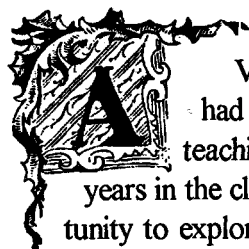


Russell H. Edes

My Impressions of Finnish and Scandinavian Educational Systems



As the Finnair jet approached the airport at Vantaa, my anticipation mounted. My school had granted me a three month sabbatical from my teaching and administrative duties. After nearly thirty years in the classroom teaching history, I now had an opportunity to explore in depth a country and a people that held a fascination for me ever since my childhood, when my father explained to me the role of the ski troops in the Winter War.

As I sat buckled into my seat, I reviewed how my interest in Finland has developed over the years. At age fifteen I read Linna's novel, *The Unknown Soldier*. Here for the first time I encountered the legendary toughness of the Finnish soldier. When I was in college in the early 1960's, I came in contact with a history professor who was officially acknowledged to be the "father of Finnish studies" in America. Later, in 1970, as a newly minted M.A. in history, I attended a summer seminar in Williamsburg, Virginia. The president of Finland arrived there by helicopter to rest up and overcome jet lag before meeting with the American President in Washington.

Many years later, in 1983, I visited the Soviet Union for the first time with a group of teachers. Finnair offered a "free day" in Helsinki at the end of our three-week sojourn. We could not turn down the offer. After our trip to the U.S.S.R., we were astounded by the contrast between the Soviet cities and the City of Helsinki.

For me it was a turning point. I knew that Finland had been part of the old Russian Empire and had broken away and was able to maintain its freedom as a result of the Winter War, but I was unable to explain why, in the same amount of time, the Soviet Union was unable to develop a higher standard of living that could match the West, and which Helsinki exemplified. I had only a day in Helsinki and did the tourist things, like taking tram 3T for a quick impression of the city. To me that day, Helsinki seemed to be a vibrant place, throbbing with energy and enjoyin being the host of the World University Games. This contrast between the dreary life of the Soviet cities and Helsinki really piqued my interest in Finland.

I randomly got off the tram to explore parts of the city, and, to my astonishment, I recognized one street from a photograph I had seen of Helsinki during the Winter War. A Soviet bomber had dropped its load of bombs, and one of them had landed on a building, causing it to catch fire. I recognized the surrounding buildings. At that very moment I resolved to learn more about Finland.

Since then, this quest has brought me back to Finland several times, usually as a leader of a student tour to Russia. Since I teach Russian History and my students can afford to pay for the trip, we usually spend ten days in March touring parts of the Soviet Union (or Russia), with a one day stop over in Helsinki, where I get my "fix" for the year. In 1991 I spent ten days in Finland, studying the geography by train and visiting Winter War battle fields at Suomussalmi and in the Arctic at Rovaniemi, all in March while the snows were still on the ground.

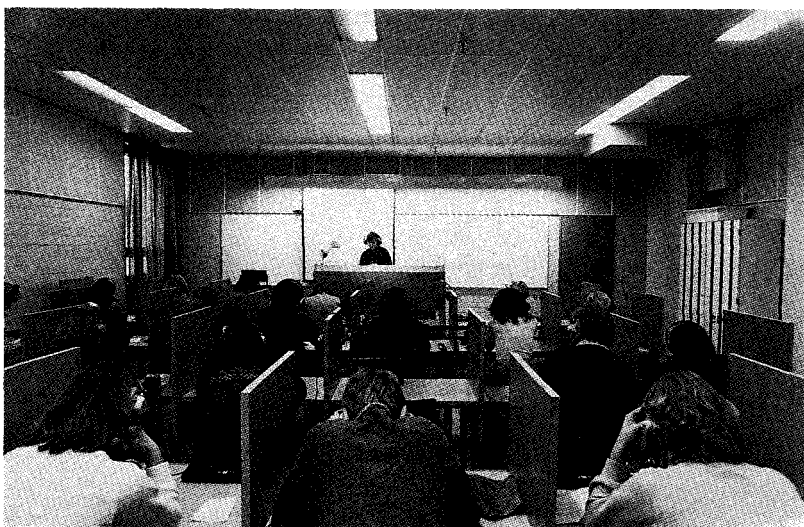
Meanwhile, when not in Finland I read everything I could get my hands on and discovered that there is a small academic industry in the English speaking world that is devoted to studying the country. To supplement my academic reading, I decided to get to know the subculture of the descendants and recent migrants from Finland to the U.S. I was delighted to learn that there are pockets of Finnish-Americans in Massachusetts, Michigan, and Minnesota. I have spent many a happy hour in Fitchburg Massachusetts at the Finnish Research center located at the state college. I participated in the

