

Information about why Finns were the best readers in the world in the PISA 2000 study, from the Finnish National Board of Education

<http://www.oph.fi/english/pageLast.asp?path=447,488,36263,36268>

Literacy in Finland

According to the PISA 2000 study Finns were the best readers in the world. Finland reaches this top performance on the strength of excellent reading skills among girls. The boys also proved to be the best readers in OECD countries, although in Finland the discrepancy between girls and boys is the largest in the countries participating in the study. Furthermore, as a result of remedial teaching in Finland the number of pupils performing poorly was lower than in the other OECD countries.

Finland has worked for the promotion of reading skills throughout the 1990s. Although it is known that the level of literacy in Finland is very high, steps to improve reading skills have been taken and the learning results have been evaluated on a national level.

* Since the mid-1990s the educational branches of administration have prioritized the promotion of reading skills. A 1995 evaluation, *Does Basic Education Create Equality*, carried out by the Finnish National Board of Education, indicated that reading skills among eighth graders were in decline. The steps taken to rectify the situation included, for example, The Project to Re-establish School Libraries, The Year of Reading Skills 1997, and the priority project Reading Finland 2001-2004. It is deemed important that the literacy performance among Finns remains high, and any alarming signs have been tackled quickly.

* Since 1996 the decrease of results in the Matriculation Examination of mother tongue has been widely and publicly reported and mother tongue skills have received serious interest.

* Parties participating in the effort to promote reading skills include The Finnish Newspapers

Association, The Finnish Periodical Publisher's Association, The Teachers of Finnish Association, The Finnish Library Association and some individual libraries, The School Library Association in Finland, The Finnish Book Foundation and certain representatives of publishing houses.

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Background for Finnish PISA success

Why did Finland do so well in PISA? Some explanations are found in the main principles for comprehensive education in Finland:

- * Equal opportunities for education irrespective of domicile, sex, economic situation or mother tongue
- * Regional accessibility of education
- * No separation of sexes
- * Education totally free of charge
- * Comprehensive, non-selective basic education
- * Supportive and flexible administration - centralised steering of the whole, local implementation
- * Interactive, co-operative way of working at all levels; idea of partnership
- * Individual support for learning and welfare of pupils
- * Development-oriented evaluation and pupil assessment - no testing, no ranking lists
- * Highly qualified, autonomous teachers
- * Socio-constructivist learning conception

For more information about the Finnish PISA results, please have a look at the press release of the Ministry of Education.

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Factors behind the good literacy performance of the Finnish youth

Social structures that support reading

- * high esteem of reading in Finnish culture (homes subscribe to newspapers, parents read for their children at home); literacy as the basis for further learning is widely accepted; constructive role of the news media in creating good publicity for the promotion of reading and writing

- * large and dense network of public (municipal) libraries; modern equipment, good collections and quality supply for the whole family (newspapers, books, on-line-links); library staff eager to promote literacy in co-operation with schools ("books-worth-reading" counselling, new titles recommendations etc.)

- * the social status of mothers as an important role-model for girls: high educational attainment of Finnish women; salaried work outside home; women read more than men

- * the ample supply of foreign films on television provided with Finnish sub-titles instead of dubbing; while watching television, children read, developing a quick reading routine

- * net surfing, text messages and role games have increased reading and writing as a leisure habit of the young (although it has decreased the reading of books)

Factors pertaining to instruction and the Finnish language

- * the "shallow orthography" of the Finnish language ("what you say is what you write") gives extra advantage in the initial phase of learning to read

- * the national core curriculum stresses the strategic skills of reading and writing; free choice of methods; supportive assessment of pupils

- * wide choice of learning materials; the teachers are free to choose the materials they want to use

- * pupils are involved in choosing the reading material used in instruction; youth literature, magazines, media texts

- * small number of immigrants in Finland; children usually learn to read in their own mother tongue (including our Swedish-speaking minority)

* schools and teachers are involved with campaigns
to promote reading as a pastime

* long-term collaboration with libraries,
newspapers and magazines

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