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Elementary Education in Finland and the United States

By

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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June 2017

Acknowledgments

Sarah Lundquist

Mom and Dad

Ryan Painter

Table of Contents

Abstract-----	5
Why Reform?-----	6
Educational Needs of the United States-----	7
Background Statistics-----	10
Whole Picture View-----	11
Governmental Basis-----	12
Common Community Outlooks-----	15
Childhood Poverty-----	19
Parental Support with Newborns-----	23
Diversity-----	28
Education Expenditures-----	34
The Nations' Contexts-----	35
Ideological Fundamentals of Education-----	36
The Finnish Dream-----	36
Theoretical Foundations of Learning-----	38
Decentralization of Power-----	39
Strong Support Systems for Students-----	40
High Regard for Teachers-----	41
Concentration on Morals-----	44
The Finnish Dream and Education-----	45

The American Dream-----	46
Misalignment of Bloom’s Taxonomy-----	49
Local Control with No Common Goal-----	51
Lack of Support Systems for Students-----	52
Opinions of Teaching as a Profession-----	53
Concentration on Routines, Procedures, and Early Content-----	57
The American Dream and Education-----	58
Differences in Dreams-----	58
Reform Movements-----	61
Global Educational Reform Movement & Finnish Reform Movement-----	61
Educational Standardization-----	63
Test-Based Accountability-----	69
Focus on Core Subjects-----	77
Competition and School Choice-----	87
Education Today-----	91
Finland’s Education System-----	91
United States’ Education System-----	94
Using What We Have Learned-----	96
My Personal Application-----	104
References-----	107

Abstract

Education is a part of society that affects everyone; it has to thrive in order for future generations to succeed in taking our place. For this reason, it is often debated how to best construct an education system that will be most effective. Through this debate comes the need for reform to morph education systems to fit the changing times and the fluctuating educational needs produced by the progression of time. By identifying Finland as a leading nation in the education world and as something to strive for, we can compare it to the underperforming education system of the United States to explore where the differences lie and how they impact student success rates as shown on the Programme for International Student Assessment. Before diving into educational variations, we look first at a whole picture view of the two countries to gain an idea of the societal context in which to analyze the dissimilarities in their education systems, as well as a background of the ideological fundamentals that form the foundation of their school structures. After gaining a deeper understanding of the social features and common beliefs surrounding education, the reform movements and current education systems of the two countries will be compared side by side, leading up to the identification of areas of Finnish success that can be modified to meet the needs of the United States.

Why Reform?

A lot can be learned about a nation from its education system.

Education is a fundamental function of society that serves as a culmination of a nation's ideals; it can easily be ascertained from an analysis of an education system what is and is not important to the community as a whole. Public schooling is a nation's means of preparing the next generation to operate the country when it comes their time. Without formal education in place it would be nearly impossible for a nation to progress at a steady rate.

The world as a whole is continuously changing and becoming more advanced and so education must reform over time to keep up with this. It is vital for education systems to reflect current societal needs or else it serves no purpose. As the world around us advances, we must alter the way we teach our children by shifting the focus of education to account for the knowledge and skills that are most important as time evolves. Because of the constant developmental nature of society, it is a necessity for education to persistently be developing as well, giving way to the many educational reforms we see from year to year. Some countries operate under the mentality that you do not fix something unless it is broken and as a result only make educational reforms when their education system is not performing well. On the other hand, some nations believe that education should be improved even when it is already functioning at a standard level.

No matter which approach is typical of a country, “The demand for better quality teaching and learning and more equitable and efficient education is universal” (Sahlberg, 2015, p.1).

Educational Needs of the United States

The United States of America (U.S.) is considered one of the most highly functioning countries in the world in many respects. However, education has never fallen into this category; the United States’ education system has always been middle of the road internationally speaking, nothing overly exceptional to say the least. Compared to their other greatly successful aspects of society, American education is commonly seen as underwhelming and lagging behind their vast collective achievements.

In an effort to ascertain exactly where the American education system is lacking, I have taken the research of John Hattie, an educational researcher from New Zealand, and applied it to the education system in the United States. Hattie (2012) synthesized data from 900+ meta-analyses on 150 different influences on education, ranging from homework to gender to pre-term birth weight and everything in between, to quantify how big of an affect these variables have on educational outcomes. Hattie believed that “everything works” in education, meaning that students will learn something no matter what teachers are doing; he found that 95% of variables have some degree of positive effect on student learning. For this reason, Hattie chose not

to focus on what works and what does not, but by *how much*. For this Hattie applied an “effect size” to his studies to rank the variables in order of how much of an effect they truly have on education. Rather than starting this scale at 0.0, Hattie found that the average gain of knowledge by a student across all domains is set at .40 of an effect size (Hattie, 2012). So Hattie set the effect size “hinge-point” at .40 to determine which influences on education were more worthwhile in general. With this in mind he set a low effect size range at anything less than .29, a medium range between .30-.60, and a high impact range at anything greater than .60 of an effect size (Hattie, 2012).

In the 240 million students who were included within Hattie’s (2012) meta-analyses, some of the highest educational variables that were identified as being most effective were self-reported grades/student expectations (rank of 150: 1, effect size: 1.44), effective feedback (10, .75), meta-cognitive strategy programs (14, .69), and self-verbalization and self-questioning (21, .64). Two of the more prominent effect sizes in the medium range were play programs (49, .50) and the frequency/effects of testing (83, .34). And of the low range of effect sizes there is teaching test-taking and coaching (98, .27), competitive learning rather than individualistic (104, .24), and ability grouping (131, .12) (Hattie, 2012). Any of these falling below the “hinge-point” of .40 (**bolded** above) are classroom strategies that have a very low effectiveness on students, meaning it would be more beneficial to swap them

out for strategies with an effect size larger than .40 (*italicized above*). I felt these were the most relevant effect sizes to look at for the United States because they show areas where the United States is doing things that should not be done or not doing things that should be done according to the effectiveness studies conducted by Hattie (2012). More specifically, Hattie's research shows that having students report their own grades, giving students effective feedback, teaching meta-cognitive strategies, teaching self-verbalization and self-questioning, and implementing play programs all have an greater impact on students than a year without those things would. Though some schools in the U.S. might employ these strategies in one way or another, none of these tactics are regularly seen throughout the country's public schools. These are all examples of things that the U.S. is not doing, but could be doing to raise their level of educational success. The indicators that I identified in the low category, teaching test-taking, competitive learning and ability tracking, are all things that have less than the average effect on learning, meaning the effect they have on education is not necessarily worth the time spent on them. These are examples of approaches that are very widely used throughout the U.S. that should most likely be traded in for something more effective. The effectiveness of these strategies found through this research helps to identify both things that the United States should start

doing and things they should stop doing; these are the educational needs of the United States.

Background Statistics

Since 2006 Finland has been at or near the top of the charts in reading, science and math as found by the published results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2007; OECD, 2011; OECD, 2013). These assessments are conducted once every three years by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) by testing 15-year-old students in over 60 countries worldwide on their academic performance in reading, science and math (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). The 2006 results showed Finland's remarkable achievements with leading scores in science as well second in reading and math (OECD, 2007). Before this time Finland's scores were nothing to take note of, typically falling in the mid-low range in all three areas. In the years since the PISA was first conducted in 2000, the United States has remained in the middle of the score report, with the nation's average scores dropping below the worldwide averages more often than not, similar to pre-2006 Finland (OECD, 2001; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2007; OECD, 2011; OECD, 2013). Since Finland's spike in test scores in 2006 their scores have slightly tapered off to being ranked fourth in science, sixth in reading and twelfth in math in the most recent PISA results of 2012; though the nation's scores have dropped in the rankings they

have still consistently remained in the top sector, placed well above the international averages in all three testing categories (OECD, 2013). This data begs the question: What changed in Finland leading up to their achievement peak in 2006 that set them apart from the once similarly performing United States?

Whole Picture View

When looking at educational reforms it is important to look at more than education alone, societies are dynamic systems made up of a plethora of variables that all feed off of one another; no individual element of a society can stand completely alone without affecting another. Sahlberg (2015) illustrated this point clearly by stating that “there is no single reason why an educational system succeeds or fails. Instead, there is a network of interrelated factors—educational, political, and cultural—that function differently in different situations,” (p. 7). Later on in this same publication Sahlberg (2015) reiterated that “education policies are necessarily intertwined with other social policies, and with the overall political culture of a nation,” (p. 49). Knowing this, it becomes apparent that analyzing other societal features and taking a “whole-picture” look at many of a country’s functions is vital in understanding the basis of a nation’s education system.

