

# INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN AND THE INSTITUTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURES OF SCHOOLS IN FINLAND

Growing numbers of children are moving between countries because of their parents' careers. The temporary labour migration of highly educated professionals—sometimes called career expatriates or transnational corporate elites (Amit 2002; Fechter 2007)—is increasing in various parts of the world. Finland, one among many countries, welcomes such professionals, both because those individuals offer skills needed in global competitive markets and because the country's domestic population is ageing. Often, these professionals do not intend to stay permanently, but rather plan to return to their native countries or move on to other locations after a few years.

International professionals are often accompanied by their spouses and children. In this paper, I focus on a central institutional infrastructure in these children's lives—namely, education and schools. Specifically, I examine international schools in Finland and children's positions within this infrastructure. My research presented here is based on extensive ethnographic research in an international school in a Finnish town.

IT engineers and developers often differentiate between hard and soft infrastructures. By hard infrastructures, they mean large physical networks, whereas soft infrastructure refers to the institutions necessary to maintain the functioning of societies and organisations (see Korpela 2016: 115). Rather than considering the technological characteristics or structural significance of infrastructures, anthropologists

tend to focus on their impact on people's everyday lives.

Infrastructure projects are often launched as indications of a better, more effective future. Therefore, time is a significant concept in relation to infrastructures, and progress and future aspirations are integral to how people and states understand such projects. In fact, Akhil Gupta (2018: 62) understands infrastructures as never-ending processes rather than as things. Discussions regarding time and infrastructures usually focus on material infrastructures, especially their maintenance and ruination. Time is, however, also important in institutional infrastructures, which often function within rigid timeframes, with one institutional function related to the execution of specific institutional processes in a certain order and within a particular timeframe.

Here, I understand children's education as an institutional infrastructure. Such infrastructures aim to guarantee the smooth progression of learning, whereby children follow rigid temporal paths; at a certain age, they are taught specific things alongside their peers. A child's progress is based on what they have learnt in the past. In other words, the functioning of an educational infrastructure is closely entangled with time; as time passes, children progress within the institutional infrastructure. Typically, educational infrastructures for children are constructed based on strong national interests, with the aim of transferring specific knowledge, skills, and values to future

adult citizens of that country. Thus, the local infrastructure of schools is tightly connected to the national infrastructure of education. The different nationally—as well as geographically—bound educational infrastructures do not, however, form a smooth global infrastructure (cf. Harvey et al. 2017). Instead, a mismatch emerges between them. Therefore, educational infrastructures reveal the limits of Brian Larkin's (2013: 328) definition, whereby 'infrastructures are built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space'. Within educational infrastructures, the flow and exchange of ideas is normally limited to the space within national borders. Here, I demonstrate that, because school systems, curricula, and educational paths vary between countries, internationally mobile children may face certain challenges.

On a global level, the educational needs of international professionals' children are often catered to by private international schools (with relatively high tuition fees), which follow their own curricula (often related to UK or US standards) (see Hayden and Thompson 2013). To some extent, such schools themselves form a global educational infrastructure or, more precisely, several separate infrastructures. Such an infrastructure is not, however, available everywhere nor to everyone. In Finland, for example, profit-making private schools which charge compulsory tuition fees are not normally permitted; consequently, this global educational infrastructure is unavailable. International schools exist in the country, but most are free municipal schools. While the language of instruction is English, such schools follow the Finnish curriculum. The curriculum does not, however, necessarily neatly fit with curricula and educational infrastructures from elsewhere.

Internationally mobile children's educational pasts—that is, their previous

studies—often differ from those expected by the Finnish educational infrastructure: the timing of various actions differ across educational infrastructures, and the content of the education differs as well as the skills and outcomes expected of children. Consequently, children's international mobility can be seen as pathbreaking (Devine and Boudreault-Fournier 2021: 5) vis-à-vis educational infrastructures—specifically in relation to their temporalities (see Korpela 2023a).

