



# the Heart of the Matter

828.258.9264  
Fax: 828.258.3144  
online: [www.rmcs.org](http://www.rmcs.org)  
email: [info@rmcs.org](mailto:info@rmcs.org)  
574 Haywood Road  
Asheville, NC 28806

Volume VI: Issue 2

A publication by Renee Owen, Executive Director

March, 2013

## Rainbow Mountain— Asheville's *Finnish* Alternative?



Without equivocation, Rainbow Mountain Children's School is a unique learning environment. Everyone knows it the minute they step onto campus. Although Americans would find Rainbow's education very different compared to American prep schools and public schools, it is not at all unusual compared to Scandinavian schools. Erica DiMercurio, a young substitute teacher for Rainbow, just returned from an internship in Denmark, exclaiming, "I love Rainbow Mountain; It's so much like the Scandinavian Schools." This comment, and others like it, prompted me to research Scandinavian Schools. What is it that makes us so similar?

I was astonished to discover the similarities. I found that not all Scandinavian Schools are alike, of course, but they almost all perform higher than the United States on the PISA – the international standardized test comparing 15 year olds. In fact, even if you take one of the *very top schools* in the US, such as Palo Alto, students on average only rank at the 67<sup>th</sup> percentile compared to other developed nations! Using testing, graduation rates, and

other measures, the US merely ranks in the middle among other nations. Therefore, we have no intention of striving to imitate the American model at Rainbow. Rainbow Mountain doesn't have a high school, so we can't directly compare how our 15 year olds perform on the international PISA. However, we know that our 8<sup>th</sup> graders go on to be very successful in high school, and on the few standardized tests we do take, our 13 and 14 year olds perform at exceptionally high levels in all subjects, especially in Reading and Science. Finland, in recent years, has been the top nation in the world in every subject, so let's look at what Finland and Rainbow Mountain have in common.

## **Learning to Read**

In Finland, school doesn't even begin until the age of seven, and there is absolutely no pressure to learn reading before then. (This is also true in Singapore, which has no formal schooling before first grade, and other high scoring countries.) Finnish students attend daycares before the age of seven that emphasize social skills and play.

One of the features of Rainbow that requires a lot of faith from parents who are accustomed to the American model is an acceptance of our trajectory of learning to read. Although students at Rainbow receive phonics instruction in kindergarten and those who are ready do begin learning sight words and even reading simple books (some are reading at very high levels in kindergarten), we don't require students to read until they are really ready. One of the advantages of this approach is that students truly enjoy Reading and take to it like ducks on water when they are ready. At Rainbow, our reading scores reflect this – consistently averaging between 80th - 95th percentiles (compared with other US students) in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Such high reading scores by that age means that Rainbow students really comprehend what they are reading, and know how to *think*.

## **Play Time and Outdoor Time**

In Finland, students on the average have 45 minutes of recess time and they take a 15 minutes break about once an hour to play, and if possible, step outside. It isn't unusual for classes to be conducted outdoors, even in the winter. At Rainbow, both structured outdoor time and open play time are sacred aspects of our program. Younger children are required to keep raincoats and boots at school so they can venture outside every day, no matter the weather.

## **Teacher Quality and Development**

In Finland teachers are given the same level of professional respect as doctors, scientists, and the like. They are chosen from the top students in the country and all receive a master's degree before teaching. They continue to engage in development based on their needs as professionals and their personal interests, rather than bureaucratic training decisions.

Most Rainbow teachers have their master's degrees, and we only accept the very best. As you know, our hiring practices have led to hiring an exceptionally high quality, intelligent faculty, trained at schools such as Emory, Cornell, University of Michigan, Elon, George Washington University, Duke, NYU, Warren Wilson and so on. The reason we have been able to attract this talent is largely because of the degree of academic freedom they enjoy here, as well as the opportunity to develop professionally as individuals. Teachers throughout the year and during the summer have a menu of classes, conferences, and retreats to choose from. One of the reasons they stay is the level of respect they are afforded at Rainbow by the administration and parents; and the fellowship and respect they have for one another.

