

## *For the Best of a Child*

Learnings from the Helsinki conference, June 2017, hosted by the Haukkala Foundation, a member organization of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group, dedicated to promoting the wellbeing and mental health of children and young people.

---

*We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children*

*Chief Seattle, 1854*

---

Native Indian culture and beliefs have experienced a resurgence of interest over the past decades. The concept of the Earth as one sacred, interconnected being, is one that scientists and researchers are slowly come around to see as tangible truth- even if the Native Indians have built their entire relationship with this concept centuries ago- long before European invasion. A solid theme underlies their philosophy and actions- the 7-generation principle<sup>1</sup>. Where we, in our postmodern, Western society tend to only look within a decade at most down the line in our policy decisions, this culture uses the concept of looking down the line to the following 7 generations in the decisions they make.

Looking around in 2017, we have clearly not followed this principle in our society. Facing a world with dwindling natural resources, increasing environmental destruction, a rise in lifestyle diseases and mood related disorders, our system is under pressure. We have been putting the future generations on the backburner, and digging into their future security on this earth. Childhood today especially has taken a backseat to economic growth, financial gains, and the desire to move forward at an ever-faster rate. Once a treasure to cherish and value, this time has been replaced by a move towards earlier academic learning, digital babysitting, and the targeting of today's children as the consumers of tomorrow. Family, once the centre of societies, has been replaced by easy entertainment and online communication, rather than a team working and supporting each other. Health has simultaneously increased worldwide regarding treatable diseases and illnesses, while conditions related to a life of excess skyrocket, resulting in a world were sugar is more dangerous than war. Happiness has declined, resulting in soaring rates of depression and suicide. Play has fallen under the firing line, as recess and breaks at schools become ever shorter and more orientated towards formal learning. Our move into a digital era has brought about a silence on the streets, children are inside and online, and far removed from the natural world and the true essence of learning through movement and human experience. But nowhere has the threat of childhood become more visible than that of the education system- with some countries such as the UK setting the starting age for primary students at a mere 4 years, with the norms falling somewhere

---

<sup>1</sup> (their belief being one generation is 100 years).

between 5 and 6 globally. This is not the time for academic learning- this is a time to develop creativity and imagination. As Albert Einstein said- “It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education”.

Not so in Finland. As I learnt in Helsinki, during the conference ‘For the Best of a Child’, Finland is leading the way, providing a lighthouse for the global education situation, and designing a remarkable blueprint for other countries to emulate and integrate into their own societies. In a country of historical repression, Finland is now celebrating its centenary year of independence- and the concept of a phoenix rising may well be applicable in the form of a world leading social and health system, where education is the core of the community, and teachers are respected and renowned for their training, insight and pedagogical approach. Yet, despite its past success, Finland is not resting on its laurels- it is currently in the midst of reform and renewal, earmarking child and family orientated services as one of the key priorities of the Government. This includes a shift to creating a new core curriculum where every child is unique, where the goal of the education is to plant the seed of curiosity, the desire to learn, and developing willpower and personal initiative in every child. The reform aims to include wellbeing and health, and the focus of each child as a subject, not an object, a human being as a citizen of the entire world. Perhaps most of all, given the current digital climate, it is a reform that reaffirms the place of computer information technology as secondary in the learning process, and rather places the relationship between the teacher as student in real time as primary- both learning from each other, and constantly evolving to meet the students changing needs in a fast-paced world.

All these areas of the reform are supported by a growing body of research showing that children, more than anything, and perhaps more than ever, require human warmth and contact in their relationships. Gone are the days past where children were “spoilt” by adult empathy and devotion: science (and common sense) is highlighting the urgent need for an emphasis on warm, positive relationships, enabling young people to unleash their power in their personal quest to contribute to a sustainable future where the following generations and children can do the same.

