

Research project on joint initiatives on stress prevention

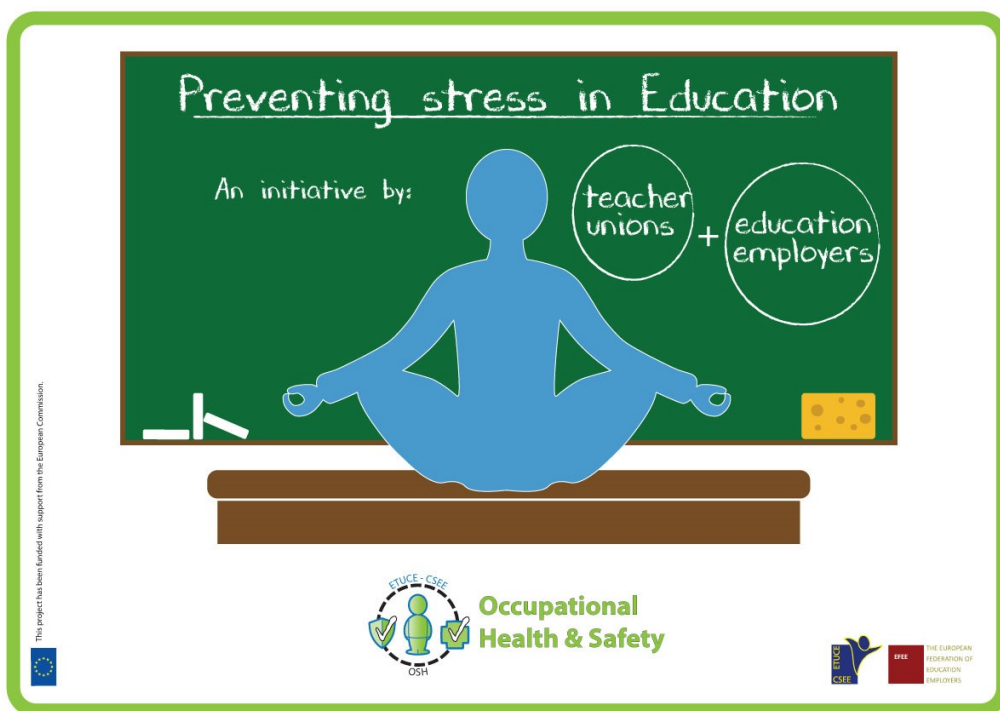
Social Partners Promoting Decent Workplaces in the Education Sector for a Healthier Working Life

This project is carried out with the financial support of the European Commission. Grant Agreement number: VS/2015/0030.

PREVENTING PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS AND WORK-RELATED STRESS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Case study report: FINLAND

October 2015



The Project is scientifically supported by FFAW (Freiburg research centre for occupational sciences) and ISTAS (Instituto Sindical de Trabajo, Ambiente y Salud.)



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The ETUCE (European Trade Union Committee for Education) – EFEE (European Federation of Education Employers) project advisory group wishes to thank the local study delegation members and all the people interviewed in Finland for their time and hospitality.

1. FIELDWORK NOTES

The data used in this report is mainly based on information collected in meetings and semi-structured group interviews with a total of 16 key participants who are employers and employees as well as governmental bodies and experts. The informative meetings with presentations were held with the Finnish Teacher Union **OAJ** and the Association of Finnish Independent Education Employers (**AFIEE**), representatives of the Local Government Employers **KT** were not able to attend. Meetings were also held with a counsellor from the **Ministry of Education and Culture**, a Safety Inspector from the **Regional State Administrative Agency (AVI)** and a specialist from the **Centre for Occupational Safety (TKK)**. Finally, there were semi-structured individual interviews with school leaders, and semi-structured group interviews with trade unionists and teachers from the **Kulosaari Secondary School** and **Helsingin Suomalainen Yhteiskoulu**. Both schools are independent (publicly funded schools managed by a foundation) and located in Helsinki. The study delegation was formed of two representatives from EFEE, four from ETUCE and one member of the research team (see annex 1). The **Helsingin Suomalainen Yhteiskoulu** includes primary, lower and upper secondary education (6 to 17 year old pupils). In the current school year there are 1190 students (500 boys and 690 girls) mainly from families with above average incomes, and 78 teachers (56 women and 22 men). **Kulosaaren Yhteiskoulu**, with lower and upper secondary education, has at present 830 students (330 boys and 500 girls), mainly from families of mixed socio-economic status; and 60 teachers (42 women and 18 men).