When a child moves from one country to another, they must move from one education infrastructure to another, which necessarily entails some disruption. A child ends up on a new institutional path—a rigid temporal path—and they may not have taken the steps (in the correct order) expected by that institution or they may have taken more steps than expected for their age. In other words, in the new place, a child may be behind or more advanced in their studies compared with their peers. In both cases, individual children become personally aware of the different institutional paths, whether repeating content or attempting to catch up. Moreover, everyday practices within schools may differ, potentially requiring children to adjust to their new circumstances. During this process, children often reflect upon their past, and possibly their future, school experiences. They may, for example, talk about the different amounts of homework required and tests in different schools with which they are familiar. Asian children, in particular, consider Finnish schools easier and more relaxed (Korpela 2023a).

Finnish education is internationally praised, with Finland ranking highly in OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) testing, which measures 15-year-olds' abilities and skills worldwide. The Finnish education infrastructure also employs effective practices including extensive language

training aimed at integrating immigrant children into both schools and Finnish society. The highly skilled international experts who come to Finland for work, however, do not necessarily intend to remain in the country permanently—their contracts typically last between one to three years. Consequently, learning the language and becoming integrated into Finnish society often does not seem feasible for their children (see Korpela 2023b). Instead of attending regular Finnish schools, many opt to attend international schools. Nevertheless, since these municipal schools follow the Finnish curriculum, children integrate into the Finnish education infrastructure all the same.

Families who intend to sojourn in Finland temporarily are sometimes concerned about the differing educational arrangements and curricula. While they know Finnish education is generally of a high quality, they also know that if their children later return or move on to a different educational system elsewhere, they may encounter problems because those curricula may emphasise different skills and knowledge from those in Finland. Consequently, some families attempt to keep up with the curricula from their home countries, which can result in a lot of extra work for such children. Others attempt to plan their families' mobility trajectories in a way that avoids specific countries and their schools, sometimes including their own native countries. For example, India and China have highly competitive education systems and some Indian and Chinese families are not keen to return to these systems. Still other families intentionally return while their children are still very young in order to secure their standing within a competitive education infrastructure.

While attending Finnish international schools can work well for young children, such children may encounter challenges at the age of 16 when they should move to upper secondary

schools. In larger Finnish towns, it is possible to study all nine years of basic education in English. At the upper secondary level, however, options remain rather limited. Youth need relatively good grades to gain entry into International Baccalaureate schools operating in English, while very few programmes in English exist in vocational schools. Finnish upper secondary schools, as well as the majority of vocational schools, function in Finnish. Therefore, international youth whose Finnish skills are limited (or non-existent) are anomalies on the rigid path of the Finnish education infrastructure; consequently, their educational options in the country remain limited (see Korpela 2023b).

When international professionals are recruited, emphasis is placed on their skills and on the labour needs of the recipient societies. We should not, however, forget the institutional infrastructures of schools. Accompanying children cannot escape these infrastructures, and they play a key role in determining families' wellbeing and their children's future options. Internationally mobile skilled professionals are often viewed as free agents, maximising their individual career options. But, as the example of schools illustrates, in practice they may end up in the midst of institutional infrastructures designed for those who remain. These infrastructures have a binding nature: one cannot escape them, but they must operate within them or, alternatively, opt for homeschooling, which creates its own challenges.

Educational infrastructures are complicated with rigid temporal paths and close connections to geographical locations. Although there are attempts to standardise education and degrees, such as through the International Baccalaureate, the great majority of education systems operate on national levels. Schools and education provide an example

of an institutional infrastructure that is not only geographically bound, but also closely entangled with time: it is not simply that children are situated within the infrastructure at a particular moment in time, but that they are expected to progress within a certain timeframe. Disruptions to this progressive path—including children’s transnational mobilities—can present challenges. Future aspirations are central to education infrastructures, but, simultaneously, the infrastructures form the framework and temporal path to which individual children must adjust in the here and now. There is not necessarily much individual agency available when navigating education infrastructures in specific locations.

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