Finnfest at Hancock, Michigan, meeting Finnish folk dancers and veterans of the Winter War. Some of the organizers were duly puzzled why a non-Finn would have any interest at all! It was so peculiar, in fact, that I was interviewed by a reporter from the Detroit Daily News in order to explain this phenomenon.

Some impressions about the Finns and their culture

As the wheels of the aircraft touched down, all that was behind me. I cleared customs and headed in to Helsinki, where I placed my bags in a locker in the train station. I took the short ride to the housing office, where I planned to pick up my key for the apartment that I had reserved. However, to my dismay there was no apartment waiting! I think the woman behind the desk was more in shock than I was, because through a miscommunication she thought I had cancelled my reservation. I decided to allow Finnish efficiency to solve the problem, and within twenty minutes my faith was rewarded and I was off to find my new apartment.

Once I had settled in, I sat down and wrote out a rough plan of action. I decided to spend part of my time doing tourist things, exploring the city and getting to know its nooks and crannies, and testing the proposition that Helsinki is "a city without slums," as observed by an American visitor in 1870. The other part of the plan was to renew my contact with the War Museum, where in 1991 I had begun my research on the Winter War. The staff had been very helpful in arranging a seminar and travel plans for a visit to the battlefield of Suomussalmi; this time I wanted to study the uniforms, weapons and equipment of the period in greater detail. Also, I wanted to be able to meet Finns socially, so that I might be able to understand these Stoics of the North and their culture from a closer perspective. At the time, visiting a Finnish school was placed on the list.



Language laboratory in a Finnish highschool. Valokuva: Matti Helenius.

During my first days I was anxious to get started on my quest. I thought a good way to ease myself into the culture would be to visit Stockmann's and see how the material level of the Finns had developed since my last visit. As I entered the doorway, my ears were greeted with the sounds of American Country and Western music. This was the last thing I expected to hear or see in Finland. But it did make me sensitive to the changing style of fashion and I began to note that American Country and Western clothing was popular in Helsinki, at least among some of the younger people.

I decided to divide my days between research at the War Museum and exploring the city. I usually spent a portion of the morning examining the uniforms, weapons, photographs and illustrated histories of the various units in the collection. I was intrigued by the Finnish army uniform, which appeared to be of a German cut. I came to realize, through discussions with various museum personnel, that the historical legacy of the Finnish army is quite complicated, and it

is reflected in the design of the uniform. Elements of its Swedish and Russian past are found in the uniform, as well as the influence of the Germans and the Jaegers. It is my understanding that the artist *Akseli Gallen-Kallela* was instrumental in creating the traditional uniform of the Army. Apparently, what looked to a non-Finn like the traditional field gray of the German uniform is actually the traditional gray of the Finnish peasant's tunic, and the gray granite of Finland. It all makes sense if one remembers that Gallen-Kallela was one of the founding members of the national romantic movement.

At the museum I was also informed of the importance of the education movement between the wars in healing the immense scars left behind by the War of Independence. One of the questions that puzzled me was why the workers of Finland let Stalin down in 1939. He expected them to rise up against their "bosses," but they failed to do so; but why?

On the surface, Stalin really seemed to have a firm basis for his expectations. There were three or four explanations advanced to answer my queries on this issue. The first was that there was the hope that things were getting better despite the depression. Working men could now buy a bicycle or a new suit, and the redistribution of land at the end of the War of Independence also won over many. Also, word filtered back about the purges and what had happened to some Finns who had gone to the workers' paradise. But the key explanation seems to be that the teachers in the interwar period were able to explain the importance and meaning of Finland's independence to the younger generation that would grow up to play a major role in the defense of Finland when the Russians attacked in November of 1939. For a teacher, this was a sobering observation. It brought home the truth that a sound education is vital to a nation's health and what goes on in the classroom can have immense consequences for the individual as well as the nation.