## **Teacher Autonomy**

Like Finland, we hire the best teachers with the expectation that they are qualified to design their own curriculum within broad standards. Instead of a massive document of specific standards, such as North Carolina's Core Curriculum, both Finland and Rainbow prescribe a simpler, broader set of standards, and then expect professional teachers to design their lessons to match or exceed those goals. Teacher innovation is celebrated rather than squashed.

## **School Year and Teacher Time**

Finland has the fewest scheduled hours of all the developed nations, giving both teachers and students time to absorb what they have learned and to stay excited about teaching and learning. Homework is minimal in Finland. Teachers in Finland have at least two hours a week for professional development and to collaborate with other teachers. At Rainbow, we have early release every Wednesday for teachers to meet, work, and train. Although this can be inconvenient, it keeps teachers inspired so they don't sink into the day-to-day factory model of "punch in, punch out."

Teachers in Finland only teach four hours a day so they have plenty of time to prepare lessons and so they don't burn out – this is a goal for lead teachers at Rainbow, who currently work much longer hours. Clearly, in both Finland and Rainbow, there is an understanding that the most important factor in a classroom is the quality and consciousness of the teacher.

### **Not a Standardized Testing Environment**

There is absolutely no formal standardized test or national comparison testing until the age of 13 in Finland, and not a single compulsory test until students are leaving high school. Evaluation of students is completely within the realm of the teacher, and mostly presented in the form of narratives. National testing and school ranking does not exist in Finland. This is sooooo different than the US. Even as a private school, Rainbow is required by state law to administer one norm-referenced test beginning in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. (Fortunately, we don't have to do anywhere near the massive amount of testing required in public schools.) In our American culture, it is too uncomfortable for parents to go longer than this without seeing how their child compares in a quantitative measure. However, we put little emphasis on the tests at Rainbow and focus on student portfolios and in-house teacher evaluations, which are comprehensive with long analytical narratives. The culture is one of learning, not standardized testing; and students value learning for the sake of learning, without self-consciousness about their rank or stress about test performance.

### **Best Practices**

Finnish pedagogical practices are not unusual or overly complex. In fact, ironically, when Finland set out to improve its school system in the 1970's it looked to American best practices that result in critical thinking. This is very similar to Rainbow. We don't have esoteric teaching practices that are highly unusual, but draw from research-based teaching practices, such as those developed at Harvard Graduate School of Education by educators such as Howard Gardner and Grant Wiggins. The difference from American schools today (and the same is true with Finland)

is that it is up to each Rainbow teacher to apply those practices in ways that work for her particular class and her own style. In America, the control of the teacher was removed, in favor of larger prescribed practices and scripted curriculum, defined by politicians rather than teachers. At Rainbow, every class is slightly different. In general, you will see the same practices as Finland – a mixture of whole group, individual, small group activities, with students engaging in multi-faceted projects. Hands-on, discovery learning is key. Students develop meta-cognitive skills to help them define and solve problems that they self-evaluate and discuss with other students. The strong emphasis on student reflection builds capable learners.

### **Enrichment Classes**

Unlike the American educational system, the curriculum isn't narrowed down to just the basics. In both Finland and Rainbow, the music and arts, physical activities, religion, and foreign language classes begin at young ages.

### **Small Schools with Small Classrooms**

Finnish Schools are smaller than 300 students and class size averages 20. Rainbow has 140 students (with a goal to grow to 230) and an average class size of about 16 (with two teachers in each class.) Small schools are an important feature. Even alternative schools, when they get to be over 300, have a hard time avoiding the factory feel of the American industrial model school – with long hallways and the like. We believe that school should feel as much like home as possible – intimate and comfortable. Finnish schools are referred to as “informal and relaxed.” When Erica returned from Denmark, this is what she was referring to more than anything – the *feel* of Rainbow.

### **A Culture of Learning and Joy**

Let's talk more about that “feel.” That Scandinavian feeling Erica referred to is mostly about the culture on campus at Rainbow – loving, playful, and creative, with highly motivated and engaged students. Finnish teachers are reported to have a high level of respect for students, which is mutually returned by students, sounding very much like Rainbow. The joy of learning is palpable!

