Critical School Geography

Education for Global Citizenship

John Huckle

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Curriculum Unit 3

Happiness and Equality: UK and Finland compared

Students use the OECD Better Life Index to compare and explain differences in happiness in the UK and Finland.

For teachers and students of geography, The Spirit Level provokes a number of further questions. Why are some societies more unequal than others? We need to add to the international comparison of nations a temporal analysis that considers the different historical, economic and political trajectories that have given rise to different dominant economic and social relationships within different countries. Grant & O’Hara, Geography, 95/3, 2010, p. 153

This unit focuses on SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) and GCE topic 3 (underlying assumptions and power dynamics).
**Curriculum Plan**

**Key idea** Societies with a high level of equality are happier.

**Inquiry questions**

What makes us happy? What indicators should be used in compiling a happiness index (well being or better life index) for countries?

Why are the citizens of Finland happier than those in the UK? What can Finland teach us about creating a happier society with a higher quality of life and a more sustainable form of development?

How can citizens shape liberal democracies so that they deliver higher levels of equality and happiness?

**Key understandings**

High levels of inequality, poverty and disadvantage are neither necessary nor inevitable. They are integral and necessary parts of capitalist societies but governments can reduce them with welfare policies. To eliminate poverty, inequality and unhappiness, we may need to introduce more radical forms of democracy.

Measuring happiness and comparing levels of happiness in different countries is not easy. The OECD’s Better Life index combines subjective and objective measures. Its results show that Finland’s citizens are happier than those in the UK. Their society is more equal, provides a higher quality of life, and is undergoing a more sustainable form of development. To explain the causes of happiness / unhappiness we need to consider the different histories, economies, politics and cultures of different countries.

**Key concepts**  
- happiness, inequality, power, democracy, welfare capitalism, social class, social exclusion, austerity, social acceleration, slowdown, lockdown, resonance

**Key values**  
- social justice, democracy, human rights

**Key skills**

Use of Better Life website to generate own index and interpret country and topic reports. Compare graphics for UK and Finland. Debate what factors account for Finland’s superior performance.
Learning outcomes

Students have a deeper understanding of the link between equality and happiness. They are able to explain and evaluate the diverse factors that account for Finland’s citizens being happier than those in the UK. They can describe different forms of welfare capitalism and relate these to the policies of different political parties.

Learning activities

Class survey of happiness and concerns. Use of Better Life Index website to compare UK and Finland. Ranking and discussion of factors that may account for Finland’s superior performance.

Assessment task

Using graphics from the Good Life website and elsewhere prepare a poster explaining why Finland’s citizens are among the happiest in the world

Links to Unesco guidance on ESD and GCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities</th>
<th>Reduce inequality within and among nations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive learning objectives</td>
<td>The learner understands that inequality is a major driver of societal problems and individual dissatisfaction. The learner understands local, national and global processes that both promote and hinder equality (fiscal, wage, and social protection policies, corporate activities, etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-emotional learning objectives</td>
<td>The learner is able to raise awareness of inequalities. The learner becomes aware of inequalities in their surroundings as well as in the wider world and is able to recognize the problematic consequences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural learning objectives</td>
<td>The learner is able to identify of develop an objective indicator to compare different groups, nations, etc with respect to inequalities. The learner is able to identify and analyse different types of causes and reasons for inequalities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCE Topic 3</td>
<td>Underlying assumptions and power dynamics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Investigate underlying assumptions and describe inequalities and power dynamics
Factors influencing inequalities and power dynamics and the challenges some people face (Immigrants, women, youth, marginalised populations)

Suggested topics include: fiscal, wage and social protection policies; historical roots of current inequalities

Example of learning approaches and methods include: develop an enquiry-based project How does inequality influence people’s happiness?

Preparation

Ideally this unit requires students to have individual or group access to computers and the internet.

Familiarise yourself with SDG 10 reduced inequalities, its aims and related facts and figures. The Equality Trust has information on inequality in the UK.