Though there are without a doubt hundreds of things that have an effect on the education systems in Finland and the U.S., for the sake of

consistency I will address the same or similar societal factors of both Finland and the United States. Every single aspect of a community affects its education but this review will only be focusing on the overall governmental bases, the common community outlooks, relative childhood poverty rates, parental supports for parents with newborns, the levels of diversity, and economic education expenditures of the two nations. What follows is a broad “whole-picture” look at each of these countries individually in regard to the topics just listed as well as a comparison of the two and an analysis of the impressions seen on education.

Governmental Basis

In Finland, the major governmental contributing factors are underlined in the welfare state status of the nation. Everything Finns do in their society reflects the nature of their belief system that is founded in the welfare state ideology, including education and all that surrounds it. Welfare states are known for their accessibility, inclusion, democratic values, and community involvement, all of which form the foundation that the rest of the nation’s systems are formed upon (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006). The most prominent underlying idea of a welfare state is the well-being of its citizens, which is reflected by Finland’s strong community of trust, low relative childhood poverty rates, fair system of parental leave with newborns, increasing diversity, and economic education expenditures.

Where the U.S. differs drastically from Finland is the national philosophy of government held by the two. As just explained, Finland is a welfare state through and through in everything they do, the United States on the other hand is decidedly less straight forward in the beliefs spread throughout it. The big player in the U.S. is, theoretically, classical liberalism which is founded on the ideas of John Locke with two main principles of liberty and social contract (Gaus, Courtland, & Schmidtz, 2015). These two themes recur throughout American government philosophies within everything from property rights, market trade, and, of course, education. Liberty in this instance refers to the unalienable rights that are afforded to all United States citizens not dependent upon their background. Americans take pride in the freedom that these rights provide them with, for example freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of religion, and the freedom to peacefully protest just to name a few. In the broadest sense, liberty equates to freedom. Social contract refers to the intervention of the governing agency to not restrict its people, but to protect their lives, liberty, and property (Gaus, Courtland, & Schmidtz, 2015). These two concepts ideally form a balance between free will for the people and security of the people that was intended to build the backbone of the United States' political dogma.

However, contemporary times have proven to give way to other ideals than those that were originally intended by the nation's Founding Fathers.

Amongst the foundation of classical liberalism, political realism has begun to show through in the modern politics of the United States. The two notions that form the basis of liberalism, liberty and social contract, are still very much relevant in today's American society, they are just seen in a different light with the added impact of realism. Political realism in the U.S. is not typically a standard practice used all the time, but it has been known to influence governmental actions of the nation depending heavily on surrounding circumstances (Mearsheimer, 2002). The domineering feature of this political philosophy is the need for power. Realism is founded on the "assumption that power is (or ought to be) the primary end of political action, whether in the domestic or international arena" (Moseley, n.d.). When considered domestically within the nation, realism has an end goal of increasing power of the political individual alone, while on an international scale it serves as an agent to gain the nation as a whole a more powerful global position. Liberty and social contract will always be a pertinent part of the underlying liberalism belief system in the United States, though occasionally they are overshadowed by the greed of the nation's politicians presented through realism (Mearsheimer, 2002).

The ideological structures of a nation's system of government affect education because education is a government organization that follows the same patterns of belief. The welfare approach to government can be seen in

every facet of Finland's education system from the limited instructional hours mixed with necessary brain breaks to the variety of health support programs in place for students and their families. In contrast, American citizens are proud of the level of free will they are afforded and prefer to obtain their own resources without much government intervention. Stereotypically, Americans like doing things of their own accord so they can exercise their freedom of choice. For this reason nothing is typically handed to Americans such as the extensive amounts of welfare systems seen in the Nordic welfare states. This is how classical liberalism is reflected in the United States school systems in their lack of government aid. Political realism is also engrained in American education by the chronic need to be on top. Americans are in a constant race to be the biggest, smartest, fastest, and overall best at anything and everything. The problem with this is that they might just be in too big of a hurry to make this a reality that they miss some crucial steps in the process, particularly in education.

Common Community Outlooks

One of the biggest of these "invisible factors" that blatantly affects the education system is Finland's widespread community of trust. This is to say that it is broadly presumed in the Finnish culture that citizens are all trustworthy, honest individuals who are skilled at their careers. Because their education system has grown into such a successful principal for the nation, it

is implicitly accepted by the population that they are being educated at a high quality and will advance from their schooling with expert-like skill sets and the moral mindset to match the culture (Benson, 2012). This trust in education specifically comes full circle because teachers are seen as reliable professionals who can be entrusted to mold the minds of future generations who then will become the trusted professionals post-graduation. In an article on the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education website Benson (2012) stated that "It is considered a hallmark of Finnish culture to trust one another to do his or her best." Such a high level of expectation is commonplace in the cultural norms of Finland, which can be linked to their success in many areas; when people are relied upon to always do paramount work, they will rise to the occasion and prove their true potential.

Widespread community values are much more varied in the United States; there is not one obvious sovereign attitude that displays itself over all of the fifty states. Typical community outlooks depend heavily on the community they are found in both geographically and demographically speaking, so they fluctuate greatly from state to state and region to region. This being said, one overarching theme can stereotypically be seen throughout the United States in the individualistic mindset ingrained in the American society.

Individualism can be manifested in many ways, ranging from intellectual independence to a fondness of being left alone. However, the way in which I use the term “individualism” when referring to the common culture in the United States is to mean that individuals give their own personal needs and desires a higher priority than those of the larger community. Biddel et al. (2016) wrote “It’s the idea that the individual is sovereign, an end in himself, and the fundamental unit of moral concern.” This is not to say that Americans pay absolutely no attention to their neighbors whatsoever, but interactions are stereotypically kept to ones in which the individual gains something out of it. Generally speaking, people in the United States wait to help someone else until it will help them personally as well, which relates straight back to the political realism previously mentioned to be found in the United States (Kusserow, 2004). Individualism abides by the mantra “think first of yourself, second of others”. This ideology reflects directly in the politics surrounding the United States, stemming from the Founding Fathers’ institution that, as mentioned before, the government’s one job is to equally protect the *individual* rights of its people (Biddel et al., 2016).

When discussing these common cultural outlooks it is important to keep in mind that they are both over generalizations of the countries as wholes; they do not necessarily apply to every single citizen merely because they live within the countries’ boundaries. Keeping that in mind, we can still

use these general patterns of cultural attitudes to make non-specific assumptions about the two countries and their inhabitants. The widespread community of trust seen in Finland can be related to the society filled with individualism in the U.S. in the aspect that Finns can trust one another to always be looking out for each other while Americans cannot. I would even go as far as to say Finland's community of trust exemplifies a very collectivist viewpoint. Where Americans are left thinking only of themselves, Finns are constantly seeking ways to better society as a whole through their own individual actions. In opposition to individualism, collectivism recognizes "society is the basic unit of moral concern, and the individual is of value only insofar as he serves the group" (Biddell et al., 2016). It is obvious from the societal features in place that Finland is a nation filled with citizens who are committed to the success and well-being of all Finns, not just themselves. The U.S. on the other hand is a country constructed of individuals who cannot agree on any one such collective objective and are simply occupying the same area rather than being an entirely unified country with the greater good as a common goal. These social mindsets play a role in education because the ideals surrounding children in schools undoubtedly affect the development of the children's self because it becomes so ingrained in their lives as they grow up (Kusserow, 2004). Each society, individualist or collectivist, impresses its

widespread beliefs upon the next generations, allowing them to be carried on indefinitely.

Childhood Poverty

A second societal factor that impacts education is a nation's relative childhood poverty rate. In 2012, research showed that a meager 5.3% of Finland's youth was living in poverty, which ranked the second lowest of the 35 economically advanced countries included in the research (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2012). This percentage is comprised of children aged 0 to 17 who were living in *relative* poverty, which the OECD defined as "living in a household in which disposable income, when adjusted for family size and composition, is less than 50% of the national median income" (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2012, p. 3). This notion of low relative childhood poverty aligns well with the nation's investment in the equitable distribution of wealth, providing equal opportunities for all and the sense of public responsibility for community members who cannot afford themselves enough provisions that is characteristic of welfare states.

