

## **Insights from the Education Nation: The Case of Estonia**

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In recent years, Estonia has emerged as an educational powerhouse. With an approach to education that combines play and child-centred learning with new technologies, the success draws on lessons from elsewhere but also a long heritage of Estonian pedagogy. Maria Jürimäe traces the history of public education in Estonia to explain the link between education, democracy, and equity in one of Europe's smallest countries.

Estonia is a small country, but its education system is increasingly recognised as one of the most successful in the world in international rankings such as PISA. Estonia is also known as a “digital society” – e-Estonia. Everything from voting to creating a small business can be done with just a few mouse clicks. It also has a reputation as a country of song, which holds massive song festivals and whose Singing Revolution paved the way to independence from the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. But how are these qualities connected?

For Estonia, education is about more than knowledge and skills: it is key to the country's identity and culture. This importance is encapsulated in the slogan “Education Nation”. The Estonian educational system has deep roots and the core of its educational thought remained strong throughout the Soviet occupation. Over the past 30 years, education has proven a key means for Estonia to build its independence and develop as a prosperous and resilient society.

### **The roots of Estonian education**

The roots of public education in the Estonian language can be traced back to the Lutheran Reformation in the 16th century. It is a tenet of Lutheranism that every Christian should be literate, to be able to read the Bible. Under Swedish rule from the 16th to the 18th century, this idea spread and the level of literacy in Estonia increased. By the time Russian Tsar Peter I conquered Estonia in 1710, the first Estonian-language books had already been published and a system of elementary education was in place. At the beginning of the Tsarist empire, Russia allowed the Baltic states relative autonomy under a doctrine known as the “Baltic Special Order”. Estonia's education system was thus able to operate without interference in the 18th century.

From the middle of the 19th century on, Estonia underwent a national awakening. Its network of public schools grew, the first newspapers were founded, and song festivals and associations of peasants, Christian groups, and literary circles emerged. The period of Russification, whereby the Russian Empire sought to impose Russian culture and language across its dominions from the mid-19th century on, took years to reach border areas such as Estonia.

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smart.*

Yet from 1885, Estonian primary schools were forced to teach in Russian and most teachers were replaced. This period lasted until the first Russian Revolution in 1905. Up until the 1917 Revolution, most schools still had to teach in Russian. The result was a decline in the quality of education, as children were forced to learn by memory rather than developing real understanding. But it was through this experience that the foundations of the modern education system began to be laid.

To resist the pressures of Russification, the Estonian national movement developed the concept of national kindergarten. The idea was to guarantee that children's early education would still be in Estonian. The first Estonian- language kindergarten was opened in Tartu in 1905.

Other predominantly Lutheran countries, such as Finland and Sweden, also have a long tradition of public education. However, Estonia's experience of colonisation and forced language change left an indelible mark on its collective memory and built an understanding of the strong link between public education, culture, and identity.

Estonia gained its freedom from Russia in 1918 after winning a war of independence in the aftermath of the First World War. Many former schoolteachers were still around to once again teach in Estonian, and many younger teachers joined their ranks too. An Estonian curriculum, cutting edge for the period, was quickly developed.

Johannes Käis, a leading figure in the restoration of Estonian education, was key to this development. A man ahead of his time, he was active in teacher training, curriculum development, and textbook writing. His ideas emphasised integrated learning and individual learning paths to develop functional literacy and critical thinking skills. His approach also included practical and work-related topics, as well as outdoor learning and experiments. While the older generation of teachers sometimes struggled, his students trained a younger cohort of teachers in this spirit.

The early kindergarten teachers were also professionally trained by the leading Estonian pedagogue Carl Heinrich Niggol. Many studied in Europe and incorporated the latest approaches developed by educational trailblazers such as Maria Montessori. Inspired by the German pedagogue Friedrich Fröbel, kindergarten was play-based and influenced by the Estonian tradition of song, nursery rhymes, dance, and crafts.

## **Resistance through education**

While much had been achieved in 20 years of Estonian independence, these ideas were suppressed after the Soviet occupation in 1945. It was no shock to Estonians. Teachers had heard their parents' stories of life under Russification. In 1945, however, education leaders in Estonia managed to successfully make the case that public education in Estonian should continue. For a country whose population was nearly completely literate, changing the language of instruction would undermine the quality of education. What's more, on paper, the Soviet Union supported the autonomy of all nations.