Read the article ‘Spotlight on . . . The Spirit Level by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett’, Lyndsay Grant & Glen O’Hara, Geography, 95/3, 2010, pp.149-153. This provides much of the theoretical background to this unit. Note on page 152 the authors refer to Esping-Andersen’s typology of three forms of welfare capitalism. Those that characterise the UK and Finland are liberal and social democratic regimes:

Liberal regimes, characterized by modest, means-tested assistance, and targeted at low-income, usually working-class recipients. Their strict entitlement rules are often associated with stigma. This type of welfare state encourages market solutions to social problems — either passively, by guaranteeing only a minimum, or actively, by directly subsidizing private welfare schemes

Social Democratic regimes, universalistic systems that promote an equality of high standards, rather than an equality of minimal needs. This implies decommodifying welfare services, to reduce the division introduced by market-based access to welfare services, as well as preemptively socializing the costs of caring for children, the aged, and the helpless, instead of than waiting until the family's capacity to support them is depleted. This results in a commitment to a heavy social service burden, which introduces an imperative to minimize social problems, thereby aligning the system's goals with the welfare and emancipation (typically via full employment policies) of those it supports
In the UK ‘welfare reform’ has been used, along with use of the terms ‘skivers and strivers’ to mask austerity policies and their impacts on the poor and disadvantaged. Being poor is portrayed as the result of some personal failure rather than bad policy and a social democratic regime as something we cannot afford. Food banks have become normalised and people with disabilities are repeatedly denied benefits.


Activity Sheet 3.1 is based on this article (Finland is the happiest country in the world says UN report, Patrick Collinson, The Guardian 14.03.2018) and letters to the editors that it provoked.

Now familiarize yourself with the [OECD’s Better Life Initiative website](#) that measures and reports on well being.

At the bottom on this page are the key findings by country. You should download the findings for the [UK](#) and [Finland](#) as pdfs that you will need to display on the whiteboard.

Also on [this page](#) is a video ‘How’s Life? Exposes deep well-being divisions’ and a slide show ‘Measuring well-being’ You may wish to watch these.

Now go to [this page](#). Notice on the graphic at the top of the page you can display countries by rank. Finland comes 9th, the UK 14th (Norway, Sweden and Denmark are all in top 4) (Website visited July 2020).

Create your own better life index on this page and watch the country rankings change to match the parameters in your index. This allows you or a student to find the country that best matches their better life index.

Downloading [the index data](#) from the link on this page allows you to see what statistical data has contributed to the 8 measures of quality of life; the 3 measures of material conditions; and the four measures of sustainability of well-being over time. Note it is possible to customize this date and draw charts from it.

Now go to the countries tab at the top of the page. From there it is possible to download longer summaries of how the UK and Finland perform. Also under topics, you can explore how countries rank on different topics.

This page compares statistics for the UK and Finland.
Possible procedure

The unit falls into 3 sections: happiness survey; Better Life website (happiness and inequality); and looking for wider explanations. Each may require several lessons.

1 Happiness survey

Begin by asking students to rate their level of happiness or satisfaction with life on a scale from one to ten. Compare their average result with that revealed by the PISA study cited in chapter three. In 2017 an OECD survey found that Dutch teenagers were the happiest (Finland 4th) The UK did not rank in the top ten.

Discuss with students the validity and reliability of such surveys. Are they really measuring happiness? Would the results be the same if they were carried out at a different time, in different circumstances, with a different sample of teenagers?

Ask the students about concerns or things that make them unhappy: things that distract from their quality of life or their satisfaction with life. Compare their concerns with those of other teenagers outlined in the chapter. What would make their lives happier? What would reduce or take away their concerns?

Consider organising students to design and carrying out a wider survey of pupils in the school, their level of happiness, their concerns, changes they would consider would make them happier. Students then decide how to present and communicate results.

Now read or display three early paragraphs from Henley’s article in The Guardian:

Last year (2017) on the centenary of its independence, Finland was ranked by assorted international indices, the most stable, the safest and the best-governed country in the world. It was also the third wealthiest, the third least corrupt, the second most socially progressive, and the third most socially just.

Finland’s judicial system is the most independent in the world, its police are the most trusted, its banks the soundest, its companies the second most ethical, its elections the second freest, and its citizens enjoy the highest level of personal freedom, choice and well-being.

The Nordic country’s 5.5 million inhabitants are also the third most gender equal in the world and have the fifth lowest income inequality. Their babies are
the least underweight, their kids feel the most secure, and their teens perform the second best at reading.

Discuss whether the students would like to live in Finland? What do they see as the advantages and disadvantages? Why do they think Finland performs so well on so many indices of quality of life and well being?

2 The Better Life website (happiness and inequality)

Introduce the Better Life website. Demonstrate its main features and then allow students to become familiar with its contents and interactive features.

Demonstrate how the site allows visitors to construct their own better life index by weighting the eleven indicators (top right and useful help button). Allow students to experiment. How do the countries rankings change when the indicators are weighted differently? Which indicators are most significant for young people.