In the United States the relative childhood poverty rate has most recently been recorded at 23.1% (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2012). Though this is not unreasonably high in the grand scheme of things when looking through an international lens, it still shows that nearly one in every four students in the U.S. is situated in a low income household that may not be

meeting all of the student's basic needs. This speaks volumes about the needs seen in the nation's education system and the type of pedagogy they should be targeting. Poverty affects school aged children drastically in many different ways, so a lot can be learned about a nation's education by looking at their national relative childhood poverty rate.

This feature of society is undeniably tied to the field of education because poverty immensely affects the way children learn. Children who are raised in low socioeconomic households are more prone to emotional and social challenges such as high levels of anxiety and stress, depression, low self-esteem and difficulty controlling emotions. Because children raised in impoverished homes are constantly surrounded by high stress situations, they are often deprived of the necessary resources children need to grow and develop in a healthy manner (Jansen, 2009). Following Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, students who do not have their basic needs met cannot even begin to think about expanding their knowledge in an educational setting because they are too innately concerned with where their next meal is coming from or whether they will make it safely through the night. When these are the things students are worried about, learning to read and do addition suddenly becomes much lower of a priority (Lester, 2013).

Food, shelter and safety aside, loving relationships one of the most important resources for a child to grow and develop healthily. Children who

do not receive resources as simple as positive attention from adults as they are maturing do not learn to form trusting relationships and begin to foster emotional instabilities. Jansen (2009) stated that "Strong, secure relationships help stabilize children's behavior and provide the core guidance needed to build lifelong social skills." Students who do not have experience with positive relationships in their lives do not learn those lifelong social skills which can fare poorly for them their school years. Children with social difficulties often have trouble working in cooperative groups and have challenges regulating emotion which leads to frustration in the face of new content even when success is right around the corner.

Another complication low socioeconomic status children almost always face a lag in cognitive capabilities as compared to their higher socioeconomic status peers. Studies have shown a strong correlation between low socioeconomic status and low cognitive performance particularly within the domain of language development (Noble, Norman, & Farah, 2005). Language development is thought to be influenced heavily by the language used by caregivers around the child. Studies have shown that guardians living in poverty typically speak to children in a more simplistic way with less complex vocabulary and the inclusion of fewer open-ended questions and explanations (Weizman & Snow, 2001).

All of these effects of poverty on children, plus many more, give way to the reason why relative childhood poverty rates are so influential in the educational world. Public education is meant to cultivate the minds of future generations, not only with knowledge but also with useful skills, personal morals and societal values. This cannot be done when a large percentage of students are struggling to survive without the added stress of schooling. It is unrealistic to dream of eradicating poverty in a society altogether, but from the evidence collected from educational and psychological researchers we can be certain that the lower the poverty rates the better, for all facets of society.

When looking at the two nations side by side, the relative childhood poverty rate in the U.S. seems much more substantial. Out of 35 of the most economically advanced countries in the world in 2011, Finland had the second lowest relative childhood poverty rate at 5.3% while the United States held the second highest position with 23.1% (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2012). On a global scale the U.S.'s rate might not appear so bad when compared alongside some of the poorest countries in the world, but when placed with countries more like themselves economically speaking, the United States ranks embarrassingly for how prosperous of a nation it is. In the United States almost 1 in every 4 students comes from a low socioeconomic status whereas in Finland this applies to only 1 in every 20 students; this

means students living in poverty are four, almost five, times more common in the United States than in Finland. When looked at in this light the relative childhood poverty rate in the United States seems astronomical and very well might be contributing to the overall success of education. Within a country with strong social support systems, such as Finland, it is understood that first and foremost people must be taken care of before they can be asked to perform in any such way. Finns are primarily concerned with the health of their students and citizenry in general and move the focus to education only after well-being has been addressed. With this mindset in place across the country, Finns are constantly getting the support they need to be healthy, happy individuals who are physically, mentally and emotionally prepared to learn. This is why Finland's low relative childhood poverty rate of only 5.3% provides so much to their high educational standing.

Parental Supports with Newborns

Another feature of society that influences the education system is the opportunity for parental leave with newborns. By looking more in depth at supports in place for newborns and their families it becomes apparent how invested the government is in the welfare of the future generation, which leads right into education. When a child is born it is a common practice in most countries for the mother to receive a set amount of maternity leave while the father returns to work (or takes a short amount of unpaid leave if

available). Though this is a typical procedure in many nations, Nordic welfare countries have a different option in place for new parents. Mothers are granted 105 working days (about 4 months) of maternity leave which can begin anywhere from 30-50 working days before the due date (Lammi-Taskula, 2008). During maternity leave mothers are offered monetary maternity allowance by Kela, the government's Social Insurance Institution in charge of handling social security programs, whether they are self-employed, unemployed, or a student. Accompanying the birth of their child and their maternity leave allowance, mothers are also provided with a maternity package or "Baby Box". These boxes are given to mothers free of charge each time they give birth and are filled with 50 different items useful for mothers ranging from infant hygiene products to bedding to many versatile outfits, including cloth diapers (Kela, n.d.). If this package of maternal goodies is not something a mother needs or wishes to have, she also has the choice to collect a 140 Euro payment rather than the box (Lammi-Taskula, 2008).

Mothers aside, fathers are also given the choice to take 1-9 weeks of paternity leave usually occurring right after the child is born. However maternity and paternity leave is not the end of the road for new parents. After these lengths of time are used up, when the child is roughly 4-months old, parents are offered the next stage of leave titled "parental leave." Parental leave is a period of 158 working days, paid by Kela, in which either parent can

take more time to stay home with the child after maternity/paternity leave is over. This time can be split between the parents however they wish, though only one parent can be on parental leave at any given time (Lammi-Taskula, 2008). The same concept applies to “childcare leave” which lasts until the child turns 3 years old and can be used by parents to take responsibility of the child while the other is at work. Childcare allowance is paid to parents by Kela if the child is being looked after by someone (parent, grandparent, private care provider) at home or in a private childcare residence. Kela also offers Flexible Care allowance for parents who work no more than 30 hours weekly to spend their other time providing care for their child until the age of 3. After the age of 3 this allowance can still be claimed under the title Partial Care allowance up until the child is second grade (Kela, n.d.). All in all the accumulated leave granted to new parents totals nearly an entire year to be home with each child they have.

The allowance given to parents during each of these phases of leave depends heavily on the typical annual earnings of the parents, usually falling at about 70% of their normal work earnings (Lammi-Taskula, 2008).

Alongside leave with allowance, parents also receive a Child Benefit allowance from the month after the child is born until the time the child reaches 17 years of age. This allowance is raised for each child a family has

starting at 95.75 Euros a month for the first child and going as high as 174.27 Euros per month for the fifth and each additional child (Kela, n.d.).

With all of these systems in place, it is no wonder Finland ranked 2nd on Save the Children's annual State of the World's Mothers report from 2015 (Save the Children Federation, 2015)¹. The measures taken by the Finnish government to ensure the wellness of its children and mothers plays a part in education because they serve as clues to understanding just how much the people matter to the government. With all of the resources put into maintaining healthy children and mothers it follows that the next steps for these children would be just as large of a priority to the Finnish people. Finland continues to support its youth throughout their childhood through the school system even after the paternity benefits cease.

In the United States there is little in the way of governmental provisions given to the parents of newborn children. The only thing even resembling the option for parental leave with a baby is the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 which allows for 12 weeks of unpaid job-protected leave that only employees who have worked 1,250 hours for the employer over the past 12 months are eligible for when there is a family or medical emergency (including the delivery of a child). With the strict

¹ The Save the Children's State of the World's Mothers report is an annual ranking of the best and worst countries in the world to be a mother based off of data collected on infant mortality rates, deaths of the mother during childbirth, afterbirth health levels of the child and mother, female political participation, educational accessibility, and government provided parental programs (Save the Children Federation, 2015).

specifications and requirements behind this law only about 56% of women are qualified to actually receive the unpaid maternity leave (Andres, Baird, Bingenheimer, & Markus, 2016). Other than this selective law that only allows some women to receive time off with their baby, maternity leave is decided by individual employers who can offer as much or little as they are willing. Only about 12% of Americans are given partial paid leave by their employer and 43% of American women voluntarily leave the workforce to spend time with their newborn because their maternity leave was not enough (International Labour Office of Geneva, 2010). All of this taken into account, plus the afterbirth health levels and infant/child mortality rates, the United States was ranked just 33rd on Save the Children annual State of the World's Mothers report of 2015 (Save the Children, 2015).

