus does not seem to be on the more holistic outcomes identified in the Finnish system. The aims of both “curricular” have been identified, but further differences will become evident in the way in which practitioners deliver the required outcomes. This will differ between settings within a country as well as between countries. The following describes a typical Finnish approach.

Based on Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, practitioners in Finland engage in and encourage numerous play opportunities through which young children can learn. In addition to this, it is accepted that children will also learn through moving, exploring, working with others and expressing themselves artistically. A constructivist understanding of learning is commonplace and this encourages an understanding and appreciation of what the child already knows and what they have already experienced, which is then used as the starting point for further learning. Children are encouraged to find joy in and celebrate their successes. The young child’s safety and well-being are at the forefront of practice and they are encouraged and supported to develop important life skills such as getting dressed, eating meals, managing basic hygiene and taking care of personal possessions. These and similar skills are given more importance in

the early years than those of reading, writing and mathematics. The learning environment supports physically active play and children's natural curiosity and desire to learn. Many activities are structured to enable young children to explore the world with their senses and entire body. Children and personnel are encouraged to be physically active both indoors and outdoors. Moreover, children are guided to avoid sitting for long periods. Children's holistic well-being is promoted by providing them with an opportunity for calming down and resting during the day as well as versatile, healthy and sufficient nutrition.

Facilities provide opportunities for physical activity and development

Finnish childcare centres are typically built with large outdoor playing areas.

Finland has a strong Scandinavian outdoor culture, and almost every childcare centre has their own little forest area for children to play in. The benefits of outdoor play are identified in 13 and research by Fjortoft (2004) identifies that a Forest environment inspires children's imagination, encourages them to play in heterogeneous groups (boys and girls of different ages) and supports their motor development. In addition, playing outdoors supports overall physical development because it is more challenging for the senses, muscles and joints than more predictable or indoor environments. It was also found that children who play outdoors and in forests have better cardiorespiratory systems than children playing

elsewhere (Fjortoft, 2001). The pictures (Figures 5.1 and 5.2) show a typical outdoor area and a forest space used by a day care centre in Finland.

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Clothing is appropriate for the outdoors

Finland is a Nordic country with four different seasons and the difference in temperature between the seasons can be remarkable with temperatures often reaching as low as -25 degrees in the winter and frequently hitting 25 degrees in the summer. This large variation means that children need to have appropriate clothing for the varying weather conditions. Bad weather is not generally seen as a reason or given as an excuse to stay inside but it is widely acknowledged that appropriate clothing is essential. Indeed, the weather has to be very bad before Finnish children are allowed to stay indoors (between -15 and -20 , depending on the wind strength). Parental attitude towards providing appropriate clothing and tolerating dirt is generally very positive, and parents typically dress their children in clothes that are comfortable and stretchy/loose enough for active play. The clothing is practical and allows for playing both indoors and outdoors in almost all weather conditions. Parents often bring spare clothing should their child need to change or if weather conditions change, and space is provided in day care centres

for children to store their spare clothes. Space is even provided for ice-skates and skis during the winter! The following pictures illustrate this approach in practice (see Figures 5.3–5.7)

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Physical activity and physical development are a requirement

One of five curriculum areas in the Finnish curriculum includes PE and health and is titled: I grow, move and develop. The goal of this area is to encourage children to be physically active in versatile ways and to experience the joy of physical activity, and “learning by doing” should be integrated into each child’s day. It is believed that regular and supervised exercise has a key role in children’s holistic development, including the development of motor skills and fundamental movement skills. Teachers and practitioners are obligated to observe children’s movement skills, to recognise those children who may need additional support and to provide support and supervision as appropriate. As a result, there are numerous

opportunities for Finnish children to engage in physically active play, both indoors and outdoors, every day. The following list outlines a typical day:

- 6.30 am – day care centre opens (unstructured play inside)
- 8.00 am – breakfast
- 8.30 am – structured activities indoors
- 9.00 am – unstructured play outdoors
- 11.00 am – lunch
- 12.00 pm – rest (sleep, quiet activities, reading, calm play)
- 2.00 pm – snack
- 2.30 pm – unstructured play indoors
- 3.00 pm – unstructured play outdoors
- 5.00 pm – centre closes

From this, we can see that two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon are dedicated to unstructured outdoor play.

The following example, taken from a small research project conducted in three nurseries in the Midlands of England, using an ethnographic approach and observations (Stirrup, 2012), reflects a somewhat different approach:

- 9.30 am: registration
- 9.50 am: snack time (fruit, cheese and milk)

- 9.50 am–11.20 am: free time indoors (reading, dressing up, playing on computer, filling in progress books with a member of staff)
- 11.35–12:00 pm lunch
- 12 pm: home time (for some children).

A second example, taken from the same research project, portrays a more positive approach (certainly in terms of providing opportunities for young children to be physically active and to develop their gross motor skills):

- 9.30 am: “Gathering” – saying hi to all the children
- 9.50 am: free time. The majority of children choose to play outside (building blocks, soft play, tricycles, running around)
- 10.10 am: some children return inside for snack time; fruit loaf and fruit
- 10.45 am–11.30 am: climbing frame activities for all
- 11.45 am: home time

Neither of the English examples followed the children into the afternoon. The first example illustrates how easy it is to provide nursery provision that does very little for a young child’s physical development. The second nursery was part of the Forest School scheme (see Chapter 13) and provided weekly PE lessons for the oldest children in the setting (something that is not necessarily required of this age group but that was observed being quite successful by the researchers). Two very different approaches but both settings were following the same framework for the

early years, perhaps suggesting that a lack of appropriate physical development opportunities may be, in part, due to the interpretations of the framework and the knowledge and understanding of the practitioners in these settings.