Display and discuss the two downloads (How’s Life in UK/Finland). These present charts on current well being; resources for the future (kinds of capital); deprivations; gender inequality; inequalities between social groups; and life satisfaction measures. For example those living in relative income poverty (Finland 6%, UK 12%), life satisfaction scores of top 20% as a ratio of scores of bottom 20% (Finland 1.5, UK 2.1).

Focus attention on the pages that focus on inequalities between the top and bottom performing individuals in the two countries (page six). Here is a summary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>United Kingdom</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>OECD average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Household incomes: top performing 20% relative to bottom performing 20%</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of wealth owned by top 10%</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earnings of top 10% relative to bottom 10%. FT employees.</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PISA score for science: top 10% relative to bottom 10%</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life satisfaction: top performing 20% relative to bottom performing 20%</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with time use scores:</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note these findings are blind to race, gender and disability. Figures on pages 3 to 5 do allow comparisons of inequalities between men and women, younger and older people, and those with different levels of educational attainment. In both countries there is evidence that middle aged and older people are doing better than younger people (page 4 shows intergenerational inequality).

Introduce students to The Spirit Level and the authors’ claims. Do these levels of inequalities support the claim that countries with lower levels of inequality are happier countries? What other data can students find on the Better Life website to support or contradict the claim?

Students might make a similar table showing the two countries performance in relation to the four capitals (natural, human, economic and social) that sustain future well-being. How many indicators does each country have in the top (Finland 6, UK 2) and bottom tiers (Finland 2, UK 5)? How do the four capitals relate to sustainable development? How does sustainable development foster happiness?

Consider introducing students to the concepts of social acceleration and slowdown. How do the satisfaction with time use scores support the idea that more people in the UK are dissatisfied with their use of time (maybe feel rushed and pressured and hence alienated and unhappy) than in Finland?

3 Looking for wider explanations

But are other factors at work? Turn to the different historical, economic, and political trajectories of the two countries that have given rise to different economic and social relationships, mentioned by Grant and O’Hara. Turn to the ‘power dynamics’ (political economy) underpinning welfare policy and provision in the two countries.

Make copies of Activity Sheet 3.1 and cut each into eleven slips of paper each outlining one factor that may explain why Finns are happy.

Read through the factors with the students to ensure comprehension and then divide them into groups to rank the factors according to their significance in explaining why Finns are happy. They could arrange the slips of paper in a pyramid with the most significant factor at the top – 1, 2, 3, 5.
Discuss the results. Clearly other factors besides equality contribute to happiness and well-being in Finland. Clearly the country is not perfect but having a more socially democratic (rather than neoliberal) form of capitalism has benefitted the majority of its citizens.

What are the implications of what we have learnt about Finland and the UK for politics and citizenship? Is it desirable to radically reduce levels of inequality? Is it possible? What kind of democracy and citizenship might accomplish this?

Possible extensions

1 Schooling in Finland

Activity Sheet 3.1 suggests that education is a factor to be considered in explaining why Finns are happy. Show the following videos to the class and discuss whether or not they would prefer to attend school in England or Finland.

Five Reasons Why Finland is a Global Education Leader

Why Finland has the Best Education, Michael Moore

There are many other videos on the same theme. Wrigley (Activity Sheet 3.2) provides a summary of the features of Finland’s national curriculum that may promote happiness.

2 The Shadow of Happiness Report

In 2018 the Nordic Council of Ministers, an inter-parliamentary group comprised of representatives from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, as well as some autonomous islands, published this report. It grouped people into three categories (thriving, struggling and suffering) based on their self-reported life satisfaction (scale of 1 to 10). The populations most likely to be struggling or suffering were the very old (over 80) and the young. 13.5% of 18 to 23 year olds in the Nordic states rated their life satisfaction as less than six out of ten. The primary cause of this discontent, the authors concluded, was the rising rate of youth mental illness. In Finland suicide is responsible for a third of all deaths among 15 to 24 year olds.

In her 2017 book iGen the American psychologist Jean Twinge attributed the sharp increase in mental illness among young people to the proliferation of smart phones and the rise of social media. The more time teenagers spent on social media the more likely they are to report feeling unhappy or depressed. Mental illness is complex and there is unlikely to be merely one reason so many
young people worldwide are miserable – or simple solutions. Nevertheless finding ways to protect young people from the harmful effects of digital culture could save lives.

Having been introduced to the findings of the report and the gap between adult and youth happiness in Finland, students might debate Twinge’s hypothesis in the light of their own use of smart phones and social media and the ideas outlined in chapter three. Ofcom report on children and adults’ use and attitudes towards media, including social media is a useful resource (see chapter eight)

Should schools be phone free zones? Should governments regulate social media more? (See Select Committee Report on Disinformation and ‘Fake News’ 2019)
Activity Sheet 3.1 Explaining why people in Finland are happy

Climate. A cold harsh and remote place. Every person has to work hard for themselves. But you have to help your neighbours. This makes Finns self-reliant, private, but also dependent on a highly cooperative society, where rules matter.