Just as with analyzing relative childhood poverty rates, evaluating government funded supports in place for parents of newborn children help to paint a picture of a nation's philosophies surrounding the wellbeing of its younger population. In Finland the list of parental support programs goes on and on, beginning with paid leave for both parents and extending to receiving child benefit allowance monthly until the child turns 17, not to mention the baby starter kit that is presented to each mother of a new child without question. The lengths Finland goes to to keep its parents and children healthy and happy are nothing short of exceptional. The aids put in place by the

United States government are quite skimpy in comparison. Only one governing law requires that mothers be given a few short months of time off work to care for their new child without being paid any amount of their normal paycheck. Individual companies do have the ability to decide on further benefits for new parents, but by law all that is obligatory for them to do is keep the position waiting for the new mother to return to. For an advanced country such as the United States it is unconventional for them to give so little to support the newest members of the next generation. As pointed out before, in the Save the Children annual State of the World's Mothers report of 2015 the United States was ranked as the 33rd best country in the world to be a mother while Finland was 2nd (Save the Children, 2015). The efforts of the U.S. pale in comparison to those of the Finnish government for obvious reasons. Again, we can see that the welfare state approach allows for Finland to take care of their people in a way that builds a strong, hardworking community.

Diversity

A fourth aspect of society that affects education is the diversity seen throughout a nation's population. The makeup of the class being taught plays a huge role in how they are taught because people from diverse backgrounds can have very different existing knowledge. Education comes by building on students' previous knowledge and skills, so teachers must first be able to

identify the range of students' background knowledge before they can commence instruction. Another reason students' unique backgrounds play a role in education is because students must feel comfortable and confident enough in their learning environment to take the necessary risks in order to develop. If teachers do not identify and acknowledge students' backgrounds they will not be incorporated in the classroom culture which forces diverse students to feel out of place and scared to learn.

Finland has always been almost exclusively categorized as an ethnically homogeneous nation with very little diverse makeup. However, Finnish scholars Raento and Husso (2001) have clearly stated that "The image of Finland as a culturally and ethnically homogeneous nation is erroneous" (p.1). It has been widely assumed for decades that Finland has next to no diversity in their nation, but Raento and Husso (2001) have identified the country's "old minorities" as the Swedish speaking Finns, the indigenous Sami group and the Romani. These groups have been identified as minorities by the national record-keeping system which is based solely off of language, so other minorities consist of Russians, Karelians, Ingrians, TurkoTatars, and Jews, all of whom have lived in Finland since it established its independence from Russia in 1917 (Raento & Husso, 2001). Though their numbers are small, these minority groups have always existed within the Finnish community and have recently been accompanied by more minority groups as well with the

Finnish humanitarian efforts housing numerous refugees during the refugee crisis in recent years. In 2014 the number of non-natives living in Finland totaled 322,711, which accounts for 5.9% of the population (Ministry of the Interior, 2016). Most recently 4.6% of primary school aged students have been recorded as being from immigrant backgrounds (Ministry of Education and Culture, n.d.). This is still a relatively low amount of immigration, but it serves as proof that the population is diversifying to some degree. For education this means some students are beginning to come from more varied backgrounds, leading to the need for a wider variety of classroom instructional strategies.

One of the most relevant topics in the education world of the United States currently is the diversity of students and how to account for it. In the latest U.S. census (which is conducted once every ten years) over one third of the American population identified themselves as belonging to a minority group in 2010. The percentage of more diverse groups of the population in the United States has been steadily increasing for many years. In the ten years between the 2000 census and the 2010 census minority groups increased at a rate of 29%. Also in the 2010 census, it was found that 5 areas of the United States, Texas, New Mexico, California, Hawaii, and Washington, D.C., have what is known as a “majority-minority” population meaning over half of the population belongs to a minority group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Looking

more specifically at education, it has been found that in the 2013-14 school year 9.3% of national school aged children were recorded as English Language Learners (ELLs)² with as high as 25% concentrated in some areas on the west coast and southwest regions of the States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). With the rate at which the diversity of the United States is growing, it can be anticipated that the number of ELLs in public schools will only rise from year to year creating a teaching environment unique from any other.

The diversity in Finland and the United States presents a stark contrast and arguably one of the two countries' biggest differences. Finland has historically been viewed as a wholly uniform population racially speaking, which is entirely different from the United States' label as being an ethnic "melting pot" far from being homogenous. The nation of Finland as a whole was made up of 5.9% foreign born citizens in 2014 (Ministry of the Interior, 2016) and in the U.S. minority groups made up just over one third of the population in 2010 (though it has surely grown since then) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The numbers speak for themselves within the school systems of the two nations as well; Finnish primary schools are most recently made up of 4.6% immigrant students (Ministry of Education and Culture, n.d.)

² English Language Learners (ELLs) are classified as students who have a first language that is not English or regularly speak a language other than English within their household. Many students who are considered ELLs are immigrant students, though the majority of them are actually American born citizens with foreign born parents (Goldenberg, 2008).

which equates to less than half of the 9.3% of ELLs found in American schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). However, these numbers do not serve as an exact way to measure the ethnic diversity in schools because the Finnish data refers to all students born outside of the country while the United States data includes all ELLs which could be immigrant born or American born but speak a different first language. Though the parameters around these percentages vary slightly, both numbers give a representation of the ethnic diversity as they are acknowledged in their respective societies.

It is not diversity itself that creates problems in education, but how it is handled. Diverse populations of students only become burdensome within a school when they are negatively discriminated against and not given the resources they need in order to flourish. A huge variable in education is equity. It is a widely held belief in both countries that education should be equitable for all children, meaning every student has an equal opportunity to access the education being provided. However, this is harder to implement than it sounds in theory. In Finland many cities have what are called “positive discrimination” funds that are given to schools with more diverse demographics in order to provide more resources for teachers who have students who need extra support (Hancock, 2011). This money can be used for anything from learning materials to assist students with special needs to the payment of instructional aides for students who do not speak the primary

classroom language. These funds are meant to create greater accessibility to a mainstream education for students who would otherwise flounder in a normal classroom with no added supports. This falls in line with the mindset that equality does not mean that everyone gets the same exact thing, it means everyone gets what they need in order to be successful.

Schools in the United States are advocates of this definition of equality as well, though it does not necessarily show through in all of their practices. There have been many legal provisions put in place over the years to protect the diverse needs of students in the American community, beginning as early as 1958 with the Captioned Films Act (PL 85-905) and peaking in 1975 with the well-established Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142), which has been amended countless times and continues on today as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), with many other laws in between (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). From this large span of time we can see that giving students with disabilities an equal chance at education is a discussion that has been going on in the United States for many years now. The main goal that all of these laws have reached toward has been to require Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for everyone, regardless of the presence of a disability or any other factor, that addresses the individual needs of students. The initial thought of these acts is beneficial for students because it brings attention to the needs of learners, but the implementation

often goes awry. The wording of these acts (and others) is broad and nonspecific, leaving a lot of room for interpretation by school officials. Along with being vague, these laws are all federally mandated for public schools, but remain unfunded from the federal level. For these reasons, many special education and English language development classes in the United States are doing the bare minimum by legal standards which is barely helpful by educational standards.

Education Expenditures

The final societal factor has been identified as affecting education is past education expenditures. The most recent data point for Finland's national education expenditures is from 2013 totaling 7.2% of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which falls just 27th in the international rankings (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2016a). The United States was most recently recorded to have put 5.3% of their national Gross Domestic Product towards education expenditures in 2011. This left the U.S. ranked 64rd on an international scale comparing the percentages from country to country (CIA, 2016b). By looking at this information we can tell how invested a nation is in their education system. The economic breakdown of a nation's expenses easily shows what that nation's priorities are and how devoted they are to various aspects of their society. Without public funding, schools do not

get resources and without resources it is very hard to teach children to a high standard.

Economic expenditures show the world what a nation's priorities are; if something is important to a country then they will provide the necessary resources in order for it to thrive. International education expenditures most recently recorded range from the highest of 12.8% of GDP in Cuba to the lowest of .8% in Burma. Just above the international midpoint, in ranking not percentage (ranked 63rd of 172), the United States was reported at spending 5.4% of their 2010 GDP for educational purposes. In the same year Finland ranked within the top sixth of the rankings (27th of 172) with 6.8% (CIA, 2016c). Even with just over 1% more set aside for educational spending Finland was ranked many levels above the United States. With Finland's upper-end percentage of education expenditures it can be assumed that they take their education seriously and are willing to provide enough monetary resources to help it succeed to the degree they desire while the U.S. is middle of the road at most with their financial provisions for schools.