As detailed earlier and discussed further in Chapter 4, physical activity guidelines have been introduced to both the United Kingdom and Finland. Like Canada, Finland has 24-hour guidelines to acknowledge the important of sleep and rest (Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland, 2016). It is recommended that young children engage in at least three hours of physical activity and that one hour of this is vigorous in nature (e.g. playing tag, jumping on a trampoline, swimming or skiing). Brisk outdoor activities (trips to the woods, cycling and skating) and light physical activity (walking, throwing a ball, swinging on a swing and balancing) should make up the remaining two hours. To avoid sedentary activities, it is recommended that time is spent doing “unhurried daily chores” (playing with cars, building blocks or dolls, studying things, putting clothes on and eating).

As many young children are in Finnish nursery settings for most of their waking hours, five days a week, the role of the nursery in facilitating opportunities for these young children to be active for 180 minutes a day is clearly important. It has already been noted that many opportunities each day are provided for young children to be active both inside and outdoors, but what else is done by Finnish Practitioners to meet the physical development needs of young children and help

them to reach their three-hour-a-day physical activity goal? The following are all examples of ways in which this has and can be achieved:

- Targeted physical activity interventions. Gordon, Tucker, Burke, and Carron (2013) found that short interventions lasting less than four weeks were most effective as children tended to need new stimuli after this time;
- Supporting parents to maximise physical activity opportunities for their children;
- Finding a balance between structured and unstructured physical activity opportunities:
 - On the one hand, unstructured activities are seen to be important, perhaps more so than more structured activities such as tag or throwing/catching games because of the opportunities they offer young children to explore the environment and experiment with what their bodies are capable of in an autonomous and creative way. Likewise, unstructured physically active play is more effective for overall child development because it has the elements of fun, spontaneity and freedom and encourage curiosity, problem-solving and imaginative play.
 - Yet, on the other hand, studies (e.g. Livonen & Sääkslahti, 2014; Ward, Vaughn, McWilliams, & Hales, 2010) have hinted at the benefits of more structured activities such as those more recognised as PE.
- Staff need to create “optimal environments” using different equipment and toys. Cardon, Van Cauwenberghe, Labarque, Haerens, and De Bourdeaudhuij (2008)

and Cardon, Labarque, Smiths, and De Bourdeaudhuij (2009), for example found that equipment such as climbing bars, swings, sandpits and slides were effective in increasing physical activity. Related research (Soini et al., 2016; Stratton & Leonard, 2002) illustrated how playground markings can also increase children's physical activity, albeit for short periods of time. In relation to this, Cardon et al. (2009) advise that interest in such markings can quickly be lost; thus, a recommendation for day care centres and nurseries might be to provide chalk for children to make their own markings as these are cheap and can easily be modified.

- Verbal encouragement from staff; this has been shown to be an effective way to increase young children's physical activity, but one study (Soini et al., 2014) highlighted that this approach was rare in early years settings.
- Just as the wider environment needs to encourage physical activity so too do the resources provided. Objects such as balls and wheels, large wheeled toys to push, pull and pedal, tyres and recycled materials all encourage physical activity. In addition, objects such as these will help develop strength, coordination and fine motor skills.
- Hnatiuk et al. (2018) underlined the importance of tailoring physical activities to the needs of the target group; thus, an understanding of community or cultural needs may be helpful.

Conclusion

A number of comparisons between Finland and the United Kingdom, in relation to physical development opportunities, PE and physical activity, have been outlined in this chapter. In providing an international comparison and highlighting the differences in practice between the systems in Finland and the United Kingdom, it is hoped that lessons can be learnt and examples of good practice be adopted. The point was made early on that, on measures of Education and well-being, Finland scored better when compared to the United Kingdom. This was despite formal education starting later in Finland and the school day being shorter. Thus, key differences were explored and a number of practices put forward as being effective: the value of the outdoors as a play environment; the importance of good training for those in charge of the education and development of young children; strategies for coping with extremes of weather; having adequate indoor and outdoor facilities; and adopting pedagogies that enable staff to meet the physical development needs of young children.

Summary of key points

- Enable children to go outside every day and provide opportunities for them to encounter different surfaces, environments, textures and slopes.
- Provide equipment that will encourage physical activity through play and, at the same time, contribute towards physical development (boxes, wheels, boards, toys with wheels, etc.).
- Help children to play together and cooperate. Those who struggle with rules and being part of a team will find it hard to play organised games and, in turn, will be less likely to engage in these physical activities.

- Teach through play and multisensory activities. Children learn by doing, using their whole body and all of their senses. Sensory integration will be difficult without these opportunities.
- When children have difficulties concentrating and being still, they are not ready to be still – allow them to move instead.

Suggested further readings

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Figure 5.1 A typical outdoor space in a Finnish day care centre.

Figure 5.2 A typical woodland space available to children in Finnish day care centres.

Figure 5.3 Finnish children play outside whatever the weather; thus, appropriate clothing is essential!

Figure 5.4 Day care centres provide appropriate storage facilities for outdoor clothing.

Figure 5.5 Winter provides new and exciting opportunities for being outside; it is not a barrier!

Figure 5.6 Children in day care centres are provided with opportunities to ski and develop their balance.

Figure 5.7 Time is spent in the natural environment, and the forest is a favourite place for many.

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