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Does it work in Finland? School psychological services within a successful system of basic education

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Abstract
The Finnish educational system has become a subject of wide interest during the 2000s due to the country's success in the OECD's PISA surveys. One might expect that the challenges of school psychology would also have been solved successfully. However, in reality, Finnish school psychology is suffering from the same types of problems as in many other countries: No large-scale shift from reactive work to active promotion and prevention has taken place, and the number of school psychologists is insufficient. In the present article we delineate critical factors that have hindered the more adequate and effective use of psychological expertise in Finnish educational system. Necessary actions for future development are outlined.

Keywords
Finland, Finnish educational system, indirect work, PISA, promotion, pupil welfare, school psychology

For several decades, one main goal of school psychology has been not only to concentrate on individual-focused activities but also to use expertise at a system level (see, e.g. Conoley & Gutkin 1995; Hoagwood & Johnson 2003; Hunter 2003; Merrell & Buchanan 2006; Sheridan & Gutkin 2000; Strein, Hoagwood, & Cohn 2003). Psychologists working in schools are expected to promote the well-being of all children, which means collaborating with school professionals

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and administration. However, the reality of school psychological practice has been, and remains, a different matter. Even though there are some positive signals (see, e.g. Farrell, Jimerson, Kalambouka, & Benoit, 2005), no large-scale shift from reactive work has taken place. The 20-year-old statement of Gutkin and Conoley (1990) still seems valid: 'All is not well in school psychology'.

Why? Several explanations have been provided in the literature. In the present article, we reflect on these factors from the perspective of Finland, the educational system of which has become a subject of wide interest during the 2000s due to the good standing in international achievement comparisons. Fifteen-year-olds from Finland, a small nation of 5.4 million inhabitants in Northern Europe, are among the best in the world in reading, mathematics, problem solving, and science (PISA surveys, OECD, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010a). Considering this success, one could expect that the challenge for school psychology would also have been met in Finland. Indeed, in international comparison, the presence of school psychology in Finland is strong (according to criteria proposed by Jimerson, Skokut, Cardenas, Malone, & Stewart, 2008). However, Finnish school psychology encounters problems similar to those in other countries; there are insufficient numbers of school psychologists, and they devote, on average, 59% of their time to direct work with clients (Ahtola & Kiiski-Mäki, 2010; Ahtola & Vainikainen, 2012).

Features of Finnish basic education

In Finland, education is one of the fundamental civil rights, and all citizens are offered equal opportunities to receive it. Literacy has been highly valued since the 17th century. A major objective is to achieve as high a level of education and competence as possible for the whole population, and post-compulsory education is offered to whole age groups (see e.g. Ministry of Education, 2008). Finland has limited natural resources, which underscores the importance of education. As the significance of the traditional Finnish export industry has decreased, human know-how is all the more crucial.

Local municipal authorities organize, and, with government support, fund the preschool (Kindergarten) and basic education including a free of charge hot lunch. Private and state schools are rare in Finland but private daycare centres and preschools are more widely available. Local authorities also have considerable powers to guide education policies and contents, as the municipalities and, ultimately, all schools are allowed to apply and modify the national core curricula (Core Curriculum for Preschool Education, 2000; National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2004) (see Appendix 1 for Legislation and Curricula). National assessments of pupil performance are uncommon in Finland, and the achievement levels of individual schools are neither compared with each other nor released to the public.

Formal schooling in Finland (as in other Nordic countries) begins rather late. The compulsory education, grades 1 to 9, starts from the year in which the child turns seven years of age and ends at age 16. However, practically all six-year-olds

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attend free of charge preschools featuring, among other things, playful activities relevant to literacy and mathematics acquisition. Primary school consists of grades 1–6, and lower secondary school of grades 7–9; these are usually located in separate buildings and have their own principals. However, comprehensive grade 1–9 school units have recently become more common. In primary school, most lessons are taught by the classroom teacher who will usually teach the same pupils for several years. In lower secondary school, different subjects are taught by different teachers, and the group moves from one classroom to another throughout the day. Teacher education in Finland is of high quality (see, e.g. Niemi, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011). A master's degree is the norm for grade 1–9 teachers and a bachelor's degree for preschool teachers. Consequently, teachers enjoy considerable autonomy in their work, and teaching is a desired career choice (see also OECD, 2011).

