

My educational visit to Finland was an invaluable experience that enabled me to connect theory from our lectures into real practice. Throughout the week, I observed different educational settings, visited the University of Helsinki's early years education department, and spoke with lecturers and practitioners about the values that underpin Finnish education. Although there were many differences between Finland and Wales, the visit highlighted that successful early years practice is shaped not only by practitioners but also by the culture and policies that support them.

Our first day at the university immediately demonstrated how highly early childhood education is valued in Finland. The university had a permanent department dedicated solely to early years education, with specialist teaching spaces, excellent learning resources and an observation room with a one-way viewing wall, allowing student teachers to observe children without interrupting their learning. I found this particularly impressive because it reflected the importance placed on preparing future educators through high-quality training. It reinforced the idea that investing in practitioners ultimately benefits children's learning experiences.

During the university sessions, lecturers explained that children in Finland do not complete official national tests until secondary school. Instead, teachers are trusted to make professional judgements about children's learning and development. This level of autonomy stood out to me because it is very different from the education system in Wales, where assessment and evidence gathering can occupy a significant amount of practitioners' time. Listening to the lecturers made me question whether the pressure to collect evidence can sometimes reduce opportunities to build meaningful relationships with children. It reminded me that observations should primarily be used to understand children rather than simply provide evidence of progress.

The lecturers also explained that Finland has introduced a professional mentoring programme to improve teacher wellbeing and tackle issues with recruitment and retention. Although Finland experiences similar challenges with retaining educators, it was encouraging to see practical support being provided. This highlighted the importance of valuing practitioners professionally, something that contributes to the high level of trust placed in Finnish teachers.

One aspect of the visit that stood out throughout the week was how deeply nature was embedded within everyday life. Natural materials were visible throughout learning environments, children spent time outdoors regardless of the weather and even bird sounds played in the toilets, creating calm and relaxing spaces. Respect for the environment was also reflected in the expectation that everyone removed their shoes before entering schools and the university. At first this seemed unusual,

but I soon realised it promoted cleanliness, calmness and shared respect for the learning environment.

The university also promoted inclusion through its curriculum. During one practical session, we explored different religions and beliefs through hands-on activities. I found this personally challenging because, as a Catholic, I was unfamiliar with aspects of Arabic religious practice. Initially, I felt slightly uncomfortable, but the experience encouraged me to reflect on the importance of approaching unfamiliar cultures with openness and respect. As an early years practitioner, it is essential that I create environments where every child's beliefs and identity are recognised and valued, regardless of my own experiences.

Our visits to early years settings allowed me to see how Finnish educational values are reflected in practice. One of the most noticeable differences was the level of independence expected from children. Even children as young as one year old were encouraged to dress themselves and complete everyday routines independently. Rather than completing tasks for children to save time, practitioners patiently supported them until they were able to succeed on their own. This encouraged me to reflect on how easily adults can underestimate children's abilities. In my own practice, I would like to provide children with more opportunities to develop independence by allowing them the time and encouragement to complete tasks for themselves.

The organisation of the settings also reflected a child-centred approach. Small group pedagogy enabled practitioners to build secure relationships with children and respond to their individual needs. I was struck by how calm the environments felt despite children having considerable freedom. For example, when groups walked together outdoors, children skipped, bounced and moved naturally instead of walking silently in straight lines. As long as they stayed safely with the group, practitioners did not correct these movements. This contrasted with experiences I have seen in the UK, where behaviour expectations can sometimes prioritise order over children's natural movement. It demonstrated that trust and clear relationships can support positive behaviour without unnecessary restrictions.

Another important observation was the emphasis placed on conflict resolution. Rather than adults immediately solving disagreements, children were encouraged to communicate, negotiate and resolve problems together. This approach supports children's social and emotional development and prepares them with valuable life skills.

I was also interested to learn that every Finnish school has access to a qualified Additional Learning Needs (ALN) teacher. Like Wales, Finland has experienced an increase in children requiring additional support, demonstrating that inclusion is a shared priority. Both countries also value bilingualism, with Finland promoting the

Finnish language in much the same way Wales promotes the Welsh language. These similarities reminded me that despite cultural differences, many educational priorities remain shared across both countries.

One of my favourite experiences during the visit was participating in a physical education session at the university. Rather than focusing solely on physical skills, the session incorporated music, movement and teamwork. I particularly enjoyed noticing how different types of music changed the way we moved and interacted with others. The activities were engaging and enjoyable. It was definitely one of the highlights of the trip for me and demonstrated how physical development can also be supported through playful experiences rather than structured exercise alone.

Although I found Finnish early years education incredibly inspiring, the visit also encouraged me to reflect critically on what can realistically be transferred into practice in Wales. Many of Finland's strengths are supported by government policy, professional trust and reduced accountability measures. Unless these wider expectations change, there are limits to what practitioners can implement independently. However, this does not mean that the experience was any less valuable. It reminded me that I can still make meaningful changes within my own practice by promoting children's independence, valuing relationships over excessive paperwork, embracing outdoor learning and creating inclusive environments where every child feels respected and capable.

Overall, this study visit has strengthened my understanding of high-quality early years education and confirmed my belief that early childhood should be recognised as the foundation of lifelong learning rather than simply childcare. More importantly, it has encouraged me to reflect on the kind of practitioner I hope to become—one who trusts children, values diversity, encourages independence and creates meaningful relationships that support every child's development.