



Happiness is a place between too little and too much

BY DANNY DORLING AND ANNIKA KOLJONEN

School meals are never termed “free” in Finland; they are simply called “lunch”. Alongside Sweden; Finland is one of the very few countries in the world to provide free school meals to all school students from the very beginning of their childhood education until they leave school. Provision to do this was written into Finnish law in 1943 and fully implemented by 1948.

Finland in the 1940s was one of the

poorest countries in Europe and had been poor for centuries; but it was by then on a path towards growing social solidarity and the feeding of its children was a part of that. The school meals provision has remained universal ever since. It is hardly remarked upon now – because it is simply sensible. But this is just one of many ways in which this small European country is now considered to excel.

In Finland, just as pupils expect to be provided with a chair and a table to work at, so they and their parents expect there to be food at school as well. It is, of course, almost always more efficient to provide food communally; and not just in term-time.

During the summer holidays, play-schemes in Helsinki provide free noon-time meals for all children under the age of 16. This ensures that none go hungry and also that children can eat together and be treated similarly. Why would you want to stigmatize some children, singling them out to receive food for free? This particular Finnish tradition stretches back to what were originally called playground meals. And they date back to 1942 when wartime food shortages affected the majority of inhabitants of the nation’s capital.

What began out of necessity slowly became embedded as the norm. Now that three or four generations of Finns have always been fed well at school, it



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would be unimaginable to take this provision away. In other countries in Europe the argument against providing free school meals for all is the apparent cost to the 'tax-payer'. The argument against providing meals paid for by the state is often part of a wider argument that the better-off in society need to or deserve to pay less tax.

It is true that some other countries in Europe began to provide free meals for some children earlier than 1942; but almost all these countries still fail to do so universally today. In the UK it is only universal for children in 'reception' and school years 1 and 2. Only about half of the children living in relative poverty are so poor that they are also eligible for free school meals in the UK. They are provided to 17% of pupils in England and Scotland, 20% in Wales and 28% in Northern Ireland; those from the lowest-income of all families. In the UK children whose parents receive what is called 'universal credit' (welfare

benefits) are not eligible for free school meals unless their annual post-tax non-benefit income is also less than £7,500, except in Northern Ireland where the cap is £14,000. This included not being eligible for food vouchers provided by the state when schools were shut during the pandemic of 2020, or in school holidays.

Children in Finland in 2020 will neither go hungry nor feel stigmatized because of the low pay of their parents. The same cannot be said in many others parts of Europe, which is still the world's richest continent. However, attitudes across Europe are slowly changing towards better appreciating what Finland has achieved, and this is not just when it comes to school meals but in many areas of life.

The experience of the pandemic might well lead to more change across Europe in some of the directions which Finland embarked on decades ago, but there is opposition to this. There are still a few on the right-wing of politics who at times appear to verge towards the old adage – that hunger is more effective than the overseer's whip – with the unspoken threat to the less well-off of their or their children's hunger or homelessness to try to ensure that they take any inadequately paid job on offer; or do work they hate because the consequences for their children are too hard to bare.

An examination of the labour market in Finland reveals that it has the most family friendly arrangements in Europe for flexible working hours. This applies not simply to those who have the most qualification, but also to Finns who leave school with the least qualifications. Comparing the least-skilled, lowest-paid in every country in Europe, the Finns have the most flexibility in when they are required to work. Everyone has greater freedom in Finland.

Finland provides lessons not just for other countries in Europe but also for elsewhere in the world, especially in the affluent world where resources are often greater than in Finland. In the USA, means-tested free school lunches are available to a third of 5–17 year-olds, those who come from families living at or below 130% of the American poverty line. The poverty line is set so low in the USA, many children above it would still be malnourished if they were not fed at school, hence the considerably higher cap. A child whose family have an income a quarter above the official poverty line still qualifies. In addition, a fifth of children in the US also receive a free breakfast at school.