The internationally strong academic success of Finland may be due, in part, to the wide availability of special education services (Sabel et al., 2010); the lowest scoring 20% of Finnish pupils strikingly outperform the corresponding subgroup in other countries. Additionally, the between-school variance in achievement is small in Finland. This reflects the equalizing effect of the school system, as well as the lack of strict stratification in the Finnish society in terms of the wealth distribution and social classes.

However, alongside the success in PISA, the socio-emotional well-being of Finnish children and adolescents, especially that of boys, and families has recently been a subject of concern in national discussions. According to international comparisons, Finnish pupils do not like school, and they report the most restless classrooms within the OECD countries (OECD, 2011; Samdal, Dür, & Freeman, 2004). Gender differences in achievement, favouring girls, are wide (OECD, 2010b), and 13% of Finnish 15- to 19-year-olds are not enrolled in education (OECD, 2012). In addition, tragic bombing and (school) shooting incidents during the 2000s have launched a public discussion on well-being among Finnish youth as well as the quality of the Finnish school system.

Pupil welfare in Finnish basic education

In Finland, school psychologists operate within the pupil welfare activities (oppilashuolto)—activities that promote and maintain good learning, good psychological, physical and social health, and enhance the prerequisites of these (Basic Education Act, 1998/2003). Pupil welfare is the concern of all persons working in the school community, but school psychologists, school nurses, school doctors, and school social workers are directly and solely engaged in promoting pupil welfare (Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2011).

The origins for Finnish pupil welfare activities can be traced back to the 19th century, when the large-scale education of nearly all children started to emerge in the Western world. The public folk school system needed to react to the health and social problems of the pupils. Early pupil welfare had a social welfare function; school doctor services and school nurse services were established at the beginning

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of the 20th century (Jauhiainen, 1993). For several decades, the involvement of the state was weak; the pupil welfare activities depended on municipal and private funding. Today, in contrast, school health services are a central part of the Finnish public health care system.

The central arena for pupil welfare work in contemporary Finnish basic education is the multiprofessional pupil welfare team, which meets regularly, usually weekly or bi-weekly. In primary school, the usual team includes the school principal, special education teacher, school nurse, school psychologist, and school social worker; in lower secondary school, the study counsellor also participates. However, this may be the case only in southern Finland and in densely populated areas (see, e.g. Koskela, 2009). The main tasks of the pupil welfare teams are two-fold, but, in practice, the actions are mostly indicated interventions at the level of individual pupils, families, and classrooms rather than general promotion and prevention at the level of the whole school community (Peltonen, 2010).

Challenges of Western school psychology

Several complementary explanations have been offered regarding why school psychology has not gained its full potential in various developed countries. At least five factors stand out in the literature: History, training, and research in school psychology; the expectations of other school professionals; relationship between school psychology and school administration; undefined responsibility; and the measurement problems concerning pupil well-being. In this article, we will discuss how data from Finland reflect these international concerns.

History, training, and research of school psychology

To understand the present situation of school psychology it is necessary to reflect on the significant and common starting point for all school psychologists in the Western world around the beginning of the 20th century. The compulsory school system generated the need for segregated special education and psychological testing, as individual differences of children became more visible and even disturbing (see e.g. Carrier, 1984; Fagan, 1992). In clinical settings, the psychologist's role as a psychotherapist began to emerge. These developments took place also in Finland (Jauhiainen, 1993; Kivinen & Kivirauma, 1988). However, even though Fagan (2002) is most likely right in stating '... had we never been attached to special education, there never would have developed a school psychology practice as it is known today...', the test-focused and individual-level perspectives are not the only origins of school psychology. More systemic and adult-oriented views emerged in the United States in the work of Lightner Witmer and Granville Stanley Hall (see Fagan, 1992, 1996; McReynolds, 1996; Reynolds, Gutkin, Elliot, & Witt, 1984; Witmer, 1907/1996).