This might sound impossible, perhaps to worn out policy makers, educators, or tired parents. But it is not. On our excursion to the nearby Saunalahti School, in Espoo, we were able to see the fruits of these ideals. The school is a relatively new complex, designed to support the pedagogical ideas of a ‘Future School’, organized like a village, with the food as the heart. The concept is the holistic wellbeing of each child, with all teachers responsible for all the children in and out of classes- no ‘your’ or ‘my’ student. With a huge increase on emphasising handcrafts, personal development and artistic creativity, it has taken elements and aspects of many branches of alternative education, such as Montessori and Steiner education, in the design and implementation of the curriculum, and blended it with the best of “standard” state schooling, and created an admirably progressive model surely destined to shine the light for the lagging state of international schooling. The Saunalahti school, now in its 5<sup>th</sup> year, marks the beginning of a more positive and inclusive model of education, one that is community centred, bringing in what society today so desperately needs- cooperation and collaboration with the wider area- rather than simply the boundaries and borders of a school building zone.

There is hope for the future, and for those next 7 generations in Finland, it is promising to be a bright one, providing the child and teacher relationship is held to its essential role, and that the focus of education is one of placing the child in the centre. And what a timely message to the rest of the world, grappling with standardized testing, exam results, academic achievements and enormous pressure upon the children growing up in to a complex and rapidly changing world. This is truly a culture that has embodied education as an essential social component, producing an atmosphere of dedication to quality and research based teaching, and one where the teacher is placed in the pivotal role of ushering in the next generations with reverence and respect. The future world leaders, the workers, the thinkers, the designers, the creators, and the imaginers will find a place here that nurtures and draws out their potential, while allowing them as children to unfold slowly, into a world that very much needs every unique individual to uncover their personal legacy and contribute it to a world that could learn much from the true value of childhood.

In the words of Professor Päivi Fadjukoff- “Children are the future. These young people face a complex, difficult and changing world. But if we take care of the children, we take care of the vitality and safety of all children and the world they grow into. Taking care of the children is creating a sustainable planet”.

We have, for better or worse, brought about a world built on the desire for ever increasing economic growth and financial gain. Standardization threatens our children’s uniqueness, and this conference recognised the immense pressure to protect it, cherishing children and allowing them to take up their role as the future of our planet. The Native Indians were probably on the right track: slowly but surely, change is trickling into a system in dire need of inspiration and overhaul. The next 7 generations still face immense challenges and pressures, but Finland is leading the way in providing their children with the ability to manage and find solutions to a planet in peril. Let us all learn these lessons, using our unique cultural and first-hand experiences to not just copy the system, but to show us how we too can ride the waves of massive global change in a way that ensures all the children of the world a future that gives them their birth right- to live, to flourish and to change the world when their time comes, fixing the errors of the past, and co-creating a world that we here, in 2017, can only hope for all on this planet.

There is no greater gift than a childhood cherished, and it is up to us to take this task upon us, and give the next 7 generations a chance on this incredible planet- home for all of us, and our children. We may not get another chance.

---

*Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.*

*William Butler Yeats*

---

Thank you to the European Alliance for Childhood and the Haukkala Foundation, for enabling me to attend, and to Lea Pulkkinen, for her extraordinary life's research and the launch of her book, which was the heart and soul of this valuable experience.

