

THE DIGITAL LITERACY AND MULTIMODAL PRACTICES OF YOUNG CHILDREN

[DigiLitEY]

SHORT TERM SCIENTIFIC MISSION

FINAL REPORT



SUMMARY

The aim of this STSM was to know, observe and discuss trends about the development of educational systems bearing in mind the Finnish Educational System and understand how digital literacies are included in educational policies.

DETAILS

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STSM Topic: Learning the future of learning: collaboration in the European space
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1. PURPOSE OF THE STSM

Curious about the reality of Finnish schools I could observe some of the ideas I had about pedagogical thinking, culture and ways of understanding education. In this scientific mission I had three main purposes: i) to increase my network of contacts by discussing and sharing ideas about digital literacy and multimodal practices related to the school of the future; ii) to collect random data that would allow me to understand the philosophy and educational system of Finland, helping me to prepare the next activities of my research project; iii) to know one of the schools recognized by educational innovation and classified by PISA as one of the best. After this journey, I think that the objectives have been achieved.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK CARRIED OUT DURING THE STSM

Through this journey it was possible to expand my ideas and perspectives about educational changes and gather a comprehensive set of data for the approach (learning) of the school of the future. In consideration of the brief number of days in this visit, a set of data was collected to support the activities of my research project. During the visit I have been writing a logbook containing: i) people and contacts made; ii) personal perceptions about Finnish education and culture; iii) description of the organization of educational spaces and ways of being; iv) observations on ways of learning and teaching; v) readings and observations on digital literacies and multimodal practices in primary education; vi) and, advantages and constraints. All data was collected during visits to the Playful Learning Center, Department of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki; in the Helsinki University Library; and in the Saunalahti School in the municipality of Espoo. During this trip and being relatively close, I also visited the Vittra Telefonplan School, in Sweden, although it was for brief moments.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE MAIN RESULTS OBTAINED

“A child is not brought up so that he can be as pleasant and effortless for us as can be, but so that he can be healthy and strong to fill in his future place in the world and discover himself.”

I found the citation above in the Saunalahti School brochure, this is from Maria Jotuni, an important Finnish writer. The reading of these words transported me, immediately, to the confirmation of what I could observe in this special school: respect for the individuality of each one; dedication and concern for the development, well-being and health of children and young people; sense of community; and “love and limits”.

The results obtained in this scientific mission were structured in three points, which are presented below: i) The City and the University of Helsinki – Reflections about Education and Culture; ii) The Finnish Education System; iii) Views about Saunalahti School.

i) The City and the University of Helsinki – Reflections about Education and Culture

Finland has enjoyed great notoriety in education issues, at European level, followed by the principles of equality in education, high qualification of teachers preparing them for a transversal and distinct pedagogical thinking and a constant (re)thinking about the national curriculum and skills that will be necessary for life in this digital world.

A country with 467 years, a capital with 200 years, an University the largest and oldest of Finland and one of the oldest of Europe. Bordered by several countries – Estonia, Russia, Sweden and Norway – we could recognize architectural influences with unique design details and cultural influences in the style of live of Nordic people. Very focused on nature and well-being, we constantly find the motto of quality of life and well-being, giving special attention to the children and their education, considered primordial in the growth and development of any citizen of the world. A very organized and safe city, designed for people, especially children and pedestrians.

The [University of Helsinki](#) and especially the [Faculty of Educational Sciences](#), that received me warmly during this mission, inspires creativity through the workspaces offered to its students and visitors and by the multifunctionality, adapting to the circumstances and needs (Figure 1). The same energy, creativity and informality I found in the [University Library](#).



Figure 1 – Workspaces at the Minerva building, Faculty of Educational Sciences.

This commitment and care with the spaces available for the study, discussion and elaboration of work by its students is evidence of the effort to promote new teaching methods that are based on the students

capacity for initiative and collaborative work in the demand of “solutions for global challenges and creates news ways for thinking for the best of humanity”.

Innovative projects are promoted and encouraged, for example, during the month of March the [Helsinki Challenge](#) event takes place, is a science based competition and an idea accelerator between ten Finnish Universities. They want, together, create solutions for the future well-being though a platform for collaboration in several knowledge areas. In this challenge there are a group of researchers, [Team Dlearn.Helsinki](#), which proposes to develop a solution based on pedagogical tools and practices for schools because they have found a gap between the curriculum and the interests of the students.

Although we see Finland as an example to follow, we also recognize that there are similar problems to those existing in Portuguese educational contexts, but they look at differently and facing an attitude of improving people’s lives.

I also had the privilege of knowing the [Playful Learning Center](#) and the work developed, having participated in a presentation session led by the researcher Heidi Sairanen, together with a group of Scottish teachers. As it is mentioned in its official webpage, “the Playful learning Center is an ecosystem for research, development and educational practices. It connects academy, educational and cultural institutions and industry to accelerate 21st learning”. In this space, aimed at children from 0 to 8 years, several researches are developed exploring concepts of learning, multimodal practices, digital literacy, involvement and motivation. This space is frequented by students in training for teachers, researchers interested in this subject and curious visitors for new pedagogies and perspectives, such as myself. A space of the children’s imaginary, idealizes for and with them, which seeks to explore, discuss and reflect on new solutions to 21st century education (Figure 2).