Early efforts notwithstanding and despite all the progress during the 20th century, the school psychologist's traditional roles have changed slowly

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(see, e.g. Anthun & Manger, 2007; Farrell, 2010). It seems difficult for psychologists to revise their perceptions of themselves as testers and therapists. At the moment in Finland, more than half of the school psychologists are interested in increasing the time devoted to indirect work, but the ideal average proportion of work with clients, as seen by school psychologists themselves, is still as high as 50% (Ahtola & Vainikainen, 2012). Thus, not even the aims—let alone the reality—are in line with the literature-stated goals (see, also, Jimerson et al., 2004, 2006, 2008). Indeed, alternative ways of utilizing the expertise of psychologists in the educational system have been discussed continuously, both in Finland and internationally (e.g. Fagan, 1992; Fredriksson, 1986; Guvå, 2001, 2004; Laaksonen & Wiegand, 1990; Lambert, 1965; Miller, 1969; Monroe, 1979; Norwich 2005; Phye & Reschly, 1979).

A current trend in Finland underscores pedagogical expertise in issues of learning and special education. Leaning on teachers' pedagogical assessments and active participation is, of course, valuable. However, it is crucial that frustration with the tester role of psychologists should not lead to the other extreme at the cost that the expertise of psychologists on learning issues is abandoned. Strengthening the professional expertise of teachers should not result in diminished involvement of other experts, because successful assessment and intervention usually demand multiprofessional efforts.

The need for reform in training and research in school psychology has been highlighted (e.g. Conoley & Gutkin, 1995; Gutkin & Conoley, 1990). Psychologists' basic orientation focuses on individuals, groups, assessment, and interventions, but it does not prepare them for proactive and preventive work in multiprofessional teams and for pursuing change in communities (see also, Bartolo, 2010; Wnek, Klein, & Bracken, 2008). Fortunately, several interesting examples of more adequate school psychologist training programmes, both in-service and basic ones, are now available in the literature (e.g. Geva, Wiener, Peterson-Badali, & Link, 2003; Griffin & Scherr, 2010; Jindal-Snape, Hannah, Smith, Barrow, & Kerr, 2009). In Finland, there are neither specific master's, nor doctoral, studies in school psychology. Master's studies required of all psychologists make them eligible for working in *any* field of psychology, including school psychology. It is notable, however, that the skills needed for in indirect work of school psychologists are applicable in other settings, too. In general, the scientist-practitioner-model for (school) psychologists should be strengthened (Kennedy, Cameron, & Monsen, 2009).

Training and research go hand in hand. According to Little, Akin-Little, and Lloyd (2011), even research efforts on consultation and collaboration in educational settings are scarce (see also, Tapasak & Keller, 1995). This is also true of Finland. In fact, systematic research efforts, literature, and terminology on welfare and health promotion in schools in general are still missing (Jauhiainen, 1993; Rimpelä, Fröjd, & Peltonen, 2010). Even though there is a strong research tradition on learning difficulties, especially dyslexia, and recent publications in several fields have discussed the themes of school well-being, generally speaking Finland has not shared the international interest in the possibilities and responsibilities of school communities to advance the well-being of children and youth.

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Expectations of other school professionals

In order to reform the role of school psychologists, it is important to consider not only the psychologists themselves but also the context of their work—the school. For teachers, the pupil well-being approach has meant new content and responsibilities, not always welcomed or easily fulfilled. In addition to teaching various skills and subjects, teachers are expected to pay attention also to the socio-emotional development and needs of the pupils, and they must be ready for multiprofessional cooperation. Accordingly, principals are not only responsible for pedagogical actions but also for pupil welfare. In the school community, non-teaching pupil welfare professionals are not always easily accepted. The expectations regarding them may be irrationally high or distorted (see e.g. Davies, Howes, & Farrell, 2008), or the new professionals may be considered unnecessary or even threatening. It would also appear that educational professionals still perceive psychologists as testers and therapists who only react to problems (Ahtola & Kiiski-Mäki, 2011; Guvå & Hylander, 2012). Obviously, training for teachers and principals should also be developed further (see e.g. Adelman & Taylor, 2010; Guvå & Hylander, 2012). This is true even in Finland, where teacher training already is of high quality.

