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A Comparison of Finnish and American Curriculum Structure

Abstract

My research was derived from frequent articles in national newspapers and magazines that continually praised the standardized test scores of Finland as a pinnacle of excellence while chiding American scores for being in the middle range. Due to the fact that I teach in an American system that is driven by test scores I questioned how Finland was able to achieve such excellence.

Throughout my reading, certain themes emerged for exploration: funding, teacher involvement, textbooks, and the effects of school reform. A comparison was completed of each of the emergent themes in an effort to understand the basis of the schooling structures to see if there was a connection to the standardized test scores. It would be irresponsible to claim that a correlation or a cause was found in my research to suggest that the American system should follow the Finnish structure as this was only a pathway into future research studies.

“What makes Finnish kids so smart?” posed the Wall Street Journal. I wondered what basis the WSJ was using to propose the superiority of an entire nation’s students. As I read the article I learned more of the work of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development) and I was introduced to PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) which is a standardized test devised by a collective of 57 participating countries in order to develop indicators of cross-national comparisons in education (2006). I was fascinated by Finland which is a relatively small country (approximately 5 million people) that only contains 4,838 educational institutions (primary, secondary, collegiate, and vocational schools). Here is a country that shouldn’t stand out against nations that invest billions into the education and into the testing of their students and it does, again and again.

Clearly the Finnish educational system is doing something fundamentally different than the American system. I set out to find themes that stood out in the research that seemed to stand out in comparison to the United States. Within the research I determined there were several emergent themes that I used to note as significant within the comparison of similarities and differences. The discussion over the benefits of the Finnish system is an incomplete work, obviously there needs to be much more research to determine if the themes are directly related to the high standardized test scores that are being published. My paper is more of an examination of the themes as they relate to each other.

I have broken the four themes into the following: reform, funding, textbooks, and teachers. My discussion of each theme is directly related to my experiences as an educator and student familiar only with an American system. My considerations of the Finnish system are from the outlook of an outsider peering in.

REFORM

In order to understand the results of the tests referenced in the Wall Street Journal, I first needed to review the test itself to determine who it is administered to and when. The target group for the test is 15 year-olds who are currently enrolled in their countries educational system. Schools and students are selected by sample. The PISA Survey is conducted every three years with a rotation of domain focus (such as reading, mathematics and science). The survey sets out to measure students’ application of knowledge in lifelike situations as well as students’ attitudes toward schooling and their study skills. The exams consist of both multiple choice and open ended written questions as a means to measure the targets.

Standardized tests, as discussed by Taubman, have been bastardized by American political forces that do not use the test scores in the same manner as other countries. Whereas America uses test scores as a means of punishment for teachers and students, Finland does not. I wonder if they choose to lay relative claim to the high status because they test so highly, or do they test so highly because they do not allow test scores to influence their system? Testing has come to define the educational reality in the United States, but I did not find that same correlation in Finland. Since standardized tests are often the result and catalyst of school reform efforts I felt it was necessary to review Finnish reform in comparison to American reform as my next point.

Historically speaking, both American and Finnish schooling was established as a means to teach the Christian doctrine to an agragarian society. Also, both systems have also had substantial governmental influence in the arena of school reform. Finland, in 1968, pushed laws through Parliament in an effort to provide equal educational opportunities for all students. Then in 1998, new laws were passed in an effort to increase flexibility, options and individuality within the Finnish structure (PISA 2006).

However, distinct differences emerged in my review of the American educational system. Common themes of reform existed in both Finland and America showing an effort to provide equal schooling in a much more tumultuous environment. While Finland was pushing to provide equal educational opportunities, the American system was dealing with deficits in their treatment of minorities, the effects of Vietnam, and emerging women’s rights. While I am not focusing on the political structure, I felt I needed to at least reference that while Finland has also had to strive for independence through revolution it has been very different than America’s struggle for independence.