Figure 2 – The Playful Learning Center.

ii) The Finnish Education System

The Finnish Education System comprises five levels of education: early childhood education and care, basic education, upper secondary education and training, higher education and adult education. The focus of this scientific mission was in the early childhood and basic education, so I will only focus it on this report.

Early childhood education and care are optional and non-compulsory. The participation in some day-care centers is subject to a fee which depends on family income and number of children. The motto in this level is “learning through play is essential” ([Finnish National Agency for Education](#)). Compulsory basic education consists of a nine year educational program for all children in school-age, beginning at age seven and up to sixteen. The basic education is completely free and “the objective (...) is to support pupils’ growth towards humanity and ethically responsible membership of society and to provide them with the knowledge and skills needed in life” ([Finnish National Agency for Education](#)). Between these two levels, in August 2015, the compulsory attendance of pre-primary education was instituted, being able to take place in day-care centers or schools. It is part of the program early childhood education and care. As mentioned in the website of the Finnish National Agency for Education, “providing a place in pre-primary education free of charge for all children is a statutory duty for municipalities”. The responsibility of the Government, specifically of the [Ministry of Education and Culture](#) is provided a [National Core Curriculum for Basic Education](#), follow by all schools. The local education authorities, municipalities and schools themselves assume the responsibility by the local curricula. The municipality of Espoo gave priority to education and made a large investment building the [Saunalahti School](#), which started its activity in August 2012. “It is the first multipurpose school building in Espoo integrating full day-care center, school, public library, youth center and many activities after schooldays” (Saunalahti School Brochure). They had specifically policy definitions display in the “[Espoo Local Development Plan for Education 2020](#)”, ambition that its residents can “grow to carry out ecological, social, cultural and economic sustainable development in their daily lives”.

The new curriculum for compulsory basic education was implemented in all schools as August 2016. As we can read in the website of the Finnish National Agency for Education, “some of the key goals of the reform include enhancing pupil participation, increasing the meaningfulness of study and making it possible for each and every pupil to experience success. Children and youths are guided in assuming more responsibility for their schoolwork, but, in accordance with this, also given more support in their studies. The pupils set goals, solve problems and assess their learning based on set targets. The pupils’ experiences, feelings, areas of interest and interaction with others lay the foundation for learning. The teacher’s task is to instruct and guide the pupils into becoming lifelong learners, by taking the individual learning approaches of each pupil into consideration.”, and they are not just words, in the visits that I did and based on what I observed this is really a concern.

Children usually go to the school closest to their homes although they can choose another if they wish. They go alone or with friends or relatives to school, from young age (Figure 3), without the accompaniment of parents, something that in Portugal begins to happen less and less. There is no need to worry about choosing the best school, as one teacher told me: “All are good”.

Taking into consideration the climate in the Nordic countries, the school calendar differs a little bit from what is practiced in Portugal. The school year begins in mid-August and ends in early June. The state establishes the number of days of school holidays and schools have the autonomy to determine the specific dates, so it is normal to have some differences from school to school and from city to city, even differences between levels of education.



Figure 3 – Children returning home, in the city of Helsinki.

Education is free as well as meals. Outdoor activities are advised, as one teacher told me:

“Every day we go out, there’s snow, cold or rain, even parents get upset if they do not”. And it was obvious I found several groups of children accompanied by teachers in activities on the street, in the bus, in the park (Figure 4). Extra activities as visits to museums or businesses also advised, for this transportation for children is free. In addition, all public transport is free for children including those who accompany them (father or mother) if you are a baby or ride a stroller. Books and other school supplies are free. Finland makes a very great investment in education and the well-being of children and parents. They encourage birth and quality of life.



Figure 4 – Children in outdoor activities (left – in the center of the city of Helsinki; in the middle – in the bus to some location; right – in the park of the Saunalahti School).

iii) Views about Saunalahti School

“In Saunalahti School every child is unique”

Saunalahti, as mentioned above, is the result of investment by the municipality of Espoo and is undoubtedly a special school. During my privileged visit, I was able to witness the true meaning of Finnish culture and pedagogical thinking. Guided by six basic principles: child centered teaching; integrity and fairness; diversity and equality; sustainability; sense of community; and, holistic wellness (we can see more about [here](#)), the organization of the educational spaces invites us to informality and social interaction.

The entrance to the school directs us to a big hall, an open space that promotes diverse activities and learning, meal zone at lunch and sitting area at other moments. In this space, stands out a Finnish word

written on the top of the balcony: *kiitollisuus*. It means gratitude. What school has *kiitollisuus* written in the wall? I saw a message to all and I see this space as the heart of Saunalahti.



Figure 5 – Hall in the Saunalahti School.