So education in Estonia became organised in a parallel system, with Estonian-language schools in place alongside new Russian-language schools that followed the standard curricula taught in most Soviet republics. The number of Russian schools was initially small but grew fast because of an active migration policy. However, most schools continued to teach in Estonian. The curriculum was a translated and adapted programme developed by the Estonian Socialist Republic. It lasted one year longer and included special courses in Estonian history and literature. These courses looked ideologically appropriate from the outside: they described the hard work of Estonian peasants under German rule, the harsh punishments they faced, and the hypocrisy of the Church. But people who had lived in a free country knew how to read between the lines, and teachers deliberately taught the material in this way too. Soviet Estonian literature and poetry have many layers and sometimes sharp sarcastic humour, which a skilful teacher can use as they will.

Meanwhile, the children of the Russian-speaking migrants who came from all over the Soviet Union to enjoy Estonia's "Western" way of life were educated separately in the parallel system. They lived in their Soviet World. The same uniform texts and curricula were followed from Karelia on the Finnish border to Siberia thousands of kilometres to the east.

The Soviet system of terror and repression did not tolerate opposition, so teachers in Estonian-speaking schools played the game and kept up appearances as "beetroots" (red through and through). But really most were "radishes" (red on the outside, white on the inside). After the occupation, some pupils of Käis and Niggol were killed, others were sent to Siberia, and some fled as refugees to Western countries. But most stayed in Estonia and continued their work as teachers and teacher trainers. Soviet education required all teachers to take a one-month training course every five years and these courses were opportunities to pass on many of the old ideas and methods to a new generation of teachers. Thus strong communities of practice where the best didactic ideas were learned and shared continued to exist.

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In kindergarten, Estonian teachers enjoyed an even better situation. In the 1950s, the Soviet curriculum was translated into Estonian. But from 1968, a special programme was developed by local experts, many of whom were women who had studied under Niggol in the 1920s. Their programme was ostensibly prescriptive, decorated with red quotes and dedicated to topics such as Lenin's childhood and the "friendship of all workers", but the true emphasis was on the approach. Concepts such as developmentally appropriate learning, the value of play, and the importance of physical education, music, and crafts were central.

In the 1980s, a Soviet period of Russification began. The Estonian-minded minister of education was replaced by a Russian-minded official. The number of Russian lessons was

increased, and translated Soviet kindergarten material began to be introduced. But by the time it was printed in 1987, it was already too late. The Singing Revolution had already begun.

In Estonia, the Singing Revolution refers to the events that helped pave the way for the fall of the Soviet Union and the restoration of independence. Across the Baltics, public festivals and demonstrations, often organised around environmental causes, where traditional and newly written songs, were sung emerged as key moments of resistance. Teachers were one of the groups able to organise most quickly in the window opened by these events. The first congress of teachers was held in 1987. The ideas discussed there around competency-based and integrated education match the concepts referred to today as 21st-century skills, but correspond just as closely to the ideas developed by Estonian pedagogues such as Käis in the early 20th century.

Teachers were among the first actors to seize the freedom of the Singing Revolution. I was a pupil in Year 7 when the Singing Revolution began. My literature teacher had always been “state loyal” and followed the official curriculum, but she also taught us to love literature and read between the lines. So while my first essay that year was “Why I honour Pavel Korchagin”, about the protagonist of Nikolai Ostrovsky’s Soviet classic *How the Steel Was Tempered*, my last was “What does it mean to be Estonian”. Around the same time, my history teacher began to introduce the class to the history of other countries behind the Iron Curtain, such as Poland, Hungary, and Romania. They began to teach the topics that they truly felt to be important. Estonian schools thus became free before the country itself.

## **Education after independence**

In the immediate aftermath of independence in 1991, there were no public curricula. As developing them takes time, schools and kindergarten were free to develop as they wished. Most schools continued with strong subject-based teaching, which was quite good in Soviet schools too, especially in mathematics and science, but added newly (re-)discovered ideas of directed enquiry learning, active learning, and freshly awakened national spirit.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, Estonia, small and agile, was open to information and innovation. From 1994 on, the International Step by Step Association began training Estonian teachers to create child-centred learning environments with flexible classrooms and apply democratic approaches. The older generation was happy to discover how similar the ideas were to those that Käis had introduced almost a century earlier.

Many of the reforms introduced by Estonia in this period proved to be ahead of their time. The idea of general competencies, such as problem solving and teamwork, was brought into the general curriculum in 1996. The educational attainments of countries such as Canada and Finland were an inspiration, but Estonia’s success was built on the initiative and readiness that had already been demonstrated by teachers at the grassroots. The general curriculum supported their independence, giving schools both the freedom and the obligation to develop their own plans. Communities of practice, where teachers can learn new methods of instruction that are both proven and innovative, were already strong during the Soviet period. However, they have since taken on a successful new guise in the form of professional learning communities – not so much learning from experts as being a

specialist in the field of teaching and sharing your expertise with colleagues.