The Nations' Contexts

All of these invisible elements play a role in forming a society as a whole, each affecting the education division in their own way. No single part of any society can stand on its own; our nations are made up of a web of interrelated factors that each have a hand in the others. Sahlberg (2015)

wrote that “context makes a difference” and the dissimilarities in nations’ contexts for education can be used to explain the gaps seen in student learning on international rankings (p.159). All of the examples I have listed, widespread community of trust, low childhood poverty rates, fair parental leave, increasing diversity, and the mid-range percentage of education expenditures, perfectly display the ideals behind the philosophy of social support in the Finnish nation. On the other hand, in the United States, a foundational combination of classical liberalism and political realism sets the stage for prevalent individualism, pervasive childhood poverty that affects nearly a quarter of American children, minimal parental supports with newborns, a large amount of diversity that is leading to inequalities, and a mediocre education expenditure in one of the wealthiest nations in the world. These are the two vastly different contexts in which we are viewing education in Finland and the United States.

Ideological Fundamentals of Education

The Finnish Dream

The success in the various societal sectors in Finland stems from the idea of “the Finnish Dream,” which is grounded in an aspiration to be an educated, literate society. Because of the Finnish Dream, Finns fought to transition from the meager, agricultural society they once were to the modern, knowledge-based society that they are today (Sahlberg, 2015). This

fight began in 1945 when World War II left Finland in a time of uncertainty and instability which ultimately united Finns and gave way to new social ideals, many of which were founded in equal education for all. After this time, Finland went through three clear stages of educational development. The first took place roughly between the years of 1945-1970 when Finns focused on enhancing equal educational opportunities while transitioning from an unindustrialized, farming nation to an industrial driven society. The second phase overlapped the first slightly, beginning in 1965 and coming to an end in 1990. This stage is known most for being the time when Finland's original public comprehensive school system was created. The last step of development that began in 1985 and which Finns are still experiencing today is marked by its focus on improving the system they have built and expanding their higher educational opportunities to reflect their success in the rudimentary levels (Sahlberg, 2015).

Throughout this long period of steady growth, the Finnish society as a whole changed to renounce old values and accept more modern ideals filled with the Finnish Dream of being a better-educated society. The entire country shared the goal of becoming a literate nation which made education the very foundation on which to establish their future (Sahlberg, 2015). This collective goal created what Sahlberg (2015) labeled a "common culture of schooling," meaning that all schools throughout the nation held their students

to the same level of expectation and built their educational communities on the same ethical grounds (p. 36). This commonly accepted school culture included a focus on theoretical foundations of learning, the decentralization of power, strong support systems for students, a high regard of teachers, and a concentration on morals in the pre and lower primary grade levels.

Theoretical foundations of learning. Since their early days of reform, Finnish schools have always taken pride in their emphasis on exploring the underlying theoretical foundations of knowledge. This is to say that they are more concerned with teaching children best practices of learning rather than easily memorized bits of information; remember, John Hattie (2012) found that teaching metacognitive skills was highly effective with students (with a large effect size of .69). Finnish schools want their students to learn how to learn, not simply be able to rote recall facts that are meaningless to their educational lives (Sahlberg, 2015). In trying to understand the basis of how knowledge works in order to teach children in this way, Finnish educators have also found the need to target higher order thinking skills within their classrooms.

Higher order thinking skills can be identified by the use of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy, a pyramid of thinking skills ranked from lowest to highest to categorize which promote more in-depth learning, originally created by Dr. Benjamin Bloom and later revised by Lorin Anderson and David R. Krathwohl.

This pyramid lists remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating as the six cognitive domains ordered lowest to highest (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The bottom three skills (remembering, understanding, and applying) are considered lower level thinking skills, while the upper tier of the pyramid contains the three skills considered higher level thinking skills (analyzing, evaluating, and creating).

All six levels of the taxonomy have their place in the learning process, the lower cognitive actions lay a foundation to help thinkers move smoothly into the higher ones which naturally necessitate much deeper thinking and consequently lead to learning the material in a more profound way. The objective of the taxonomy is to be used by educators to classify the learning goals they are setting for students and create lessons with a cognitive progression that aids in deepening student knowledge of concepts. Finns use this in just the way it was meant to be; by building up knowledge with the lower level skills before solidifying concepts with the higher end skills (Booker, 2008). Openly using this supportive progression of learning gives students the opportunity to see the pattern of development in their education which allows them to better become reflective and self-aware learners.

Decentralization of power. The secondary focus of Finland's culture of schooling is the decentralization of power by increasing the autonomy given to schools. Sahlberg (2015) explained that in Finland "it is the school,

not the system, that is the locus of control” (p.46). The way their education system is arranged allows for schools to hold their own authority rather than being held captive by external forces. With this aspect of their culture of schooling in place the power of decision-making within a school district is highly localized rather than centralized by the state or federal government. The biggest selling point to this is that teachers within schools are able to create their own curriculum based off of the broad national standards so that it meets the needs of the diverse learners specific to that area (Baker et al., 2010). Though this sounds as though it would create segregation and rivalry between schools, Finns made a habit of continuous collaboration between schools to ensure that never happen. This collaboration is what keeps the consistency alive between schools since there are not as extreme levels of standardization as are seen elsewhere in the world. The decentralization of educational power coupled with collaboration, not competition, between schools is a staple to the Finnish common culture of schooling.

Strong support systems for students. Another aspect of this culture is the availability of school support systems within typical Finnish public schools. Schools in Finland usually offer many health and wellness systems for students free of charge including extensive student guidance counseling, psychological counseling, health services, and free nutritious school lunches (Sahlberg, 2015). This is just one more way that the welfare structure makes

itself apparent in the Finnish school system. The government is primarily concerned with the well-being of its citizens, from the youngest preprimary school student to the oldest senior citizen. Keeping the school aged population happy and healthy is only made easier by their total inclusion of support services throughout all public school systems.

High regard for teachers. Student learning aside, a high regard for teachers has also become a necessary piece of the common culture of schooling seen through Finland. Teaching is not perceived as a simple job that just anyone can do; the old saying “those who can’t do, teach” is nowhere near applicable to Finns. Finnish teachers are viewed with a very large amount of respect and are honored greatly for the service they provide to the public. Sahlberg (2015) said “It was assumed very early in Finland’s [educational] reform process that teachers and teaching are the key elements that make a difference in what students learn in school, not standards, assessments, or alternative instructional programs,” (p.49). From this we can ascertain that Finns acknowledge teachers for the professionals they are and the immense impact they have on education and society in general. For this reason many people in Finland dream of being teachers “not because the salaries [are] so high but because autonomy and respect [make] the job attractive” (Hancock, 2011). These two aspects are what the education career is most known for in Finland.

Finnish teachers have a large degree of independence because they are so highly trained and trusted as experts in their profession. Sahlberg (2015) wrote that “the basic assumption [in Finland] is that teachers, by default, are well-educated professionals and are doing their best in schools” (p.126). This ties into Finland’s community of trust previously discussed; Finns believe in the quality of their education system and its ability to produce trustworthy specialists who know what they are doing in their field. Because of this high level of confidence among the working people, Finnish teachers are held accountable by trust not tests. The low level of formal teacher evaluation measures has already been considered, though it comes as a result of the trust given to teachers and the level of autonomy they get because of it. It has even been found that “Many Finnish teachers have [said] that if they encountered external pressure regarding standardized testing and high-stakes accountability, similar to what their peers in England or the United States face, they would seek other jobs” (Sahlberg, 2015, p.106). With this in mind, it becomes obvious that Finnish educators take their work related freedom very seriously and cherish it as an integral part of the career.

All of this autonomy given to educators stems from the trust and respect that is gained through their qualifications in the education field, which in turn come from the teacher education program seen throughout Finland. Though the process is complicated and demanding for students in

the program, the generic layout is fairly straightforward. First, students must graduate general upper-secondary school and take the rigorous matriculation exam, just as all other general upper-secondary graduates do. The scores from this exam are coupled with scores from a separate written exam for students wishing to pursue further schooling in teacher education. Pupils who receive high scores (dependent upon the range of scores for the year) are then invited to “phase 2” of the admittance process which varies widely from university to university (Sahlberg, 2015).