At the schools, the researcher conducted **semi-structured group interviews** and at the end of the interviews, the other members of the study delegation could ask further questions in accordance with the guidelines agreed upon by the project advisory group (see annex 2). All interviews took place in a constructive manner and in an informal environment allowing for the achievement of the case study goals: to document and learn about good practices for the prevention of psychosocial risks and combating work-related stress in secondary schools.

The information analysed was in the form of audio recordings facilitated by the film team, study delegation notes and discussions. Additional data was given by the interviewees and provides relevant documentation. For data protection reasons, the names of the staff interviewed are not disclosed in this report.

2. COUNTRY BACKGROUND

Education system

The Finnish education system seeks to achieve equity and consistency in results. Basic education is a nine-year education for 7 to 16 year old students in comprehensive schools, including what in other countries is known as lower secondary education. Young people who have completed their compulsory schooling can opt for one extra year of basic education. This voluntary education is intended to help and encourage young people to continue their studies at the upper secondary level

(http://www.minedu.fi/export/sites/default/OPM/Koulutus/koulutusjaerjestelmae/liitteet/finnish_education.pdf).

Upper secondary school offers general education for students of about 16-19 years of age. It is publically funded and provided by local authorities, municipal consortia or *independent* organisations authorised by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The majority of the upper secondary schools in Finland are run by local municipal consortia.

The general upper secondary school is based on courses with no specified-year classes. It normally takes 3 years to complete the course but the studies may be undertaken over two, three or four years. Upper secondary schooling ends with a matriculation examination drawn up nationally, which entitles students to continue studies in universities, polytechnics or vocational institutions. A few upper secondary schools specialise in a certain subject or prepare for the International Baccalaureate.

Working conditions

In 2013, around 175,000 employees (of whom two-thirds were women) were working in the education sector. A large majority of employees in the education sector (two-thirds) work in the local government sector. The “Finnish success” in education (i.e. as reflected by PISA results) can be seen as a result of a mixture of policies which ensure equal opportunities with a flexible system to fit students’ needs, recruiting and maintaining competent teachers (highly trained and professional; selected through a highly competitive process – only 8% of those wishing to take up teaching studies actually go on to study for the career at university) and giving them adequate support and good working conditions – small class sizes, a voice in school decisions and high levels of professional autonomy. These factors lead to a relative stability in the teacher workforce and success in teaching. Student-teacher ratios are 8.92 students per full-time equivalent teacher in lower secondary education and 16.06 students per full-time equivalent teacher in upper secondary education. On the whole, average monthly gross salaries are around €3,800 for teaching. Salaries are based on collective agreements and depend on the teaching level, the number of lessons taught and the specific subject (the salary for teaching sciences, humanities or sports is different); individual agreements are also allowed. Net teaching time was 589 hours and 447 hours respectively in lower and upper secondary education in 2014. This represents the lowest number of teaching hours per week among OECD countries, and equates to 19 hours of teaching per week on average. The proportion of fixed-term employment has stayed around 10 percent and is more frequent among young women. Finally, it is important to state that teachers have the opportunity to take a sabbatical year after 16 years of working.

Occupational Health and Safety

The Finnish OSH-system consists of specific legislation (over 100 regulations), policy mechanisms, coordination, collaborations, standards, means and tools and statistics. The legislative approach combines both occupational health and safety and pupils’ safety approaches: all people participating in education (teachers and students) have the right to a healthy and safe working and learning environment. In this context “safety” includes the psychosocial environment and the right to obtain support when needed. Key policies are negotiated among the government, employers and trade unions. The Regional State Administrative Agency (AVI) is responsible for the regional supervision and direction of occupational safety and health policies. AVI’s activities are targeted to maximise societal impact, and along with the supervision of compliance with safety and health regulations, AVI provides instructions, advice and training in occupational safety and health, working closely with employer and employee organisations.

Finnish Social Partners jointly manage the Centre for Occupational Safety (TTK) which provides training, information, materials and development services, and administers maintains a register of occupational safety personnel.