Currently, major changes due to No Child Left Behind and assorted addendums are setting the stage for the next level of reform in American schooling. While American reform is pushed by standardization, Finland is much more flexible offering a more loose interpretation of standards. Where America focuses on literacy and numeracy, which often becomes a series of memorization of facts, Finland focuses on broad learning combined with creativity to develop the child as a whole. The last major push in American reform is accountability which basically rewards or punishes teachers based on test scores. Finland offers an intelligent accountability design where the teachers and administrators are valued and trusted in judging what is best for the students and in reporting the progress made by the school (Sahlberg 2007).

Something within the accountability structure of Finland seemed to strike a chord with me. Imagine the implications in American education if teachers were trusted enough to gauge the success of their students. I know teachers who are scrambling for jobs because their students’ test scores weren’t high enough so they are now considered ineffective. Sahlberg wrote, “student achievement carries a broader meaning than in those systems where accountability policies rest on competitive indicators of success. In practice, this means that successful Finnish students need to demonstrate not only sufficient knowledge and skills in a broad range of academic and aesthetic subjects, but also certain developed features of personality and moral behavior.”

I find Sahlberg’s statement extremely provocative from an American standpoint. How could achievement be measureable and immeasurable all at the same time? Furthermore, as American teachers, how are we to put into process a system that supports a child that is truly ready for the future with our limited funds?

FUNDING

Throughout this semester, our class focused on standardized test scores, how they are used, how they are misused, and who is pushing for changes. A key point of many of the in–class discussions was the basis of American test scores that are used in determining who receives funding and how much funding is received. “Failing” schools are often cut out of the influx of money spent while “Excellent” schools are at the forefront of money filtering through. There is a complex dance that takes place when it comes to funding for American schools. Local property taxes are a main source of funding for schools, from which you can imply that wealthy districts have high taxes, which leads to more funding coming into the school district. Areas in economic decline will have lower taxes, which translates to less funding for the schools that they support.

Be that as it may, the United States has consistently topped the OECD reports on annual spending per student. The US is spending $11,000 per year per student, yet consistently lags behind other countries when it comes to the test scores that measure success. Again, this funding is due in part to controversial measures in No Child Left Behind which allows the Department of Education to withhold funding from a district that they feel are not making a sufficient effort to improve student achievement.

Finnish funding is slightly different from American funding. The schools still rely on income from property taxes, which are considered very high throughout Finland. The high tax base is then equitably applied across schools so every school is considered equal in terms of the education that it will provide to the students. There is no sense that one school is better than another. When it comes down to the numbers, Finland’s funding gap between the best and worst performing schools was the smallest of any country in the PISA testing group. The United States has an average gap in comparison (Gamerman 2008).

TEXTBOOKS

An integral part of education is the means by which information is transferred. Teachers in America are a minor player in the selection of textbooks which are used in their classroom. According to McClintick, textbooks selected by the state of California were riddled with so many errors and omissions that they were viewed by experts as “snappy packaging” that overwhelms the content (2000). The erroneous textbooks in the United States are not limited to a single publisher. Overwhelmingly the powerhouses behind textbooks; Pearson Hall, Scott Foresman, and Holt Rinehart are all equally guilty of pushing their textbooks through immense lobbying and political practices. Unfortunately the texts that are churned out are embattled in an effort to raise self-esteem of students and not necessarily test scores with their limited lessons.

From information published by the OECD, Finnish teachers are left with the autonomous decision of selecting what textbooks are used in their classroom (2000). Personally I feel that if teachers are able to select their own textbooks then the market for the texts will be more competitive which would lead to more accuracy in the contained information. I was unable to find much more information on the process of Finnish textbook selection which leaves this to be one of the areas I would like to continue to explore in an effort to better understand the procedure.

Even with the limited information I have obtained on Finland’s textbook procedures, I feel confident in stating that American procedures need overhauled to become less political in the process in order to give back some of the power of choice to the teacher. Texas is currently a state that is in the news due to controversies surrounding their textbook policies. The Texas board of education is defining what textbooks include and what teachers must cover (Birnbaum 2010). Due to the size of the state of Texas, if the texts are altered to fit their definition of curriculum, then how will textbook changes affect other classrooms in the United States? Again it is my belief that the United States’ constant struggle to standardize is how we drive schools further apart.