After being accepted to an accredited university education students are required to complete a three year bachelor’s degree program followed by a two year master’s degree program for a total of five years of teacher education courses. Though the curriculum is unique at each of the universities that offer teacher education, the typical requirements include classes in communication skills and orienting studies, cultural bases of education, psychological bases of education, pedagogical bases of education, research studies in education, teaching practicum, and a range of multidisciplinary studies in the minor subjects such as math, art, environmental science, history and religion among others (Sahlberg, 2015). Teacher education is a highly competitive course of study in Finnish universities which attracts talented students who wish to seek a deeply esteemed profession.

Concentration on morals. One last aspect of the school culture spread throughout Finland is the high level of importance placed on teaching children morals. Many educators throughout the world have agreed that the enhancement of knowledge should not be the sole purpose of public education, but also the enhancement of character (Shields, 2011). Finns as a whole have embraced this idea that students need to first be taught how to be good citizens and respectable human beings long before the focus of their education should ever be switched to arithmetic and composition. For this reason, Finnish preprimary grades (early childhood from age 1-5 and preschool from 6-7) “stress the importance of the joy of learning, enriching language and communication, and the role of play in children’s development and growth...the main goal is to make sure that all children are happy and responsible individuals,” (Sahlberg, 2015). More specifically, the Finnish National Standards stated that the core aim of preprimary education is to “promote children’s growth into humane individuals and ethically responsible members of society by guiding them towards responsible action and compliance with generally accepted rules and towards appreciation for other people,” (Finnish National Board of Education, 2010). Though the idea of building students into “ethically responsible members of society” might not be taken so seriously in other countries, it is the entire basis of the preprimary National Standards in Finland, which supports the claim that

schooling students to take the moral high ground is the number one focus for young students across the country.

This focus in the younger ages carries on into the primary and secondary levels and is never forgotten or made less important, even with the additional focus placed on more standard curriculum. Sahlberg (2015) wrote that “education in Finland is seen as a public good and therefore has a strong nation-building function” (p. 49); because the nation is so invested in its students, Finns want to instill that same sense of purpose and community integration into its younger generations who will someday enforce their own educational reforms to better the system as time progresses. It is clear that Finns believe education is more than grades and test scores; it molds the minds of citizens and builds the future of their people. A veteran teacher, Kari Louhivuori embodied this mentality with her quote, “This is what we do every day, prepare kids for life,” (Hancock, 2011). So with their minds set first on morals, Finns will continuously be raising new generations that are prepared to take part in and make contributions to society.

The Finnish Dream and education. The Finnish Dream has everything to do with education. A communal wish for more successful schools and a better educated society is at the very core of the nation from the first day they began to rebuild it. Their focus on education is not something only a handful of Finns are concerned about, but rather the nation as a whole.

From their collectivist viewpoint, Finns are all equally invested in the accomplishments of the country, which they have identified as beginning and ending with education. Finnish teacher Kari Louhivuori once again summed up the Finnish mindset engulfing education by simply stating the fact that “‘Whatever it takes’ is an attitude that drives...most of Finland’s 62,000 educators in 3,500 schools from Lapland to Turku,” (Hancock, 2011). From this it is easy to see that becoming a better educated society is not only sought after from select regions of Finland, but from the country as a united whole with a common goal that they will work cooperatively to fulfill. Finns pour everything they have into their public systems so they can become a more well-rounded, happy, and healthy community of people, and that is the Finnish Dream.

The American Dream

Similar to the Finnish Dream, the United States has the notorious American Dream. The American Dream is a well-known concept across the globe, symbolizing opportunity, freedom, and hope of a better life. The idea of the American Dream is rooted in the wish for prosperity and success, being founded on the notion of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” that is promised to all American citizens. The American Dream embodies the individualism seen in the United States because everyone buying into the American Dream is reaching toward the end goal of self-fulfillment. For

centuries the American Dream has brought people into the United States looking for a chance to improve their circumstances and increase their status with fewer obstacles in the way. It became thought that those who moved to the United States and worked hard would undoubtedly become rich and successful.

With this in mind, we can look back at the notion of classical liberalism as the established governmental foundation in the United States and be reminded that this liberty that is sought after, is, in theory, afforded to *all* U.S. citizens. In other terms, with classical liberalism, everyone is supposed to be granted equality of freedoms without them being based on country of origin, gender, ability level, or previous life circumstances. This is specifically where education comes into the American Dream; education is an opportunity that many people have come to the U.S. in search of having an equal chance at. Because equity of education is in high demand and there is a lot of diversity within the American education system, there are laws in place to uphold the level of equality in education necessary for diverse communities. For many years, the American public struggled to make educational equality a priority with their lawmakers, leading to many famous court cases that paved the way to the laws in place today. The most substantial of these laws was the Equal Education Opportunities Act (EEOA) of 1974 that required there to be no form of discrimination to any member of a school (faculty or student) on any

terms. This act also reinforced the idea of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for all students, which had been previously introduced within many less successful laws such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the State School's Act of 1965, and the Rehabilitation act of 1973. FAPE was then more firmly defined in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, and has continued to be updated and revised as the years move on in an attempt to make the opportunity of education more attainable for all citizens, just as the American Dream suggests.

This all ties back into the American Dream because, like the Finnish Dream, the societal frame of mind put in place by the country's dream lays the foundation of what the school culture looks like throughout the United States. By looking at the same areas as were previously discussed with the Finnish Dream and how they impact their culture of education, we can determine where the differences in dreams truly lie as they relate to public education. From this we can see how the American school culture differs from the Finnish common culture of schooling, by the misalignment of Bloom's Taxonomy, the localization of power without a common goal, the lack of support systems for students, society's negative opinions of teaching as a profession, and the concentration on routines, procedures, and early content in the preprimary and primary levels of schooling.

Misalignment of Bloom's Taxonomy. Elementary schools in America are taking one of two paths, overemphasis on lower level thinking skills with basic facts or diving into higher level thinking skills without spending time on those basic facts that come first. As explained before, Bloom's Revised Taxonomy gives teachers a guide to how deeply students are thinking during the activities teachers ask them to do; this taxonomy gives remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating as the six cognitive domains ordered lowest to highest (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The depth of thinking can be judged by the action verb used within the learning objective specific to that learning task. For instance the learning target "Students will be able to memorize the sum of basic single digit math facts," would promote a low level of thinking because the verb "memorize" goes with "remembering" within the lowest level of Bloom's Taxonomy. However, if a later learning objective was "Students will be able to write their own original single digit math facts that follow the rules learned," then students are being asked to think at a much deeper level about how basic math facts work since writing requires "creating" which is the highest level of thinking on Bloom's Taxonomy.

Schools that take path one are caught in the lowest three thinking skills, with only the occasional inclusion of the higher levels. On the other hand, schools that take path two jump straight into the top tier of Bloom's

Taxonomy without first laying the groundwork for that deep level of thought. Both paths lead to dangerous territory. As I discussed in an earlier section, Bloom's Taxonomy is intended to be used as a learning progression for students, not an excuse to drill young students with only the foundational skills or to force students into thinking profoundly about something that they might not even fully understand yet. This is where those two paths take us; path one does not give students a chance to push their limits and explore concepts more deeply when they are ready, while path two does not give students a chance to learn the material in its most basic form before working with it more complexly.

This second path is what American elementary schools are most at risk of according to Booker (2008). It comes off as being beneficial for students because teachers are pushing them to learn more deeply and think more profoundly, but in reality it is teaching students that the basic skills that are meant to precede higher-order thinking are of no value to them and that time should not be wasted on them. Booker (2008) wrote that American schools are in trouble because "shortchanging basic skills education has resulted in producing students who misunderstand true higher-order thinking and who are not equipped for advanced education," (p. 348). By taking this route, American teachers have unknowingly devalued the learning progression

suggested by Bloom's Taxonomy and put their students at risk of misinterpreting what it means to truly learn.

Local control with no common goal. Just as in Finland, the decentralization of educational power is an important aspect of America's school culture. In the United States it is the school districts that hold the locus of control rather than the state or federal government. This means that each school district has an elected school board that is made up of members of the local community and it is this council, along with school administrators, that makes school policy decisions within the district. This places more power in the hands of the local communities to handle education the way that they see fit with their specific educational needs in mind. Localized power in this amount allows districts to make their own choices about school practices and curriculum (Barrera-Osorio, Fasih, Patrinos, & Santibáñez, 2009). However, the state-mandated standards must be addressed by the chosen curriculum, taking away a certain degree of choice and leaving districts to choose a basal curriculum program³ rather than creating their own curriculum guides as they would be able to with complete decentralized control.