Impressions about Sweden and Norway

As September became October, I decided it was time to begin my explorations of the other nations of Scandinavia, and on a beautiful and blustery day in October I booked passage on the ferry to Stockholm. I planned to explore as much of Sweden as possible, but my ultimate goal was to get to Norway and visit the land of my wife's ancestors. The next morning, three nations were in mourning following the sinking of the liner *Estonia*. When I heard the news, like everyone I was in a state of shock, and as the story unfolded I began to question my decision to take the ferry to Stockholm. In the first few days there was a great deal of uncertainty as to why the ship went down and there was fear that there was an inherent design flaw in the ship's bow. I was scheduled to leave the Saturday after the tragedy and my confidence was shaken.

On the appointed day I placed my bags in a railroad locker and wandered around the city trying to decide whether to cancel or continue my voyage. After having a "last meal" at the Cafe Ekberg, I was feeling more confidence in Finnish ship design and seamanship and I boarded the vessel and headed out to sea. I have to say I was greatly relieved the next day to see the islands of the Stockholm Archipelago.

I spent three days sightseeing in Stockholm. I then boarded the night train to Trondheim, and awoke to find the train in the middle of a snowstorm and heading to the pass in the mountains at Storlien.

Travel by train in Scandinavia is a delight for the American tourist. The service is wonderful and the trains seem always to arrive within seconds of the scheduled time.

As the train crossed over to the Norwegian side of the mountains, I studied the landscape very carefully. I was trying to envision where my wife's great grandparents might have lived for they seem to have left the Trondheim region some time in the 1870's. I was surprised

to spot, tucked away at the bottom of the hill, a U.S. Army truck and several other vehicles with U.S. military markings.

Apparently this was one of the prepositioned depots that had been set up in Norway. After passing the depot the train rapidly descended to the valley floor below and began the process of travelling around the edge of Trondheim fiord.

I spent four days in Trondheim, walking around the town and exploring the innards of the city. To my tourist eyes, everything was orderly and neat. The buildings seemed exceptionally low in height and the appearance was enhanced by the hills that encircled the city. The tallest structure in town appeared to be the Cathedral. Across the street was the Cathedral school which has an 800 year history. Since I was intrigued by the appearance of the buildings, I walked into the schoolyard where I met a teacher who invited me to meet with the teachers of the English Department the next day.

Visits to some Norwegian schools

After being introduced to the faculty, I sat down to enjoy coffee with members of the English Department and it soon evolved that I was invited not only to visit a class of advanced students of English, but also to teach them! I had exactly twenty minutes to prepare my notes and do a quick read of the first five chapters of *To Kill A Mockingbird*! As I read the text, I tried to keep in mind that the students might be confused by the unwritten assumptions under which the author wrote and that they might not understand the nuances of the descriptions and relationships.

When I entered the classroom the students were hesitant, but as the session wore on I think I was able to help them understand the intricate relationships in small southern towns.

What impressed me about the students was that once they felt comfortable with a native speaker, they were able to communicate without much difficulty their questions and concerns about the text. The conversation flowed very smoothly. This classroom experience verified my "rule of thumb" that when one travels in Scandinavia, if one gets stuck or has to get information quickly, all one has to do is ask someone under forty for help. To a teacher the most obvious thing about the educational system in all the Scandinavian countries is their tremendous success in teaching foreign languages. The big surprise is that the students usually speak with an American, not British, accent. This is probably due to three factors: 1) language teaching is taken seriously and it is begun at an early age; 2) a tremendous number of Scandinavian children have traveled to English speaking countries; 3) the decision was made not to dub t.v. programs in the native tongue. This allows children to acquire the language rapidly and pick up colloquial English and the street language as it evolves.

These impressions continued to be verified as I travelled to Oslo and Bergen by train. I communicated easily with people as the train crossed the rugged landscape of Norway. Many of the passengers seemed to be engrossed with *John Irving's* new book, *Son of a Circus Man*, both in the original language and in Norwegian.

Finally, I detrained in Bergen and found accommodations at a bed and breakfast where the owners spoke impeccable English. The gentleman spoke with a British accent, which he learned as a student in Austria and his wife spoke American English with a slight New Jersey accent that she picked up as a young student.