Sisu & Talkoo. Cultural traits. Sisu is a kind of courageous persistence regardless of consequence. It is what, in 1939-40 allowed an army of 350,000 men to twice fight off Soviet forces three times their number. Talkoo means ‘working together collectively for a specific good’. Getting the harvest in, stocking wood, raising money. Its about cooperating, everyone together, equally.

History. Finland only became independent in 1817. Before that it was ruled by Sweden and then Russia. In the 19C there was an aristocracy whose wealth was based on timber, shipping, and cotton. In 1918 an alliance of industrial capitalists and aristocrats launched a war against Finnish workers and the same reactionary elite allied the country with the Nazis during WW2. Finland has tried to escape this dark past and now the gaps between social classes are smaller than in other countries. You don’t look up at people, and you don’t look down. You look level. The tax paid by the top 10,000 earners is published in an annual list on ‘national envy day’. Finland is big on transparency.

Education. Finland’s free system was established in 1866 and regularly ranks amongst the world’s best. Children start school at 7 after play-based state run preschools. They then go to schools that are all publically funded and comprehensive where children are taught to care about each other. All teachers have masters degrees and a large degree of freedom to decide what to teach and how to teach. There is no testing or exams until the age of 16.

Economy. For many years Finland’s economy was dominated by large mining and forestry firms, then by the once mighty Nokia. Today Finland is close behind Silicon Valley in the number of start-ups per head, and is ranked as the most innovative country, per capita, in the world by the World Economic Forum.

Universities. Academics led Finland’s independence movement and created Finland as a nation: its language, history, literature, music, symbols and folklore. Since independence, nearly 30% of Finland’s heads of state and government have been university professors. They shaped the country and created confidence in social mobility.
Gender equality. Finland ranks 3rd in the world for gender equality. In 1906 Finnish women became the first to run for electoral office. Nearly 10% of MPs in Finland’s first parliament were women (the figure is now 42%). As early as 1930, up to 30% of university students were women.

Political leadership. Finland’s wartime and postwar leaders took big, sensible decisions and the citizens backed them as everyone knew the country was fighting for its existence. Responsible choices were made by coalition governments on such matters as infrastructure investments that have paid dividends many times over. Finland has made record investments in research and development and is very friendly to start-up businesses. Finns criticise their politicians but they do trust them.

Welfare capitalism. Finland’s welfare system provides high quality services for all irrespective of ability to pay. Welfare is a right for all rather than a safety net for the poor. It seeks to minimize social problems by promoting social equality through high rates of taxation and other measures. It spends 31% of its GDP on its welfare state, the second highest proportion in the OECD (UK 27%).

The Nordic theory of love. In the family it is realising that relationships can only flourish between individuals who are equal and independent. In a society it means policy choices aimed at ensuring the greatest possible degree of independence and opportunity for everyone.

Current trends (2018) Recent trends cast a shadow over Finland’s success. The ruling coalition is pursuing a policy of deregulation, including dismantling parts of the welfare state and education budgets have been cut back. Racism and neo-facism are on the rise. The Finns party is overly nationalistic while the Nordic Resistance Movement aims to create a national-socialist state. The integration of immigrants has not been a success. Iraquis and Afghans who came to Finland in 2015 have been deported.
Activity Sheet 3.2

Key features of Finland’s national curriculum

1. an enlightened set of aims, emphasising democracy, environmental sustainability, multiculturalism, community and self-esteem

2. an open view of culture – education is not only a means of ‘transferring cultural tradition from one generation to the next... it is also the mission of basic education to create new culture, revitalize ways of thinking and acting, and develop the pupil’s ability to evaluate critically’

3. formal schooling starting two years later than in England, around the age of 7, until which point children learn informally in kindergarten, and those speaking other languages at home being expected to learn Finnish more gradually

4. a gradual division into subjects, so that history is introduced in grade 5, and environmental and natural studies dividing up gradually, to become geography and separate sciences in grade 7 (the equivalent age to England’s Y7 and Y9);

5. cross-curricular themes are emphasised from the start

6. no national testing until age 19

7. a curriculum well matched to age and stage of development, in terms of interests and cognitive development

8. full recognition of modern media and genres

9. an emphasis on problem-solving, interpretation, creativity and experience.⁹⁰

Source Wrigley 2014 p. 41