Where the United States struggles with this concept of local control is not in meeting nationwide curriculum standards, but in staying united across

³ Basal programs are scripted curriculum progressions written by textbook companies that plan out detailed units of study for educators in order to more easily teach to the standards.

the board. In order for the decentralization of power to not create inconsistency and unpredictability between schools across a country, the nation must decide and depend upon one common goal that every school is collectively invested in working toward. The United States, however, cannot cooperatively agree on any such goal. Without an overarching goal in mind, schools are left working individually rather than being a part of the bigger picture, which only reinforces the individualism seen in the American society.

Lack of support systems for students. Public schools in the United States very rarely offer full health and wellness support systems for their students and families as are seen in Finland. Health and wellness programs that would be beneficial within public schools include school nurses, emotional psychologists, family counselors, and others that aid students with physical and mental health. Because of the extensive costs associated with these types of programs, most American public schools either do not provide those services to their students or share them with other schools in the area. The problem with sharing services is that the specialists who deliver them are on a circulating schedule, meaning each school only gets a fraction of their time. This leads to schools not taking advantage of the systems in place because they are more of a burden to be used. For this reason, American students in need of certain health and wellness professionals such as nurses and counselors are often referred to outside facilities that are not free of cost

to families. This can be too much for families to afford or too much of a hassle to fit into their schedule, causing the student to miss out on the services altogether in these cases.

Opinions of teaching as a profession. A major factor of the education system in the United States is the teaching profession. Teachers themselves undoubtedly play a huge role in the education of children, but it is often forgotten that the societal views of teaching as a profession also impact how educators are teaching. How people in the community feel towards teachers will begin to reflect in how teachers see their own jobs. For instance, if teachers are treated as professionals that are experts in their field, they will be invested in continuing their work because they are needed and valued in their career. However, if teachers are constantly brushed off as being meaningless and replaceable, they will inevitably begin to believe it themselves and grow to accept that their job as an educated professional is worthless within society. Though these are both examples of the extremes of this spectrum, it is still clear that the United States tends to lean toward the side latter explained. Outlooks on teachers in the U.S. are not entirely to the extreme just explained, although they are closer than not. Society's opinions towards teachers depend heavily on the area, ranging widely from state to state or even city to city. However, generally speaking, teachers are quietly appreciated for the work that they do, but are also considered to be more

toward the low-end of the job market. It is widely known in the United States that teaching is a career that is fairly low on the pay scale and not competitive or prestigious to get into. As stated earlier, “those who can’t do, teach,” is a common saying that is heard almost daily in the United States. The popularity of this colloquialism just goes to show that Americans believe anyone can be a teacher; it does not take a high-level of education or skill to be successful at it. From this it becomes apparent that educators are not entirely respected or seen as experts or well-trained professionals by the general public across the United States. This is not to say that there are not areas where teachers are valued as meaningful additions to society, but rather that teaching is broadly not seen as a reputable and admired career among Americans.

Because of these common viewpoints, teachers in the United States are not afforded the same degree of independence within their classrooms as was previously discussed for Finnish educators. American teachers still have quite a bit of instructional freedom inside their classroom walls, by having the opportunity to plan their own lessons and choose their own pedagogical strategies, as long as they are adhering to the national standards. These standards will be discussed further in detail in an upcoming section, but do play a large role in the independence of teachers in the United States.

Teachers have the autonomy to run their classrooms however they wish, though they are held strictly accountable for the classroom practices they

choose by the scores their students receive on high-stakes tests which correlate to the standards needing to be met by all students (Hamilton, Stecher, & Klein, 2002). So in reality, the externalized testing dictates what is to be taught by teachers even though they technically have control over the instruction they give and the way they give it. This gives teachers a certain level of independence in their teaching, but also holds them accountable for what they do independently (Gewertz, 2015).

This level of autonomy is awarded to teachers after the completion of the necessary schooling required to gain a state issued teaching license. As with everything in the United States, this licensure process varies greatly from state to state, with each state having their own set of requirements. Typically, teachers are required to go through a 4-5 year bachelor's degree program in educational studies, part of which is spent within a teacher education program. Teacher education programs usually span over the last year of the undergraduate study and depend upon application and acceptance within the university, again depending on the state and school. Most universities request letters of recommendation, documented experience working with children in a classroom, and a certain level of success with lower division education courses before admittance into the program can be granted. This is generally not all that competitive within most schools, though some more prestigious universities might include interviews, portfolios, and a

more formal application process and only accept a certain percentage of applicants. Typical courses of study within these undergraduate education programs include creative arts in education, childhood psychology, language and linguistics, theory of mathematics, health and physical education, educational science methods, teaching practicum (experience within local classrooms), choice of multiple social sciences, differentiation for Special Education, curriculum and assessment, and theory of pedagogy.

Along with college graduation in the field of study, teachers must also receive a state issued teaching license by passing the necessary tests to prove teaching competence. At some universities, education program members take the necessary certification tests during the time they are studying, which leads them to be able to graduate with their bachelor's degree in education *and* their finished teaching license in the state in which they studied in. Other colleges do not incorporate these licensure tests within their program studies, which means students graduate only with their Bachelor's degree and have to take the necessary teacher certification tests on their own after graduation. Either way is acceptable for university students to become teachers, it simply depends on the layout of the university attended. After graduating with a bachelor's degree and obtaining the proper teaching license, teacher candidates can either join the workforce and begin teaching straight away or continue their education to work towards earning a master's

degree. Master's degree programs are of all different lengths, depending on the graduate school and area of study chosen by the student. A master's degree is not necessary for teachers to begin teaching in elementary schools in the United States, though having one places a teacher higher on the pay scale than teachers without one.

Concentration on routines, procedures, and early content. The focus of preprimary and early primary education in any country says a lot about what is taken as a priority within the foundation of that education system. In the United States the emphasis in the early grades is placed almost entirely on teaching kids how to “do school.” This relies mostly on spending time instructing students on the specific routines and procedures they need to be able to do regularly to be successful with their learning. Included in this is anything from students learning to raise their hands before speaking, wait their turn during games, stand quietly in line, and work both independently and in groups for activities. Alongside this, teachers also place an importance on early academic content in literacy and numeracy, with the content being how students authentically practice the routines and procedures. The main component here is not strictly academic content, but content is what the most classroom instructional time is devoted to. Educators explicitly teach the content with the hopes that students will gain the implicit practice of the routines and procedures that will help them to “do school.”

The concentration on routines and procedures through early content shows us that American schools are highly invested in creating an environment where students can be successful and always know what to do within the classroom. The early onset of content curriculum within the preprimary and primary grades also makes the United States' fixation on meeting standards apparent within their school culture.

The American Dream and education. The American Dream itself is not entirely related to education; it is more about opportunity, freedom, and prosperity than anything else. However, education is an opportunity many people seek when migrating to the United States. And beyond that, education is seen as a way to open doors for further opportunity in the future as well. Through the lens of the American Dream, education is seen as a chance for people to better situate themselves in society to gain more wealth and status. It is viewed with a nation building attitude by some groups of people spread throughout the United States, but is more widely used as a tool of individualism. Education in the United States helps a person to have more opportunities, more freedoms, and more prosperity, and that is the American Dream.

Differences in Dreams

The differences between these two dreams stems from the very foundation upon which they were built. The Finnish Dream is founded in

education while the American Dream is established in individual prosperity. Education is just a stepping stone used to fulfill the American Dream, whereas it is the entirety of the Finnish Dream. From these dreams come the common school cultures seen throughout the two countries, which differ just as much as the dreams themselves do.