TEACHERS

Moving from text to teacher seems to be the next natural step in my discussion. So much in education is due to the quality of the teachers in the classroom and their relationship with the students, the parents, and the administration that they are working with. Burnout in teachers in America is frequent due partially to their exhausting schedule. American teachers spend on average 1100 teaching hours in the elementary/middle school level. Finnish teachers are spending between 500-600 teaching hours at the same level (OECD 2000). I wonder how this discrepancy in hours spent translates to the expectations of the teachers and their level of efficacy in their position both in the American and in the Finnish system.

I have also found that Finnish teachers rate of pay is significantly lower than American teachers. But the level of prestige in a career in education is much higher in Finland than in America. The pool of candidates for teaching positions in Finland is comprised of the top 10 percent of college graduates and is considered as lucrative as a career in medicine in the United States (Zastrow 2008; Simola 2005; PISA 2006). It was also noted that a classroom teacher in Finland is required to obtain a Master’s Degree prior to teaching.

Per Laukkanen, “We can trust that [teachers] are competent. They know what to do.” Imagine this shift in the paradigm of accountability in the United States, teachers who are trusted in what they are doing and how they are doing it. It seems almost out of place in our society where teachers live in fear due to the audit culture that has been created.

SUCCESS

It is easy to explain Finland’s success as a result of its high tax base which allows for all schools to be funded properly, or the high level of teacher training and confidence within the teachers. However there were a few key factors that I did not discuss in detail that also came out of the reading.

First, Finland is a mostly homogenous society. Finland traditionally has lacked the component of ethnic minorities that the United States was built upon. In the educational structure if you can remove as many extraneous variables (such as socio-economic status, race, religion, etc.) you should be able to set common goals that are obtainable more quickly than when you factor in the additional variables. However, Finland is now seeing an influx of foreign born residents which is leading to immigrant children in their classrooms. Currently some urban schools are reporting nearly 50% enrollment of students whose native language is not Finnish (Sahlberg 2007).

If you look at the earliest components of Finnish schools, you will notice that they served a common people with a common purpose. This is a task that is much harder to accomplish in America due to the melting pot of languages and beliefs. I’m not by any means saying that we need a homogenous society in order to be able to excel, I’m only suggesting that it will take us (Americans) more time to figure out the best way to serve all people.

Another component of Finnish success seems to be the lack of emphasis on the standardized test scores that seem to drive so many of America’s decisions. In Finland the students are generally not graded in their coursework until the 5th grade which effectively removes stress from the student because their success is measured individually by their teacher rather than by a letter grade (PISA 2006).

So could it be true? Could success of students lie mainly in not pushing for test scores? It seems almost too easy, but researchers are picking up on the correlation between high test scores and the lack of emphasis I previously discussed. Hannu Simola posited that there needs to be a code of ethics established for the publication of school performance indicators. He states that it is basically walking on ethical eggshells to use test scores to determine educational quality when comparing schools. I have to agree with Simola, schools in the United States are inherently different machines that serve a wide variety of needs. Success lies in individualization rather than in standardization. By using test scores to “rank” a school, you are effectively undermining the work of the professionals in that building.

Is Finnish success out of reach for America who in comparison is dealing with significantly more schools and a different set of ideals? Yes and no. Elements of Finnish success could be realized by following their cues on removing the emphasis from standardized test scores and also by ensuring that teachers are truly professionals in their field. Success is measured by the leaps and bounds of society and their interactions in a global economy and not by scores on a page of questions that students will probably never use. Hopefully America can see that success is possible for every student, but standardized tests should not be seen as the panacea for success.

Also, could Finnish ideals of “less is more” be translated to other countries? Finnish students spend the fewest numbers of hours in the classroom in comparison to the other PISA countries. What I find equally interesting is the fact that students do not begin school until the age of seven to give them time as small children to learn social skills through play (OECD 2000). Has America been putting students at a disadvantage by pushing them to excel even as early as preschool? Are students becoming burned out by Kindergarten and as a result becoming reluctant learners? These are topics that I would like to expand on in the future to see the relationship with what is seemingly the over-education of American students.

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