Table 5.1: People who said they were happy most of the time in Europe, 2018

% OF ALL PEOPLE AGED 16 AND OVER	RANKED:	HIGHEST EDUCATION LEVEL ATTAINED			
		All People	Lower (0-2)	Medium (3-4)	Higher (5-8)
FINLAND	63.6	58.4	64.1	68.4	
AUSTRIA	61.5	51.0	62.5	66.7	
NETHERLANDS	60.9	52.5	62.4	65.1	
SWITZERLAND	60.7	48.7	61.3	65.3	
BELGIUM	59.2	51.0	57.1	68.2	
LUXEMBOURG	59.0	52.2	59.5	66.6	
GERMANY	58.1	51.8	58.8	61.2	
MALTA	56.1	49.6	62.0	65.4	
DENMARK	55.7	50.1	55.8	59.1	
NORWAY	53.2	49.7	55.0	54.3	
FRANCE	52.2	43.7	52.0	60.6	
POLAND	51.9	42.6	52.1	57.3	
SWEDEN	51.8	47.2	54.6	52.8	
SLOVENIA	48.8	37.2	47.6	57.9	
AV.	48.4	39.5	50.2	55.4	
HUNGARY	48.1	36.2	48.7	58.7	
CYPRUS	45.9	37.8	46.5	52.0	
CZECHIA	44.8	39.0	43.1	53.7	
ESTONIA	44.3	33.1	41.9	52.4	
SPAIN	43.0	40.4	43.9	46.4	
ROMANIA	41.7	33.8	43.8	51.2	
PORTUGAL	40.7	34.2	48.2	54.8	
SERBIA	40.6	32.2	42.1	48.5	
LITHUANIA	37.3	27.8	33.4	47.1	
GREECE	36.5	31.1	38.3	41.6	
CROATIA	36.5	26.3	38.7	44.6	
ITALY	32.7	28.8	35.5	37.9	
BULGARIA	27.9	17.5	28.2	39.4	
LATVIA	26.6	22.3	23.5	34.6	

Note: Data missing for Iceland, Ireland, Slovenia, and the UK. Lower is "Less than primary, primary and lower secondary education (levels 0-2)", Higher is "Tertiary education (levels 5-8)", usually degree level.

Source: Eurostat (2019) Frequency of being happy in the last 4 weeks by age, sex and educational attainment level [ilc_pw08], 25 October, http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=ilc_pw08&lang=en

Within the USA policies between different states vary, and New York City public schools have provided free lunch since 2017 for all children, 75% of whom would in any case have qualified because of the very high rates of child poverty in New York. Thus New York in 2017 has achieved what Finland achieved 74 years earlier; what Finland achieved in wartime was similarly achieved at a time of desperation in New York due to the extent of child poverty there. When New York closed its schools in the autumn of 2020 during the pandemic children were at an increased risk of going hungry.

In countries that have not achieved universal provision of goods such as school meals, health care or education, it is often suggested that a combination of private provision and the means-testing of benefits achieves the most efficient allocation of resources. The strongest counter argument to this is that the overall outcome of providing universal services is so good, and has so many wider benefits, that it is foolish not to follow the route taken by Finland given the long term results.

In health Finland now has one of the lowest infant and child mortality rates in the world. This is not because of feeding children for free at school today, but is the aggregate effect of all Finnish social policies over many decades, of which school meals are just one tiny element.

In education Finland ranks very highly for how well its children learn at school, for how happy they are, for how skilled they are, for how unlikely they are to later engage in crime and end up in prison and how likely they are to make positive contributions to their society and the world compared to the average European child.

In housing Finland is well known for having the lowest rates of homelessness in Europe. All is not a utopia in Finland and there are increasing complaints over



some of the costs of housing, especially in Helsinki. Nevertheless, many Finns also have access to a second home (free-time residence) in the countryside which they go primarily during the summer and other holidays. In much of Europe this would be viewed as a luxury only the wealthy could afford.

Given the overall success of Finland we should not be surprised when Finland repeatedly ranks the highest in the world for happiness. There is an old Finnish proverb – *Onnellisuus on se paikka puuttuvaisuuden ja yltäkyläisyyden välillä* – ‘Happiness is a place between too little and too much’. This goes some way to explaining both why people are more content with what they have in Finland than elsewhere and how the Finns went about achieving what they have achieved.