After settling in, I walked to the center of Bergen where, at the town square, a debate was in progress between the supporters and opponents of the E.U. It was interesting to me that the high school age students tended to favor the admission of Norway and some of the older folks opposed it, all in excellent English. During the course of the discussion, I asked one of the opponents why she opposed Norway's entrance to the E.U. and her response was very interesting. She claimed that the E.U. would be too bureaucratic and de-

mocracy would falter as a consequence. We both recognized the irony of her position, for she was a Social Democrat and the socialists were noted for the growth in bureaucracy!

In my wanderings around Bergen I discovered a type of school that I did not expect to encounter - a private school. It was about 5 p.m. and the school was still in session. One of the students invited me into the building where I discovered that the students were reviewing their assignment in English and most of the conversation flowed easily between Norwegian and English. I talked to a teacher and discovered that the classes were to be held until 10 p.m.! I thought to myself that this school was serious about learning!

Comparing the cultures of Scandinavia and USA

One of my impressions of Bergen is that as in Helsinki, many of the people have traveled to English speaking countries and have a working knowledge of the language. A woman who owns a leather goods store, for example, has a daughter who was an exchange student in Connecticut, a few miles from where I live. There were many such people working in the stores. It was becoming rapidly apparent that the Scandinavian schools are very successful in educating all strata of society in languages other than the mother tongue. Although I was a tourist, I felt extremely comfortable but at the same time a little embarrassed that I was unable to communicate with the local population in their native languages.

The American system of education has been very successful in creating a society which at the turn of the century was multilingual, into a society that has been Americanized and homogenized in the interest of national-unity. However, this success has come at a high price. We have become a monolingual society, a "melting pot", but it is now very difficult for Americans to communicate in other than

English. Occasionally, some of our citizens are fluent in either French or Spanish, but the linguistic fluency declines at a very steep rate. The only people who are truly fluent in other languages are immigrants or their children. By the time the third generation develops, the pressures to Americanize are so great that fluency in the family's mother tongue has been all but lost. In a way this is a great success story, and as long as the U.S. remained isolated and a North American power, it was suitable; however, as globalization accelerates, Americans will be at a tremendous disadvantage. American educational policy makers need to rethink language training and begin it at an early age in order to imprint the languages of the international community on the minds of the young.

More observations about the Finns

After my stay in Bergen I headed back to Finland, traveling north along the Gulf of Bothnia. I took the rail as far as Boden and then a bus back to Kemi. On the bus I noticed a university age couple studying their math and chemistry texts. I was intrigued to note that the mathematics text was published by Addison-Wesley, an American publisher with offices in Boston, Massachusetts. I enquired of the student why he was using an American text, and he informed me that many of the mathematics texts used in the Swedish universities are American. Perhaps it is simply more cost effective to use texts that were designed for the larger American market. To me, it was obvious that the professors at the university naturally assumed that the students would have a higher command of the English language, as opposed to a "working knowledge" which is the goal of American language educators at many universities.

Arriving in Kemi I had some time to kill, so I went over to the nearby kiosk to buy a sandwich. I did not expect the woman behind the counter to have a strong command of English, but to my surprise she did. We were able to converse comfortably and I discovered that

she owned the kioski, which was a franchise, and that her chosen profession was nursing. Apparently jobs were hard to find because of cutbacks in support for medical care that had taken place in Finland. It was apparent that this young woman had a lot of drive and ambition to be financially independent, and she felt comfortable as an entrepreneur.

My next stop was Oulu, where I intended to spend three days. This was my first visit to the city and I looked forward to it. While in the States, I had learned that Oulu had played a prominent role during the migrations of the Finns to the U.S., and was the terminal goal of Stalin's armies had they been successful at Suomussalmi; additionally, I had discovered the novels of *Kalle Päätalo* and the city plays a prominent role in his stories.

I was delighted with Oulu for a number of reasons. It was obvious that the urban planners had reorganized the city after the war, but they also preserved many aspects of the old Finland that had existed prior to the war. I was pleased to be able to visit the university and its library, for I had read about its short history and I had wondered about the similarities of the architecture that I found there. The internationalization of architecture was driven home to me because the university appeared to have many modern buildings that one might find on a campus in the American Mid-west. Were the American architects influenced by Finnish design? The answer seems to be in the affirmative.