School psychology and school administration

When planning services and planning to utilize expertise in an organization, structure should follow function (Adelman & Taylor, 2010). However, it seems that the efforts to promote the psychological well-being of children and youth in educational settings are not far from being marginalized. This harmful development took place also in Finland during the 1940s and 1950s, when psychological expertise was institutionalized by new family guidance centres, where a new expert, the psychologist, became the key actor. Activities in these centres generally focused more or less on individuals and classification, and their connectedness to schools was infrequent (Nevalainen, 2010; Niemi & Tiuraniemi, 1995). This setting supported the idea of external experts, who carry on remedial activities with individual pupils and their families. Moreover, family guidance centres profiled themselves as advocates of segregated special education services (Kivirauma, 1989; Korppi-Tommola, 1990; Rinne & Jauhiainen, 1988). Thus, instead of perceiving school welfare as mutual co-operative problem solving and responsibility, with the goal of promoting the well-being of all pupils, the psychologist was expected to react only to difficult situations and resolve them almost miraculously (Selvini-Palazzoli, 1978).

In other Nordic countries, psychological expertise was more clearly established within the school system (Kiviluoto, 1963). However, developments in Sweden and Denmark have not been optimal either. In Sweden, the opposition between theory and practice, that is, general and individual approach, is conspicuous (Guvå & Hylander, 2012), and access to a school psychologist and school social worker became a legal right only in 2011, four years later than in Finland

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(Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency, 2009/2010). In Denmark, school psychology flourished during the 1970s and 1980s, but the recent development has been somewhat disappointing (Poulsen, 2007); school psychologists have become responsible for providing various other services, in addition to their core tasks as school psychologists.

Whose responsibility is it after all?

As Adelman and Taylor (2010) point out, few argue against prevention of problems of children and youth; however, the costs and the role of schools are subjects to disagreement. As Finland started to develop a welfare-state similar to that in Scandinavian countries following World War II, the psycho-social well-being of children was highlighted. Several factors contributed to the establishment of schools' psycho-social support systems at this time, the fundamental change in the whole basic education being the most important (see Jauhiainen, 1993; Rimpelä et al., 2010; Rinne & Jauhiainen, 1988). The new nine-year basic education programme featured a compulsory free of charge education, replacing the earlier two-track system. Grammar schools could no longer select their pupils and instead had to teach all adolescents. Consequently, the quality of primary school educators was improved by requiring a university-level training of them (Rinne & Jauhiainen, 1988). These changes led to greater professionalism in schools, including new and essential roles for school psychologists and school social workers, who started their work in the mid-1960s (Jauhiainen, 1993; Kurki, 2006; T. Tikkanen, personal communication, August 8th, 2011). In fact, pupil welfare activities can be seen as an essential component of Finland's effort to educate all pupils through a unified school system. A government-set committee prepared an extensive report on pupil welfare (Oppilashuoltokomitean mietintö, 1974), with an ambitious goal of employing 500 school psychologists and 500 school social workers—a goal that has not, 40 years later, been realized. Several nation- and region-level professional positions were established to coordinate the work of school psychologists and social workers (Laaksonen, Laitinen, & Salmi, 2007; Sipilä-Lähdekorpi, 2006).

However, from the 1970s onwards, the interpretation of the possibilities and responsibilities of the school changed (Rimpelä et al., 2010; Vesikansa, 2009). Schools were supposed to concentrate on teaching and learning, whereas homes and social and health services were to be responsible for health and well-being. The most harmful manifestation of this situation was the prolonged reform process of legislation and curricula in terms of pupil welfare. What is more, when the work of school psychologists and school social workers finally was specified in legislation as an optional service, this was done within the 1990 Child Welfare Act, not in the Basic Education Act, which would have been the most appropriate decision. When all but two posts of national coordinators of pupil welfare work were abolished during the recession in the 1990s, the development of services in municipalities became very uneven and almost defunct in all provinces other than Uusimaa

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(Laaksonen et al., 2007). All this left school psychologists without national support in most municipalities and the school psychologist's role undefined.

