



education - and the politics that surround it - is on the minds of many Canadian families these days. As most parents and teachers will tell you, children are not the same as they were 20 years ago and this has become particularly apparent with the rise of certain childhood diseases and neurological and developmental disorders. It's a lot of pressure on education and it comes at a time when the world itself is changing fast: ecologically, economically, and socially. It is recognition of these very world changes that led the Finnish Ministry of Education, already considered one of the best in the world, to decide to give even *more* attention to education. They attribute their continual success to "the education system (uniform, basic education for the whole age group), highly competent teachers and the autonomy given to schools".

So, how does Canada compare in these and other areas? There is a lot that Canada is doing right, but there are a number of current trends in our education system that are cause for concern. To figure it out, I sat down with Chris Kelly, the former Superintendent/CEO of the City of Vancouver School Board who identified some key differences in the two countries' current mainstream systems. Mr. Kelly's long and extensive career in education includes numerous senior administrative positions within British Columbia school boards as well as co-founding the educational Dalai Lama Centre for Heart-Mind. I also called upon one of my favourite Canadian thought leaders in childhood development, Cris Rowan, an occupational therapist and author of *Virtual Child*.

### TWO-TIERS OF ACCESS MAY MEAN DOUBLE THE TROUBLE

As a transplant to Canada from America, there are many aspects of the Canadian system that I find baffling. One of the biggest is the lack of consistency across the provinces. For example, while homeschooling is legal in all of the Canadian provinces, B.C. has the most supportive home education laws in North America with parent-teachers even eligible for some provincial dollars. Seven of the provinces and territories allow faith-based schools (such as Catholic or Protestant schools) to be supported with tax money. Independent or private schools that meet certain criteria get up to 70% of the funding of a public school in Alberta, up to 50% in provinces like B.C., Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Quebec, while in Ontario, most independent schools are defined as private and receive *no* comparable funding. Then there are the Francophone schools which restrict access to only those students with a Francophone parent and are then provided with federal dollars not available to other public schools.

The variation in the educational opportunities for children leads many, including Mr. Kelly, to argue that Canada has a two-tiered system that offers better educational options to those that can pay for it. Others complain that it's more than just private versus public that provides a two-tiered system, but also the additional funding received by schools offering a French-language program. Mr. Kelly says that one of the reasons so many schools decide to offer a French immersion program, rather than, say, an art, science, nature-based or Spanish immersion emphasis, is because of the additional federal funding for schools offering French. There is often an unintended cost: "One of

the challenges of the Francophone systems outside of Quebec is that it has not been as prone to professional development, and therefore current and enhanced pedagogy, as non-Francophone systems," says Mr. Kelly. He realized this himself when his own child started school. He put her in a French immersion program "to be with her peers," but then pulled her out when he realized that he expected more from the teachers than he was going to get in that program.

These are areas where Canada seems to be in stark contrast to Finland which has common aspirations that are defined and standardized, expects all schools to perform at a similarly high level, is *free* from daycare through adult continuing education and doesn't have a separate fee-based option when the public one fails.

### VALUING TEACHERS – AND SCHOOLS – MEANS MORE AUTONOMY, NOT MORE MONEY

At the crux of the 2014/2015 B.C. teachers' strike was *who* gets to decide how many and what types of learners are in a classroom: the B.C. Teachers Federation or the government? The answer: the government does. There have been similar actions in many provinces. In almost all of these debates, especially in B.C., teachers seem almost entirely absent from any real input into the conversation. It seems intuitive that the answers to the questions "Who gets to decide how many students?", "What kind of learning needs can teachers handle?" and "What does great teaching look like?" should include teachers. Indeed, this is one of the aspects that Finland says has been crucial to their success.

What happened in Canada that gave teachers so little input? Ironically, part of the answer may lie in the teachers' unions themselves. Mr. Kelly suggests that the resources and influence possessed by unions have hindered public systems' resilience and ability to "resourcefully and operationally really honour its full mandate", though he acknowledges, "A union is an essential force in a democratic society." Perhaps the larger issue is not the unions, *per se*, but the confrontational attitude between the government and the unions and a lack of value for teachers.