Oulu was also important to me because it allowed me to obtain a better understanding of the "Silent Finn." I had been conditioned to think that all Finns are basically shy, an attribute that many foreign observers could agree upon, and one that I had encountered in the four Finnish students with whom I had contact at my school. I broadened my view of the Finnish national character by engaging in a long and fruitful discussion that led to my understanding that it all depends on where one is born and who your grandparents are. The Karelians seem to be the most open and socially gregarious; Finns along the northeast border have a similar reputation along with the Ostrobothnians, but as one heads south along the coast, inland to

Tampere and Helsinki, the more reserved and quiet Finns become. No one seems to have an explanation for this taciturn phenomenon in the culture, but that is the way things are. From that point on, if I met a Finn who was more outward going than usual, conversation usually revealed that the person had at least one grandparent who was a Karelian, and the habit of gregariousness had been passed down through the generations. Thus, Oulu gave me an insight into the national character that I might otherwise have missed.

I returned to Helsinki and eventually found my way to Turku, where I visited with two of my former students, both of whom are university graduates. One was serving his military commitment and the other was working as an accountant and playing hockey.

Back in Helsinki, I met and interviewed some Winter War veterans and had a tour of the Parliament. I responded to an invitation to visit the Sibelius School of Art and Music, where I spent a delightful day discussing professional activities, visiting classes and being a guest lecturer in two English classes.



A group of Finnish schoolchildren playing old Finnish music-instrument, Kantele. Valokuva: Matti Helenius.

Comparing the education in Finland and elsewhere

During my travels in the last decade and a half, I have made it a point to visit schools in the countries that I tour. Thus, I have visited schools in Mexico, Russia, Estonia, Norway, and now Finland. What have I learned? Schools and their professional staffs are faced with many similar problems because their children go through the same stages of development. The variable seems to be the culture which determines how the school will react to the angst of the teenage years.

In Finland as well as in Norway, I found that the staffs were highly motivated and caring, and seemed to be happy with their work. There appeared to be general agreement on the values that were to be imparted and there was less internal debate over what these values are. In the U.S., the debate is open and raucous and it seems that the public schools have become a battleground for single issue groups fighting for control of the curriculum by creating slates of candidates who represent their particular point of view on the issues of the day. This in turn leads to a degree of anxiety and disquiet that interferes with the educational process, because there is no general community agreement on what is to be taught. Directives and policies of the school board are now understood to reflect political forces of small, well organized groups and not the general values of the community at large. In the Finnish system there seemed to be a unity of purpose and mutual support among the teaching staff and a general atmosphere and respect for the gifts and talents of the students.

I visited a history class at Sibelius Senior Highschool where there was a general discussion going on based on the reading assigned from the text. The students were genuinely involved in the discussion and quite animated. This was a pleasant surprise. Over the years at my school which has had the good fortune to have four Finnish students, the general consensus has been that the students from

Finland shared three common characteristics: 1) they were reluctant to participate in class discussion; 2) they were always well prepared for tests, and 3) once they felt secure about their verbal abilities in English they tended to become more involved in discussions near the end of the school year. David Bradley, an American teacher who taught in Finland in the early 1960's, describes in his book *Lion Among Roses* the frustration of opening day as he attempts to draw his Finnish students into conversation. His description of his students' response is peppered with "no response"... "further questions brought no more than monosyllabic answers. Yet there was no hostility in these faces...or anything I could be sure of, save a kind of uneasiness which reddened into blushes if I looked too long at any one person.

Having retreated to the teachers lounge he is greeted by a fellow teacher, a veteran of the Finnish system.

"Hello, chum. You look stricken. Been working?"

"I've had a three hour monologue with myself."

"It shakes you, doesn't it?" He smiled. "But this is normal," he said. "Even the native teachers fare no better...." As we picked up our books for another class he gave me a good tip: "Remember, you can't assume nothing goes in. You will be surprised. Even though a Finn would rather die than speak, months later out will come something on the examination paper that is absolutely perfect. So...it is worth having a go at it." (pp. 42, 45)

This is what I expected to witness in the Finnish schools because of my experience with Finnish students in the States and because I had read *Lion Among Roses*. But that is not what happened among "native teachers." At the Sibelius High School of Music and Dance, I was invited by my host to visit her class of English language students aged 14, 15 and 16. The students were somewhat reticent, as I had expected, but soon the children were engaged in a full blown discussion concerning the attributes of Finnish and American schools. The shyness melted away and I had a very rewarding experience.