During the 2000s, pupil welfare activities and professionals have finally been formally acknowledged in Finland in documents concerning basic education (the 2003 revision of the Basic Education Act; the 2010 revision of the core curriculum). In addition, since 2007, school psychology services are now defined as mandatory in preschool and basic education. Even though current legislation on pupil welfare still reflects the splitting of responsibilities between school and health and social services, most school psychologists and school social workers are an integral part of school communities both physically and organizationally. However, the efforts of the existing 300 school psychologists and 300 school social workers are insufficient; an additional 600 psychologists and 600 social workers are needed in preschool and basic education alone. In school psychology, quantity is closely related to quality. A school psychologist with an unmanageable workload cannot form trusting relationships with school professionals, because she/he is seldom available (Curtis, Hunley, & Grier, 2002). Individual-level assessments and therapeutic contacts usually dominate. This is true even though in principle indirect methods, such as consultation, are useful especially when the workload is unreasonable (Caplan & Caplan, 1993).

One reason for this obvious lack of pupil welfare experts in Finland is the level of municipal autonomy. As the government funding system was reformed in 1993, the normative steering structure was replaced with a system that gives greater autonomy to municipalities. Consequently, local decisions concerning pupil welfare vary, because the recommended workloads for school social workers and school psychologists are not quantitatively defined by state authorities, in contrast to school nurses and school doctors (Sosiaali-ja terveysministeriö, 2009). Peripheral municipalities particularly lack funds and qualified professionals for pupil welfare services, and the situation is not getting easier as the Finnish population continues to migrate to the larger towns and municipalities in Southern Finland.

The problem of measurement

What receives attention in society? For one, things that can be measured (Adelman & Taylor, 2010). Unfortunately, compared to academic achievement, psycho-social well-being is a rather tricky concept to define, pursue, and measure. Second, occasional incidents of high visibility also evoke public interest. However, good psycho-social well-being and enhancement of it may not manifest themselves straightforwardly, whereas the lack of it sometimes actualizes dramatically. This is why well-being often draws attention only when the problem already exists.

A positive response to these phenomena is the development of the KiVa antibullying programme (Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2010). It was initiated and funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture as a response to the poor results in an international survey on liking school (Samdal et al., 2004), which caused widespread public discussion in Finland. Fortunately, that poor survey

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result eventually led to a positive outcome, as the KiVa programme has been shown to reduce bullying and victimization (Kärnä et al., 2011a, 2011b, in press). However, public attention has a tendency to fluctuate, and political aspirations do not always come true. During the 2000s, young males have committed several bombing and (school) shooting crimes in Finland. As a rule, these incidents have generated demands and promises to increase the number of pupil welfare professionals, such as psychologists, in schools. However, nothing much has happened; for example, the legislation that would guarantee psychological expertise in upper secondary education is still in progress, and the lack of psychologists in basic education is obvious, the legislation notwithstanding. In general, the choices in Finland over the past 50 years have seemingly favoured less expensive and less well educated professionals (school nurses) rather than university-trained experts, and physical health has in practice been preferred to psycho-social well-being.

In fact, it seems that in Finland, psycho-social well-being has primarily had only an instrumental value in enhancing good learning and achievement. This may be due, to some extent, to the rather unstable and harsh history of the Finnish people and state. Finland has evolved from a former province of Sweden and an autonomous grand duchy of Russia into an independent state (1917), which since then has faced civil war and substantial losses in World War II. Traditionally, characteristics such as pursuing independence early, coping on one's own and hard work have been valued. Even the climate is far from ideal, the cold and dark winter season being challenging both practically and psychologically. In the past, it may have been seen as best not to reflect on one's feelings and desires too much. Many traditional Finnish proverbs express this stance. A future challenge in Finland is to strengthen the intrinsic value of inter- and intrapersonal skills in education.

Conclusion

It seems that, for various reasons, school psychology has not yet reached its full potential. This is true of Nordic countries, where public services are of high quality, including Finland, with an educational system which is excellent at least in terms of academic achievement. The same holds true for the USA, where the systemic ideas were presented more than a century ago. Hard work is needed to reform the outdated basic assumptions of child development, education, and methods of psychology. Finns believe strongly in the power of education to solve societal problems, including those of school psychology. Multiprofessional co-operation, as well as promotion and prevention perspectives need to be part of the training of professionals working in schools and with children and families. In-service training is needed, but, according to the best principles of promotion and prevention, this issue needs to be tackled before professionals begin to adopt inappropriate working procedures and methods in schools (see also Wnek, Klein, & Bracken, 2008). However, the present analysis suggests that administrative and political choices are also crucial in determining the position on promotion efforts in educational systems.

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Appendix 1

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