## Care for the Whole

Finally, the true meaning of leaving no child behind is making sure that students have what they need – and that is different for each child. When a student is struggling, they receive more attention from the teacher and if necessary, receive special support. This is beneficial to all students, whether in Finland or Rainbow. We deeply care, and provide the time and resources necessary.

## Too Good to Be True?

At this point, you may be thinking that it is really the socialized political system in Finland (which makes sure that there is not a large difference between the rich and poor) and the culture of care within the family that is the real reason for Finland's high performance. However, you may be surprised to learn that Finland actually had very low performing schools up until the 1970's. Its educational practices are not an accident, and experts agree their success is directly related to their educational efforts – they systematically set out to improve their schools, slowly building to the model they have today. And, they have far more diversity than one would expect, partly because of the inflow of immigrants – it isn't unusual for urban schools to have an immigrant, non-mother tongue population of 50% . One of the articles I read, was based on a low income Finnish school where half of its population had learning disabilities. Also interesting, is that the one Scandinavian country that isn't ranking as high as the others is Norway – also a country with a reputation for good family life and a socialized economy. However, Norway chose to adapt American style school improvement methods, such as longer school years and standardized testing. Its academic results are more similar to the US.

## Rainbow Mountain Simply Does What Works

Rainbow isn't intentionally imitating Finland. We are simply providing an education that is enjoyable and practical. We do imitate best teaching practices both within the US and without. In fact, one of the reasons we are adopting Singapore Mathematics is because of the success it has had in Singapore, which consistently ranks with Finland in the area of Math. However, we aren't adopting Singapore Math just because of that country's test scores, but because we have investigated the pedagogy of the program and it makes sense. Singapore Math is a seamless fit with our hands-on inquiry style of teaching.

Finland began its school improvement program in the 1970's and it took almost three decades for it to reach the quality and success of today. Rainbow was founded in 1977, and while it was always a wonderful school, we are now reaching our apex of quality and success. Thanks for being a part of it and congratulations on having the courage to engage your child in an educational experience that is so different from the rest of America. May the joy of learning be with you!

---

## Resources

- The Best Education in the World: Finland, South Korea Top Country Rankings, U.S Rated Average  
[www.HuffingtonPost.com/2012/11/27/best-education-in-the-wor\\_n\\_2199795.html](http://www.HuffingtonPost.com/2012/11/27/best-education-in-the-wor_n_2199795.html)
- Finland's Education System: 10 Surprising Facts That Americans Shouldn't Ignore; [www.takepart.com/photos/ten-surprising-facts-finlands-education-system-americans-should-not-ignore](http://www.takepart.com/photos/ten-surprising-facts-finlands-education-system-americans-should-not-ignore)
- Commission's Report Outlines Education Priorities, February 22, 2013 NPR Morning Edition.
- Finland's Education System Best in World  
[www.BusinessInsider.com/finlands-education-system-best-in-world-2012-11?op=1](http://www.BusinessInsider.com/finlands-education-system-best-in-world-2012-11?op=1)
- NEA –What we can learn from Finland's successful school reform [www.nea.org/home/40991.html](http://www.nea.org/home/40991.html)
- <http://blog.coreknowledge.org/2010/04/09/less-school-higher-scores-in-finland/>
- Why are Finland's Schools Successful?  
[www.Smithsonianmag.com/people-places/Why-Are-Finlands-Schools-Successful.html?](http://www.Smithsonianmag.com/people-places/Why-Are-Finlands-Schools-Successful.html?)
- What the US can't learn from Finland about ed reform [www.WashingtonPost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/what-the-us-cant-learn-from-finland-about-ed-reform/2012/04/16gIQAGlvMT\\_blog.html](http://www.WashingtonPost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/what-the-us-cant-learn-from-finland-about-ed-reform/2012/04/16gIQAGlvMT_blog.html)
- We need Finland's school system  
[www.teacherleaders.typepad.com/get\\_in\\_the\\_fracas/2010/02we-need-finlands-school-system.html](http://www.teacherleaders.typepad.com/get_in_the_fracas/2010/02we-need-finlands-school-system.html)
- Darling Hammond's book "The Flat World and Education"