Upon my return to the teachers' room I conversed with teachers from the various school disciplines and satisfied a question that had intrigued me from the start of my visit to Finland. Throughout my travels, I had noticed an abundance of students wandering about the streets of the various towns and cities that I randomly visited. I learned that Finnish students are allowed to leave the school campus at any time that they are not required to attend class. In other words, the students are trusted to act with responsibility and with restraint. In the States during the educational reforms of the 1960's, students were allowed similar privileges under the "open campus" plan, which was supposed to lead to responsible student behavior. However, the vast majority of students appeared to abuse these privileges and thus the open campus concept declined in many parts of the nation. In general American students are required to remain on campus until the end of the school day.

The Finnish student day is also less structured than that of his American counterpart. Typically, the American public school student is confined to the school campus during the day, and every second must be accounted for. In the morning there is "home room," where general school attendance is taken. Attendance is also taken every class period, and again in study hall, where students are expected to work on their assignments. If a student wishes to go to another part of the building she must receive a "hall pass" which needs to be presented on arrival. If the student is late or takes longer to travel the expected route, she must explain why she is late.

My sense is that the students in the Finnish schools are not as closely supervised because there is a cultural expectation that the student is a responsible individual and will not abuse his rights. In short, to build a trust in society, you instill trust in the individual at an early age, by trusting him in day to day activities. In the U.S., there is a lot of discussion about how to build trust but very little responsibility is actually entrusted to the student and as a result the students feel that school is more like "jail." They resent the restrictions that are imposed on them by the school and by society at large. This sometimes results in a resentful school population which, when

it matures to adulthood takes out its resentment by voting against the school budgets that must be approved by the local electorate.

I am impressed with the quality of the school construction in Finland. The school that I visited was opened in 1901, the same year as the school in which I teach. I was particularly impressed with the music facilities. The electronic music facility was very up to date and on a par with what I have seen in the States.

It was very obvious that there was an easy interaction of teachers and students in the after school activities. As I wandered about I observed the orchestra in rehearsal and the chorus in action, and found the quality of the music to be extremely high for students of this age and level of experience. I was impressed with the obvious respect between teachers and students, and the hard work that produces an excellent classical education as well as a demanding training schedule in music which helps to form the basis of the world renowned music produced by Finland during this century.

Were there any blemishes upon the educational landscape that might marr the idyllic impression that enveloped me while I was in Finland? During my travels I came upon a journal that reprinted an article that was critical of literary and historical works that had questioned Finland's policies and relationships with its neighbors to the east. The gist of the article was that the policies were not totally honest and that those who tried to raise questions as to official explanations were subject to subtle pressures. I had been aware that a debate has ensued in Finland over whether censorship existed or whether there was just a reasonable recognition that their neighbor to the east and its interests must be recognized.

I polled a small number of teachers, recent graduates and authors on the issue and they generally agreed that in some quarters there was unease at how history was taught and interpreted. As a result, there were pressures brought about to "correct" or suggest alternatives to some historical explanations. Having learned this, admittedly from a very small and highly unscientific sample, I was disturbed. Upon reflection however, it is understandable that some in positions of power might be concerned with historical interpretation, consid-

ering the history of the century. History is always vulnerable to interpretation, and it is natural for those in power or aspiring to power to encourage interpretations that support particular positions or policies.

In the States there is a battle over a proposal for "History Standards" that would act as a guide for teachers, school boards and state board of education. Even here there are charges of political pressure and political agendas being put forth in the "Standards" as objective history. Thus the battle goes on.

The ultimate test for an educational system is what type of society it produces, how it evolves and whether it can withstand the trials and tribulations that it must face as history and fate unfold. If one takes a long view of Finnish education since 1917, then one can argue that the educational system has been very successful. Finland as a nation has had to surmount what appeared to be insurmountable odds in order to build the present society. And the schools have played a major role in creating a society that has wiped out illiteracy in its native language as well as in English and possibly in other languages as well. It has a high scientific base, an outstanding medical system, an enviable standard of living, a population that is well versed in international affairs and a society that is renowned for its music and architecture, to say nothing of its competitive sports program.

It is a society that has proven its "sisu" when history has required; it is a society that has evolved in an orderly and humane way – a society that takes care of the needy and is concerned about the environment. One has only to look around and this can be seen, felt and lived. Perhaps all this would not have been possible if the schools of Finland were not filled with dedicated teachers, earnest students and a citizenry that supports the educational system.