In the background of this progress was Estonia's investment in digital policy, especially digital education. The government's Tiger Leap programme equipped schools with computers and trained teachers to use them effectively in the classroom. Today, computers are widely used from kindergarten on and Estonian children learn to code from an early age.

## **Reasons for success**

So why are Estonian schools at the top of the PISA rankings? If someone knew the whole answer, it could possibly be multiplied and used everywhere. The reasons can be distilled into a few elements.

A first aspect is an approach to education that values all children. Classes are organised in a student-centred way, which means that the aim is to find what they are good at and enjoy, bringing out the best in them. Education is also age appropriate. Compulsory school only starts at age 7, while early education is based on play. Teaching is organised along the lines of integrated learning, especially in the early and primary years, where different subject areas are combined around specific themes and projects.

The second strength of the Estonian system is the large degree of autonomy afforded to teachers and education institutions. The state trusts its educational professionals, and the curriculum is only minimally prescriptive. The external monitoring system, known in many countries as "inspection", is instead a system of educational consultation. Used in cases of need, this consultation is led by teacher communities and often organised through professional learning communities.

The third aspect is critical: the Estonian education system is based on equity. The general education system in Estonia is free, and parents do not face hidden costs. The number of private kindergartens and schools is increasing, but these also contribute to keeping the public system on its toes. What's more, the school system does not segregate pupils based on ability but keeps pupils together in their learning path. The only form of segregation that exists is between Estonian-language and Russian-language schools. Finally, Estonia is not without income or wealth inequality, but the gap between the richest and poorest is not comparable to some other countries and Estonia never really developed a class society.

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Estonia's size and history are also part of the story. The population of the country is around 1.3 million people, of whom 1 million are Estonian speakers and the remainder Russian speakers. This means that Estonia is the smallest language community in Europe that handles its affairs in all areas of life, from the machinery of government and education to PhD level to a legal system and a literary and artistic culture. This is a source of both pride and opportunities for self-development for all of Estonia's citizens. The country's size also

allows and obliges it to be flexible, as seen in its early adoption of digital technology. Estonia may not be strong, but it can play smart.

The final element to stress is early childhood education and care. Estonian mothers have the right to three years of maternity leave, during which their employers must guarantee their position. For the first 18 months, they receive a full salary (unless it is very high, but that is not a “problem” for most Estonian mothers). Later on, almost all children attend high-quality early years education provided by the state. The cost is reasonable, and families on low incomes can apply for financial support. These kindergartens offer a place to be a child in the time of childhood, to learn through discovery in a friendly environment and be immersed in Estonian culture through songs, nursery rhymes, and dances, as has been the way since the time of Niggol and his students. Visiting an Estonian kindergarten, you will not see school-like lessons, but rather active play, arts, and music.

## **Seeing the light**

For centuries, Estonians have seen education as a tool for a better life, self-improvement, and enlightenment. Play-based early years combined with quality learning later have formed a platform for an internationally recognised education system. The state avoids dictating methodology and so learning can be student centred. Learning autonomy at the student level avoids over-testing and helps learners fulfil their potential.

Estonian education is also based on a certain element of positive nationalism. It is a small country, so it needs to support all its students to succeed. Its size also means that Estonia operates on the level of possibility: to make Estonia possible, everyone needs to play their part. A long history of foreign rule – first by Germans, then Swedes, then Russians – helped produce survival strategies. Passed down through the generations, Estonia was forced to be innovative, sometimes in hidden ways. Today this heritage has made Estonia the home of tech start-ups such as Skype and Wise. The combination of Estonia’s early switch to digital and student-centred learning also paid off during the pandemic, and many teachers were able to draw on pre-existing experience.

Still, the Estonian education system is not perfect. Teacher and school autonomy can also lead to stagnation. Some teachers may be experts in one subject but otherwise reluctant to teach new skills or try different approaches to learning and assessment. The situation in Russian-language schools is worse. Their teachers also enjoy much freedom, and many of them use Russian texts that present a propagandistic view of politics and history, including about Estonia’s place in the Russian Empire. Despite state resources, language learning is often a problem and their students do not always gain a full grasp of Estonian.

Education in Estonia has benefitted somewhat from public investment over the last 30 years. The Tiger Leap programme introduced digital technology to the classroom, and some schools and kindergartens have been renovated to offer excellent physical environments. Yet teachers’ salaries remain among the lowest in Europe, damaging the attractiveness of the profession. The war in Ukraine has underlined the most important values for a society. Now the Estonian government has invested in defence, education should be the next goal.

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