Social dialogue

Social dialogue in education is well developed in Finland and common in occupational health and safety issues, with **OAJ, AFIEE and KT** (Local Government Employers) as main partners. The proportion of teachers who are members of teacher unions is 95%. The teacher unions' and employers' organisations most successful activity in the last year was a project on stopping violence in schools and kindergartens (stopping violence at schools has been given a high priority in Finland) which focused on developing forms for reporting and processing violent incidents at work.

3. STRESSORS

All the interviewees agreed that education in Finland has been given a high priority for years, and that students' needs and teachers' working conditions have been key issues. In this context, main stress sources are seen in the domain of **workload and demands**, referring to **quantitative** (amount of tasks and time to do them), **emotional** (interacting with pupils, parents and colleagues), and **cognitive** demands (dealing with knowledge and decisions). Although, it has to be highlighted that all interviewees agreed that teachers usually have enough resources and support to deal with these demands, and that they also enjoy a high level of influence over their own job, including some autonomy in the organisation of working time. This is mainly because of the conception of a school as a "flat hierarchical organisation" where teachers have high levels of opportunities for skill development. In this context, cognitive demands contribute to healthy *active work* (work characterised by high demands and high control) and not to *high strain* (high demands with low control) or unhealthy conditions.

In addition to the high demands, the **payment system** may add pressure on teachers if they are recruited to teach fewer lessons or lower paid subjects.

Finally, increasing **commuting time** from home to work and vice versa is seen as stressing in the context of the closing of small schools which are then clustered in bigger educational institutions.

Sources

The cited high demands and workload came from different sources:

- Highly **demanding parents and very motivated students** who have both high expectations from their teachers and school leader.
- Increasing **communication demands from highly participative parents**, including the use of e-mails and easy-to-use on-line systems that add tasks to the daily work of teachers and put pressure on them to work overtime.

- The demands that highly committed teachers place on themselves (teachers want to meet the highest standards and do their best), are potentially leading to over-commitment.
- Demands for **team work and increasing needs for cooperation** (although this can be seen as related to both demands and resources). Team work with colleagues adds the need for specific professional and social skills, and results in some cases in additional working time.
- **Extra-curricular demands**, such as visits or excursions, that may result in a loss of teaching hours, which teachers may want to compensate for; and activities with colleagues and school staff organised by the school (i.e. activities with families) that introduce conflicts with their family and social life.
- **Pressure to adapt to changes** and innovation – i.e. new curriculum developments and updates.

4. GOOD PRACTICES AT NATIONAL AND SCHOOL LEVEL

National level

“Safety in a learning environment”

There is a legal requirement in Finland for teachers and students to enjoy a safe learning environment. This has to be embedded into school action plans linked to the curricula and including the protection and promotion of health and the prevention of bullying and violence. This coordinates the legal requirements contained within regulations for occupational health and safety (OSH) and the Pupil/Students Welfare Act. Accordingly, all education providers have to draw up action plans. The labour inspectorate and state agencies help schools and social agents to go beyond the mere implementation of legal requirements by facilitating high level assessment and support – i.e. the use of the in-company *Valmeri* inquiry, an easy to use inspection tool for measuring working conditions with an emphasis on psychosocial workload. On the one hand, Social Partners, along with their autonomous activities, jointly contribute to maintain well informed and trained employees, employers and their representatives through the activities of the Centre for Occupational Safety (TTK). Examples of such activities include the “Well Being at Work Card”, a mass training programme, and the “Stopping violence in schools and kindergartens” project. On the other hand, municipalities encourage organisations and workers to give visibility to the progress in work organisation and share innovations in order to improve working life, though programmes like *Kunteko* (<http://kunteko.fi/>) focusing on innovation and productivity, building trust and cooperation, maintaining a competent workforce and improving occupational health and working conditions.

School level

The concepts of “trust” (at both vertical and horizontal levels), “team working” and “cooperation” spontaneously arose in the interviews with principals, teachers and worker representatives at the schools. This reflects the internalisation of the national strategic objective that

good working conditions and quality of education go together. The main features of the observed good practices at schools are as follows:

Schools implemented a collaborative, collegial and co-operative leadership model involving leaders, administrators, teachers, education support personnel and the whole pedagogical community; this is seen as the most effective form of leadership in educational institutions. Regarding psychosocial risk prevention, this model encourages influence and horizontal trust (among peers and colleagues) and vertical trust (leaders – teachers upwards and downwards). It implies a flat hierarchy with good communication and opportunities to speak out that facilitate the detection of any problem and agreement on its possible solution. Such organisations allow teachers to share knowledge, improve their professional skills and get support from colleagues and school leaders when needed; contributing to the construction of a psychosocial working environment characterised by respect, trust, cooperation and high levels of autonomy and development of professional skills for teachers.