People are happier in Finland as compared to those living in other countries due to a myriad of small differences. Each difference on its own may not appear hugely significant, or only significant at a time when a particular policy is making the headlines, but taken overall these differences, and the effect they have on people, has now resulted in that country ranking first in the world happiness estimates three years in a row.

Finland has achieved one of the highest levels of income equality ever measured in the world and Finns are constantly wary of threats to that practically unparalleled gain in equality and the human rights that it enhances. That high level of equality means that schools with tuition fees are exceptionally rare. The few that do exist are often partly state-subsidized, and not educationally superior. The highest performing schools are all free. Regional differences in the quality of schools are very small.

The success of Finland’s education system followed the Basic Education Act passed in 1968. This overhauled a system in which grammar schools, most of which were privately owned and charged fees, were the only route to higher academic education. Arguments in favour of competition and selectivity in education were vociferous, but the reform was passed in parliament with 123 votes for and 68 votes against.

Many European countries became more equal in the 1950s and 1960s. Where Finland differs most is that its people managed to not only hold on to the gains they made then, but have also strengthened many of them since. Its small population and the need for economic growth facilitated reforms

and made it harder to accept systems that perpetuated inequality and inefficiency in employment, consumption, and productivity.

It has only been within the last decade that Finns have come to appreciate just what they have achieved, mainly through the increased release of comparative social statistics. For instance, in 2013 a report issued by the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicated that differences among schools in Finland accounted for only 7.7 per cent of variation in student performance, against an OECD average of 42 per cent.

Given how Finland now scores so highly, and that this is becoming more widely known, what is life in Finland like for an immigrant you might ask? Surely more and more people will want to travel to live in such a country as the message is spread? However, few immigrants to Finland will, for instance, speak, read, or write the language before arriving, which can be an impediment in educational and career opportunities as well as in social situations – despite so many Finns being multilingual. While it is true that some Finns are not especially welcoming to immigrants, when the UN measured the happiness of immigrants for the first time in a 2018 report, Finland scored the highest of any country being compared. However, immigrants in Finland were not as happy as the Finns themselves.

In affluent countries, immigrants usually tend to be more optimistic than the locals of their new country. But in Nordic countries, where people's well-being is generally so high, immigrants are relatively less happy. Whether in Finland this is because immigrants find it harder to fit into in a society that is so socially cohesive, or just in comparison to the happiness particularly of poorer Finns, is not yet known. Finland accepted 40% of asylum seekers applying to live there over the past 10 years. The current government pursues a pro-immigration policy with many practical measures because of the positive impact of immigration on Finland's economy. And, of course, any EU citizen has the right to live, work and study in Finland.

Finland is not Utopia and its people are well aware that there is much that could still be better. There is increasing activism and research on racism in Finland and on discrimination that is perpetuated through institutions and policies. A recent Non-Discrimination Ombudsman's report concerning people of African descent in Finland documented racialized guidance disproportionately encouraging girls to pursue careers in care services and an unnecessary concentration of particular ethnicities in classes for Finnish as a second language.

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ways to be found and further improvements to be made. Knowing that things are likely to get better, especially for the less well-off, is often more important than how the situation is today.

People will always worry, but we also need to be able to hope. Finland's recent history can give us all hope. On 20 March 2020 it was announced – for the third year in succession – that Finland was once again the happiest country in the world. The world happiness report in which this was declared included a chapter dedicated to the Nordic countries which concluded: "...there seems to be no secret sauce specific to Nordic happiness that is unavailable to others. There is rather a more general recipe for creating highly satisfied citizens: Ensure that state institutions are of high quality, non-corrupt, able to deliver what they promise, and generous in taking care of citizens in various adversities".

As we have tried to hint at in this article, Finland excels at much more than just happiness; the Nordic and in particular the Finnish model works well in practice across the board. It urgently needs to be made more widely available; but it is a recipe that requires slow cooking. Finland introduced school meals for all and food in holiday times a human lifetime ago; it was only much later that it reaped the multiple rewards of its approach. 

This article is based on the book 'Finntopia – what we can learn from the world's happiest country.' <http://www.dannydorling.org/finntopia/>



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