## Summary of Speakers and Topics: June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017- Helsinki, Finland.

<p><b>Anita Lehtikoinen:</b> <i>Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education and Culture</i></p>	<p>A talk describing the holistic reform of Finland's education system with more emphasis placed on the human element of learning than ICT and digital technologies as central, describing the key aspect of developing willing, curious lifelong learners, who have a desire and capacity to develop as a human being and citizen of the world.</p>
<p><b>Olli-Pekka Heinonen:</b> <i>Director General of Finnish Agency for Education</i></p>	<p>An overview of how the whole of the Government must coordinate for the best of a child, and how everything is connected in regard to achieving this. He also went into how our current society has a vertical structure, but how our global problems are of a horizontal nature- interwoven and interconnected. He also spoke of how complex it is to raise a child, far more complicated than creating a simple recipe, and even more so than building the technological know-how to get a rocket to the moon.</p>
<p><b>Lea Pulkkinen:</b> <i>Professor &amp; Chair of Haukkala Foundation.</i></p> <p>*Routledge, June 2017- now available to purchase through book suppliers.</p>	<p>The entire conference was based around the launch of Lea's seminal publication 'Human Development from middle childhood to middle adulthood: Growing up to be middle-aged'*, a synthesis of her 50 years of research and the renowned longitudinal JYLS project. One of the key findings she espouses is that life paths are not predestined, and that positive developments are possible at a later age. Of the many rewarding discoveries also, the concept that emotional regulation was one of the most crucial aspects for future all round success, enabled by child-centred parenting.</p>
<p><b>Michiel Matthes:</b> <i>Co-Founder &amp; Chair for Alliance for Childhood European Network Group</i></p>	<p>In highlighting to us the immense and tangible threats humanity faces in the form of climate change, digitalization, biotechnology, war and corporate interests, Michiel provided us with the necessary context for the importance of the Alliances work safeguarding children for not only this generation, but all the following ones.</p>
<p><b>Helma Brouwers:</b> <i>Professor and member of Janusz Korczak Foundation</i></p>	<p>A fascinating insight into alternative modes of viewing children and childhood, through the lens of Janusz Korczak, who argued and fought for a republic of childhood, and made the case that we need to go with children rather than against them, and that children are above all- subjects, not objects.</p>
<p><b>Clara Aerts:</b> <i>Chair of International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early Education (IASWECE)</i></p>	<p>In a passionate and inspiring talk, Clara encouraged us all to ask the question of 'what does it mean to be human?', and spoke of the ideas of Rudolf Steiner, in his promise of a new worldview and cultural impulse through Anthroposophy. As change comes through the children, it is essential we get children's education right- and the links between health.</p>
<p><b>Nickel van der Vorm:</b> <i>Co-Founder of Netherland's Institute for Educational Matters</i></p>	<p>Nickel brought about the vital question- what is the purpose of education? His arguments to resist the standardization of children, and averages, spoke of his deep passion for Pedagogical Tact, and bringing out what is already in the child, rather than trying to force things upon them.</p>
<p><b>Maria Kaisa Aula:</b> <i>Chair of Governmental Program, Ministry of Social Welfare and Health</i></p>	<p>Maria gave an in-depth look into the Finnish governmental reform- 'LAPE', whereby we were able to see the 'why' necessitating a reform, and also the method and approach being used to best carry out work for the best of a child in Finland. Building bridges between organizations and departments was a key theme, and also providing extensive support for parenting in the early years- a true foundation for a healthy society.</p>
<p><b>Thomas Kurttila:</b> <i>Ombudsman for Children in Finland, chair person elect for European</i></p>	<p>Thomas Kurttila chaired the second session of the conference, using his vast knowledge in his role as Ombudsman for children in Finland and Europe- spearheading attention to childhood, and ensuring the UN Convention Rights for the Child are upheld and communicated within the networks of</p>

<p><i>Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC)</i></p>	<p>government, professionals, child carers and the wider public. His arguments of needing care for children as the cornerstone for a sustainable society was a heartfelt, and vital message.</p>
<p><b>Daniel Kropf (via video):</b> <i>Founder &amp; Chair of Learning for Well-Being Foundation</i></p>	<p>Delivered to us as a video recording, Daniel spoke of the urgent need to develop more of a thinking, feeling, doing, and being aspect to educating children. He spoke of the need to weave together eastern, western and Indigenous approaches, and spoke of how our goal should be to “unleash the power of young people who create the future for everyone”.</p>
<p><b>Päivi Fadjukoff:</b> <i>Professor and Project Manager of Haukkala Foundation</i></p>	<p>As both the first speaker, and the last, Päivi’s eloquent and passion talk wove all the threads together of the previous talks, and gave us a solid reasoning for investing in children- children as the future, born now into a complex and ever-changing world, rampant with globalization and digitalization. She highlighted to all of us that taking care of the children results in a sustainable planet- with vitality and safety for all the world’s children.</p>