Integrating psychosocial risk prevention as a daily *normal* issue in the school. Together with this leadership model and with schools going beyond OSH legal requirements (i.e. OSH Committee meetings, compulsory risk assessment, preventive actions and so on) occupational health focuses on processes and solutions rather than control and problems.

Making job demands manageable. Sharing leadership makes teachers more responsible and accountable for their work which otherwise could become too challenging for teachers. That is why it is important to keep work demands manageable and to improve resources. Various solutions support these objectives:

Subject meetings, in which teachers of the same subject comment on methods and tools they use and share materials.

Regular but informal peer interaction in the common spaces where teachers meet to prepare lessons, to talk to the others or just to relax.

Implementing ICT and e-mail protocols, i.e., establishing a time after which e-mails do not need to be replied to that same day, replies can be sent the next day, no replies necessary at weekends.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the Finnish secondary education system, a specific policy on psychosocial risks prevention is integrated into national education and occupational health policies, and is based on both teachers' and students' rights to enjoy a safe learning environment. Accordingly, state agencies and Social Partners cooperate in order to implement these broad objectives at school level.

Regarding work stressors, job demands are the main issues. The main sources are highly demanding parents and the highly motivated students who challenge teachers. Along with this, teachers have high commitment levels and high expectations of themselves. Other demands arise from the need to adapt to changes in curricula, increasing commuting time, and extra-curricular activities with colleagues and school staff organised by the school that may also introduce conflicts with family and social life. Finally, wages vary according not only to the number of lessons but on the specific subject teachers teach.

The collaborative, collegial and co-operative leadership model is not specifically designed to deal with psychosocial risks, but it implies the building of flat organisations with good communication, high levels of teacher involvement, trust and cooperation that facilitate the management of psychosocial risks.

Along with this, psychosocial risk prevention is integrated as an everyday issue in the schools, and they go beyond OSH legal requirements to focus on processes and solutions rather than control and problems.

In the schools studied, examples of initiatives to make demands manageable and to improve resources to deal with them are: subject meetings, in which teachers of the same subject share experience; informal peer interaction in the common spaces where teachers meet to prepare lessons, to talk to other colleagues or just to relax; and establishing rules for replying to e-mails to avoid working excessive hours beyond the school day.

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6. ANNEX

Annex 1: Study delegation

Alexandra Cornea FSLE, Romania (ETUCE)

Patricio Perez FECCOO, Spain (ETUCE)

Bianka Stege, EFEE

Salvador Moncada, ISTAS (researcher)

Susan Flocken, ETUCE

Tari Aho, AFIEE, Finland (EFEE)

Wouter Massink and Otilia Babara, Massink Media (film team)

Annex 2: Programme of the visit

Case study in Finland: Agenda, key actors and informants		
DAY	HOUR	ACTIVITY
28.09.2015	9:00 – 10:00	Welcome to Finland AFIEE, short presentation Description of the Education System in Finland - Information on the education workforce and working conditions in the country, specific on secondary schools - Information on labour relations
	10:00 – 12:15	Promoting well-being and safety in Finnish schools Occupational Safety and Health Administration - The framework of OSH by the Finnish law (obligations, rights and responsibilities) - Addressing psychosocial risks prevention and combating work-related stress - A key objective is promoting and maintaining the employees' ability to work and preventing work-related health hazards and adverse effects. - How is prevention organised in the Education sector?
	13:10 – 16:30	Case Study Kulosaaren yhteiskoulu, Kulosaari secondary school - OSH at the school with a specific focus on addressing psychosocial risks prevention and combating work-related stress
29.09.2015	9:30 – 12:00	Towards Better work -Tools for improving wellbeing and productivity at work Co-operation between social partners in Finland - Stopping violence in schools and kindergartens (Developing forms for reporting and processing violent incidents, practical example in supporting well-being at work) Kunteko 2020, Programme for improving working life in Finnish local government
	13:00 – 16:30	SYK Suomalainen yhteiskoulu - OSH at the school with a specific focus on addressing psychosocial risks prevention and combating work-related stress