Finland, on the other hand, though having some of the strongest unions in the world, has prioritized education, and thus their teachers, making teaching a high-status profession with good pay and a lot of built-in autonomy, and boasting a cooperative

(not top-down) approach to curriculum development and accountability. The teachers, their unions and the government have *not* been involved in political stand-offs, but operate together to create a system that works.

The lack of autonomy isn't just at the level of teachers. In Canada, many provinces also give very little autonomy to their individual schools. This is certainly the case in B.C., according to Mr. Kelly, where individual school districts have flexibility over less than 8% of their operating budgets. But this issue, as well as the overall quality of educational systems, has little to do with money alone. Finland actually spends less per capita on educating their school children than Canada does. Indeed, Canada spends more on primary, secondary and

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higher education than just about any other G-7 country. In other words, our system is relatively expensive, yet, based on the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), we consistently fall behind Finland (although we did far better than the U.S., which spends even more than we do on educating primary age students).

A Pearson report, *The Learning Curve*, commissioned by The Economist Intelligence Unit, says that if one thing seems to be an indicator in determining the success of an educational system – more than money, class size or any other single input – it is having good teachers. It's interesting to note that the survey found it very hard to define what, exactly, makes a good teacher. They do say that it seems to have less to do with the money thrown at the system or the salary and a lot more to do with things like respect, autonomy, and other forms of cultural support for the role of the teacher.

### THE DANGEROUS GAME OF MORE TECHNOLOGY AND LESS PLAY IN SCHOOLS

Cris Rowan is the expert that I typically turn to for information regarding children and play. She started her career as an occupational therapist in the schools and

saw, first-hand, the phenomenal rise in learning disabilities. "Twenty-five years ago I had a very limited caseload," and it was confined to kids with head injuries and other "concrete" disabilities. "About 15 years ago, my caseload skyrocketed and I began to see kids with a lot of fine motor and gross motor skill issues, ADHD..." It is clear to her that increased screen use and lack of free play correlate with the issues that she is seeing. She describes 21st century children as "plagued" with health concerns such as developmental delays, obesity, mental illness, illiteracy and even porn addiction. "To what extent are these child health issues related to technology overuse, and what is going to happen if parents and health and education professionals continue to ignore the warning signs that children are simply

using too much technology?" Rowan asks.

Active and free play is both therapeutic and necessary to education. In fact, the research suggests that active, physical play helps kids develop key abilities such as spatial concepts without which kids will never understand math; outdoor time can be as effective as drugs for ADHD; and imaginative free play helps develop executive function – a greater determiner of school and future success than a child's IQ.

Rowan is bewildered. "I was at a school recently that had their playground cordoned off with yellow caution tape, but they had just bought a whole new block of computers." Yet, there is very little research into the effectiveness or safety of using technology in the classroom, especially at the younger ages. In fact, there is a great deal of research to suggest that technology use before grade three may have more harm than benefit. "So many things are about benefit versus risk. It doesn't mean that you have to throw it all out, but it has to be clear: what is the benefit?" says Ms. Rowan. "Waldorf is the only education system that is acting cautiously." While other schools catch up, she encourages parents to examine the issues: everything from EMF radiation in a classroom to the effects of being sedentary.

### IS AN EARLY START REALLY GETTING AHEAD?

Perhaps the rush to enrol our young children in full-time school is an unintended consequence of paying some of the highest rates for childcare anywhere in the world. When I moved to Canada, I was surprised to learn that in some provinces children are encouraged to enter full-time Kindergarten as early as four-and-a-half-years-old. Compare this to Finland which starts full-time compulsory education in grade one, when children are seven years of age. Numerous experts – the likes of Malcolm Gladwell and University of California researchers Kathy Bedard and Elizabeth Dhuey – have found that children who are among the oldest in their class have a competitive advantage over their younger classmates. Malcolm Gladwell proved this with hockey players. Bedard and Dhuey recently showed that older classmates scored higher on math and science tests in grade school all the way through high school and were more likely to enrol in college or university than their younger classmates.

