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Research Proposal:

A Comparative Look at Finnish and American Curriculum Structure

ED 556

My research project is based on articles that the Washington Post, the BBC, and the Wall Street Journal all have in common. They have all featured articles praising Finnish test scores and questioning American success rates. All articles have attempted to discern the question, “What makes Finnish kids so smart?” Since we are in a test-score driven culture I would like to see why Finnish kids score so well. Test-scores are derived from curriculum so I will try to research what I feel are the four most important aspects of curriculum that students are surrounded by in Finland and in America; funding, teacher involvement, textbooks and the effects of school reform.

For my research purposes I would like to take a comparative look at how Finnish curriculum is shaped by these themes and compare it to the American structure. I will need to devise a way to look at a timeline of Finnish schooling and overlay it with the timeline of American schooling to see where the deviations in school reform occurred in order to effectively compare the two systems. Since the reforms are taking place in different time periods I will also need to limit the dates that I review so that my topic does not become too broad and muddled.

One of the driving interests of this topic for me is that America is embattled in a system of educational reform driven by political forces and I wondered if a country that consistently scores well on standardized tests has that same political driving force. I selected Finland based on the reoccurring theme of overall proficiency on standardized tests compared to approximately 40 other countries that take the same exam.

Since American curriculum is undergoing major changes due to No Child Left Behind and assorted addendums, I may need to look at American curriculum from the past tense rather than the present in order to alleviate problems that could arise due to changes made daily by political influences. Currently Finnish curriculum is more static than American curriculum and is easier for me to process as a whole, even though I am a product of the American Educational System I do not necessarily feel as though I am a vested member of the system.

I also expect to compare differences in schooling options available and the importance of standardized test scores. Hopefully the insight that I gain into the curriculum structure will allow me to better understand how schools are structured which I hope will make me more effective in my own classroom.

Recurrent themes in the literature that I have reviewed so far include Finland’s generous state-funded educational, medical and welfare services (Kaiser 2005). Also, Finnish students generally do not begin school until the age of 7 which is two years past the age that American children begin school. I wonder how this affects demands on children especially considering how American parents often utilize services such as pre-school preparatory programs.

Financially speaking, 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). I would like to explore the distribution of taxes as it relates to school funding. This seems very interesting to me because it seems to level the playing field of schools. All students have equal access to the same education. Striving for this elusive goal in the US seems out of reach, however, it appears Finland has achieved equal access.

Finnish schools also seem to have a very basic approach to schooling. They are devoid of courses for gifted students, sports teams, and the seemingly excessive glut of extra and intra-curricular clubs and groups available to their American counterparts. I find it interesting that students are permitted to just be students. From my personal experience students are wearing so many hats that often an imbalance is struck where schooling loses most importance on the development of the whole child.

One particularly interesting theme that seemed to come out of the reading is the relatively high status of the teacher. Teachers in Finland carry a social esteem bred out of the competitiveness of entrance into the teacher training programs. Various sources put the number between 10% and 20% of applicants into teacher training programs that are accepted (Simola 2005; PISA 2006). I also found it interesting that the teachers are viewed in two distinct arenas; the classroom teacher and the subject teacher. Also, all teachers are required to hold Master’s degrees in their area of specialization.

Another area of interest includes the fact that Finnish teachers are able to use whatever textbook they choose in their interpreting of the national curriculum. The structure of the curriculum seems open for interpretation and the teachers are given enough faith in their decisions to do as they please in their classroom (PISA 2006). Currently in the US I have been following the initiatives to create a national curriculum complete with a set of textbooks to match. I wonder if by losing this sense of autonomy in the classroom and being told what textbooks to use we will also lose more ground on standardized tests.

Rather than focus too much on the entire history of Finland’s schools I may need to concentrate specifically on two periods of reform; the 1970’s and the 1990’s. In 1970 the present Academy of Finland was established and that is the basis of the major implementation of the comprehensive school system that is currently viewed as the system today. However, Finland in the 1990’s dealt with the recession by turning against excessive centralization when ruling of the schools again went to the control of localities and the schools themselves (Kaiser 2005). I would like to see how these two time periods have shaped the current school system.

One name that comes up in Finnish research is Hannu Simola. Currently he is teaching in the Department of Education at the University of Helsinki in Finland. He has written extensively on what he refers to as “The Finnish miracle of PISA” (Simola 2005). He has also spoken at a global symposium on when and how test scores should be used (2007). Since my readings have shown that students do not suffer the test anxiety levels that American students exhibit, I would like to know why.

As far as a timeline of research is concerned, I would like to spend each week until the due date focusing on one of the four themes that I feel are most important and writing approximately one to two pages about each. The themes related to curriculum are:

1. Funding – determining who funds the school system and how taxes play into distribution.
2. Teacher involvement – the status and statistics of teacher education programs as well as a qualitative view of society.
3. Textbooks – who selects the texts and who determines what is in the textbooks.
4. Reform in the 1970’s and 1990’s – this is specifically looking at Finland’s educational reform. I may compare it to the driving forces behind American reform, but I don’t think I’m going to go through each stage of American reform.

The end result of each of these themes is the high test scores that Finland is able to achieve in comparison to the United States. I would like to be able to develop a comparison of each that devotes enough time to the Finnish structure while providing an understanding of how it differs from the American approach. The topic is robust enough for studying but I feel like I will need to focus on only the four themes that I have designated or I will not have enough time to properly allow myself to research and discuss each aspect of the curriculum system.

Ideally I would love to be able to study Finnish curriculum first-hand but obviously I am not able to do that during the school year. I would think that the best way to understand Finland is to immerse myself in the culture of the school and then draw my own conclusions. Since this is not feasible I will obviously need to surround myself with as much Finnish research as possible.

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