Basic education still divided in traditional subjects but focus on the development of student's competencies and autonomy, they work on transversality and applicability of knowledge and not in the assimilation of curricular content that will later be measured by tests. There isn't such pressure on children and families. The evaluation exists but accomplish differently. Students are autonomous in their learning and self-assessment, they present their ideas to colleague, they discuss and learn together and teacher gives his option and guide learning. Each child has a tutor accompanying their progress. The evaluation is done to projects that are being worked on. There are no tests or homework. A teacher knows at what level the student is. As one teacher told me, "The teacher knows what level the student is in. It is something we know, we feel. It is part of our training and our pedagogical thinking".

The distribution of lesson hours for basic education, 45 minutes, are made between different subjects as mother tongue and literature, mathematics, environmental studies, religion/ethics, history and social studies, music, visual arts, crafts, physical education, artistic and practical elective subjects and guidance counselling.

They develop competences for the 21st century as autonomy, responsibility, communication, a sense of community and respect for the other, critical thinking and individuality, behaviors and attitudes essential for citizenship education and, in my personal opinion, contents and competences superficially addressed in Portuguese schools. They stimulate independence and break with passivity. For example, I observed that after finishing the task, children could choose what to do (read a book, a comic book, draw or paint) as long as they did not disturb colleagues who were still finishing their work (Figure 6).



Figure 6 – Evidences of individuality and respect for the other.

Classrooms are multifunctional and very different from the traditional classrooms. They have sofas, carpets, blackboard, whiteboard and interactive whiteboards, robotic material, adjustable tables, musical instruments like piano and a variety of materials (Figure 7).



Figure 7 – Classroom in the Saunalahti School.

The furniture itself is designed for this different methodology and the way it (re)organizes itself. And, of course, a very Nordic custom: everyone walks in socks or slippers (shoes just inside the school). The “hard clothes” are taken at the entrance to the school and placed in the appropriate place (Figure 8).



Figure 8 – Suitable place to leave coats and boots.

The main features of Finnish education are defined by methodologies directed to learning by projects developed by students in search of knowledge: problem-based learning and project-based learning. Students learn from practices and search for solutions. Teachers do more tutoring and not teaching. The

teacher mediates in class planning and providing guidelines to the students, following the work they are developing. The computers exist and are available for use whenever they need it, but they are not central in this process, although in the new curricula we found some lines and directions encouraging this integration taking into account the current context of (digital) society. However, my question remained: what is the level of IT competences in Finnish students? Are these children proficient in the use of technologies, digital natives as suggested Mark Prensky? Or there is the same problem that exist in Portugal, the myth that children and young people today know more about computers than their teachers?

Finnish teachers have a duty to fulfill their role fully, everyone works for the same cause, the education and well-being of children. To do that “teachers need good knowledge about special needs of children; that means lifelong for each teacher” (Saunalahti School Brochure). The school has a nurse who is present three day per week, responsible for make the healthy checks of all children; and a psychologist and a sociologist twice a week.

Study those who wish to study. When I asked if the children liked the school, I got the same answer to the one found in Portugal: “there are children who like and other who do not like”. The children have different needs, interests and desires and as said Andreas Schleicher (2017) “learning is not a place, learning is an activity” that we must make it motivated and interesting.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Finnish education teaches that the school should teach the pupil something far more important than knowledge: it must teach the pupil to lead an independent life in the future, to build his own future. They teach to think and to acquire knowledge on their own. Teachers do not have to teach the subjects because everything is written in didactic materials and books, in digital educational resources or on the internet. It is not important to memorize knowledge and to obtain “diplomas” that certify our knowledge, but it is necessary to know how to find it and use it. One of the dreams of the Saunalahti School teaching team when students leave school is: “... he is able to find his place in the world”.

During this scientific mission I had opposite feelings of happiness and sadness: happiness, to realize that there are other possibilities in the search for better life and better education for our children; and sadness, to think that in Portugal there is a similar school, the [Escola da Ponte](#) founded in 1976 giving continuity to its Project “Fazer a ponte” (Make the bridge), but which is not yet strong enough to influence the political, social and economic mentalities and educational policies in favor of a change adjusted to the contemporary society.

Through this learning trip I could expand my view on the educational changes in schools and learn about actual developments in the Finnish educational system and understand how there are trying digital literacies and multimodal practices in national and local educational policies. A mission to gather new contacts in the European context, collect and share ideas, knowledge and experiences.

4. FUTURE COLLABORATION WITH THE HOST INSTITUTION

This journey gave me a set of ideas and approaches to take into account in the reflection about digital literacies and multimodal practices and in the discussion about the school of the future. There are certain specificities that we find in different cultures from ours and that enrich our personal and professional live. This was undoubtedly one of them.

The next step is to develop a more complex discussion about the potential of new scenarios for the development of new ways of thinking and learning, preparing children and young people for the challenges of the digital society,

I hope to gather these contacts in a focus group for my research project, in order to collaborate in the discussion about children, school of the future (education), technology and competencies for the 21st century.

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7. OTHER READINGS

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