This idea of pushing children into grades based on age, rather than developmental level, is perhaps the biggest mistake we are making says Ms. Rowan. "We can no longer talk about age appropriateness. The gap is huge now. You can have a four-and-a-half-year-old that functions like a one-year-old. That kid isn't ready to go to school."

Couple delayed development with the lack of physical activity and you have a problem that can be further exacerbated when you send an already over-sedentary child into a typical classroom setting. "We are seeing that when kids are in a preschool focused on movement, they are far more ready to enter Kindergarten." Kids should be getting at least an hour of vigorous activity a day from ages 5 to 18 according to The Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines for Children and Youth. They found that even kids supposedly getting one hour of active play are only actually participating in truly vigorous play – think a game of chase – for about *nine minutes*. And then they need to be active – think biking, walking, and swinging – for another two hours.

### IS THERE HOPE?

Mr. Kelly made an important point: stories in the Canadian media about our schools are usually negative and don't capture how much great education is actually happening in this country. He spoke optimistically

### AT-A-GLANCE COMPARISON BETWEEN FINLAND'S AND CANADA'S EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Finland – already ranked as one of the best educational systems in the world – is undertaking comprehensive educational reforms. "Why improve the system that has been ranked as top quality in the world?" Irmeli Halinen, the Finnish National Board of Education's head of curriculum development, asks this of herself in a video posted to their website. She answers, "Because the world is changing around the school... globalization, development of technology and...challenges of sustainability. All of them are influencing the...environment of our children and also influencing the schools... There must be changes in schools too." These changes will primarily be curricular in nature – a big deal in a system that has no standardized testing and instead relies on curricula developed in an "open, interactive, and cooperative process". The new curriculum will increase emphasis on collaborative work and interaction, active learning, and positive emotional experiences. Their curriculum continues to include regular and rigorous feedback from teachers.

#### a few other facts to consider:

- Although both Finland and Canada, in 2011, spent approximately the same amount on education per student relative to overall spending – 24% per pupil as percentage of GDP per capita – Canada ranked 15th in overall educational achievement, versus Finland's 4th.
- In Finland, compulsory education does not begin until age 7; in Canada it varies from age 5 to 6. At the age of 16, Finnish students may choose to continue their secondary education (usually three years) on an academic track or a vocational track.
- The Finnish system does not track students, even those with special needs, but works to meet their needs within the classroom or by special instruction within the local school. The Canadian system tracks students in multiple ways, including French/Francophone/English schools and private versus public schools.
- Finland prioritizes having schools nearby to homes and provides free transportation for students in rural areas. Throughout Canada, the availability of free transportation varies tremendously by province and type of school.

Watch the completely refreshing video statement by Irmeli Halinen here: [www.oph.fi/english/education\\_development/current\\_reforms/curriculum\\_reform\\_2016](http://www.oph.fi/english/education_development/current_reforms/curriculum_reform_2016)

about a sort of grassroots effort amongst parents, students, and teachers to persist in instilling education with their values. Ms. Rowan pointed to the growing movement of outdoor schools as one such hopeful example.

Creating great schools may not be rocket science, but it sure seems to be an art. *The Learning Curve* report says that "Education remains very much a black box in which inputs are turned into outputs in ways that are difficult to predict or quantify consistently." So while they don't have a prescription for success, they do have five understandings they offer for education policymakers:

1. There are no magic bullets
2. Respect teachers

3. Culture can be changed
4. Parents are neither impediments to nor saviours of education
5. Educate for the future, not just the present

Mr. Kelly, like the Finnish curriculum minister, says that access to a *quality* education for *all* students amounts to a human rights issue. As Canadians, the question, then, is whether we are prepared to do the hard work to make it so. ●

<http://thelearningcurve.pearson.com>  
<http://www.csep.ca>  
 Virtual Child by Cris Rowan