The school culture in the United States is much different than that of Finland. While Finnish schools focus on assisting students in learning how to learn, American schools focus on helping students pass tests and meet standards. Where schools in Finland are decentralized with a common goal, schools in the U.S. are decentralized without being able to agree on a collective goal. In this respect, Finns value cooperation over competition, and the opposite is true for Americans. Finnish schools offer seemingly endless support systems for students and their families, whereas American schools provide minimal supports within their doors. In Finland, teachers are viewed as prestigious professionals though their American counterparts are seldom even recognized in society. Finnish educators are given a high level of credibility, which leads to more autonomy in their field of expertise and continued investment because of it; the more control educators are given over what and how they teach, the more inspired they become to do it because they feel their work has great impact. Finland's preprimary and primary grades emphasize morals and concentrate solely on teaching

students how to behave like a Finn, though American preschools and kindergartens teach morals only as the need arises within their focus on routines taught through early content. This does not bode well for the American society because “The job of teachers is to help make socialized adults of unsocialized youngsters; schools and teachers quite literally help pass on our society’s way of life and culture to the next generation” (Ingersoll, 2003, p.4). Without allowing time for young children to mature and learn the morals that are valued within the community, those ethics will not be nurtured and may disappear over time. The American education system needs to be reminded that educating a child is only half about content, raising students to be acceptable members of society is equally important.

All of this shows that the entire culture surrounding public school in both of these countries greatly shapes the way their school systems run and where they rank on international standings. Finnish schools are full of highly trained professional educators who teach young children how to be lifelong learners and decent human beings, while offering them a multitude of health and wellness supports to ensure their complete wellbeing, all of which is in the control of each school working cooperatively toward nationwide goals. American schools are full of underappreciated teachers who must train students in routines and procedures while cramming too much mandated content into not enough time, and hardly even offering consistent support

services for students in the meantime, all of which is being driven more by competition than collaboration from school to school. It all comes back to the communal mindset shared by each nation, with Finns leaning towards collectivism and Americans towards individualism.

Reform Movements

Global Educational Reform Movement and Finnish Reform Movement

Sahlberg (2015) identified the global educational reform movement (GERM) as “not [being] a formal global policy program, but rather an unofficial educational agenda that relies on a certain set of assumptions to improve education systems,” (p.143). Since the 1980s, the GERM has spread through the world with a series of recurring reform patterns that are seen in various developed countries including the U.S., Australia, and England. Though the reforms seen in each of these countries’ education systems may not be identical, they all have multiple commonalities in the overarching themes that are used as an attempt to better their educational structures or “assumptions to improve education systems” as stated by Sahlberg (2015). Five of the most predominant of these themes are the standardization of education with outcome-based instruction, the incorporation of test-based accountability policies for schools and teachers, a higher focus placed on core subjects, increasing competition among schools, and school choice for parents (Sahlberg, 2015).

In stark contrast to the GERM seen around the world, Finland has had a tendency to reform in ways that are quite the opposite of other nations' processes. Sahlberg (2015) argued that it's not necessarily what the Finns are doing in their schools, but more so what they aren't; his thought was that "Finland was, in many ways, an outlier among countries. Finland seemed to have many central school policies that were almost the opposite of those introduced in...much of the rest of the world" (p. xxi). Rather than focusing education reform movements on implementing completely new institutional structures, Finland has remained focused on simply innovating the ideas surrounding the institutions previously established in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Finns spent a large portion of their time and resources concentrated solely on establishing their educational institutions and forming them to fit their societal ideals after World War II and through the 1980s while they were transitioning to a knowledge based society. Since then, they have moved their attention to renewing the interests and ideas of those institutions to continue to fit their societal ideals as their nation progresses (Sahlberg, 2015). The same five overarching themes characteristic of the GERM can be seen in the Finnish reforms of their educational interests and ideas, though in the opposite effect. Rather than blindly following what everyone else was doing, Finns went against the grain in order to target their own personal educational weaknesses. In each of the five main aspects of the

GERM Finland unknowingly implemented contradictory reform movements as those other countries were simultaneously implementing. The PISA results tell us that Finland's reforms were superior to the GERM statistically speaking, but which were really better for students on a personal level?

Educational standardization. The first and foremost of the GERM assumptions is the standardization of education across the country. Standardization in education stems from the belief that all schools should educate all students exactly the same. In theory this concept sounds beneficial to students; however, Sahlberg (2015) argued that advocating the same ambitious performance standards for all students at all schools does not necessarily equate to improved performance outcomes. Sahlberg (2015) believed that students need individualized educational goals in order for them to meet expectations, not homogenized learning targets that lead to strictly regimented curriculum. This strictly regimented curriculum has been seen in a plethora of education reforms, including the National Curriculum in England, the New National Education Standards in Germany and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in the U.S. (Sahlberg, 2015). These are only a few of the many worldwide attempts to standardize national education through the implementation of a "blanket curriculum" that shifts the focus of education to be holistically about student outcomes.

Focusing in on the U.S. specifically, this “blanket curriculum,” the CCSS, has been both supported and criticized heavily in the education world since it was first enacted in 2009. The reason behind the original application of the CCSS is simple: there was an increase in the amount of the nation’s college-aged students who were performing unexpectedly low in entry-level college courses which only filled community members with worry for the coming times when those students would enter the work force (Gewertz, 2015). Many people during this time blamed the K-12 school system for these students’ shortcomings in being prepared for postsecondary schooling that would in turn prepare them to contribute to society through their participation in the job market. Employers of the time also identified math and literacy skills as the areas most in need of improvement with young applicants (Gewertz, 2015). To solve this problem, national education officials decided to set higher standards for all students in the national K-12 system that would be consistent from state to state to ensure every student’s performance was measured to the same degree, giving birth to the CCSS.

The National Education Association (NEA) of the U.S. interviewed a panel of educators from around the country who almost unanimously spoke of the good that the CCSS were doing for students and teachers alike (Long, 2013). These educators agreed on six benefits that Common Core holds in the classroom: Allowing room for creativity in instruction once again, giving

students a deeper, longer-lasting understanding of material, requiring more rigorous involvement from students, promoting collaboration between teachers, advancing equity for students of all ability levels, and lastly, getting students college ready (Long, 2013). According to these educators, “the Common Core State Standards are just that — standards and not a prescribed curriculum. They may tell educators what students should be able to do by the end of a grade or course, but it’s up to the educators to figure out how to deliver the instruction,” (Long, 2013). This is in stark contrast to Sahlberg’s earlier claims that the CCSS are exactly what he would call a prescribed curriculum by Finnish standards. Despite this disagreement of whether or not Common Core falls under the “prescribed curriculum” category, both Sahlberg and these American educators in favor of CCSS agree that prescribed curriculum that dictates classroom instruction is toxic for educational achievement.

One of the most predominant reasons why prescribed curriculum is harmful in education and, similarly, why people are opposed to the CCSS is the idea that it undermines teachers’ ability to tailor what is taught based on individual students’ or classes’ needs. On the political side of this same topic, people debated that Common Core infringes on states’ rights and violates laws that prohibit the federal government from mandating the curriculum to be taught in schools (Gewertz, 2015). However, since the federal government

did not require each state to adopt the CCSS, but only greatly encouraged them to do so by tying it to funds, they were not legally in the wrong (Gewertz, 2015). Though no laws were broken and no rights were taken away, the overwhelming adoption of the CCSS still managed to step on quite a few toes and hinder the individualization of instruction which led way to the oppositional side of Common Core.

In Finland, rather than prescribing standardized learning targets for all children as the rest of the developed world began to do, they created an environment in which the personalization of learning targets for each child was made possible. Some might argue that there is no consistency in the education of students across the country without the same specific standards being applied to each and every student in the nation. A national curriculum framework with standards and learning outcomes, however, was still set in place in Finland; where it differed from other countries was the specificity of this framework, not the question of whether it existed entirely (Sahlberg, 2015). The clear Finnish belief in the personalization of education is strongly shown through their concise, flexible national standards for education. When creating the curriculum framework, the Finnish National Board of Education stayed true to the country's ideal that all children should be educated in a way that produces an opportunity for individual success while still accomplishing the same level of knowledge and skills deemed necessary to become a valued

part of society. They did this by fashioning a set of core curriculum standards as national goals for the country's students to achieve, though left them broad enough that they can be left open for interpretation by the teachers and met by students in a variety of different ways as seen fit on an individual basis (Finnish National Board of Education, 2010). These standards are in no way a "blanket curriculum" because "teachers from all over [Finland] contributed to a national curriculum that provides guidelines, *not* prescriptions" (Hancock, 2011). The Finnish National Board of Education provides these broad learning end goals for schools, but grants schools the authority to use the framework to build their own local curriculum progressions based off of the general standards. This framework tells educators where the Board wants students to be at the end of the primary grades altogether, but does not lay out a strict grade by grade progression. This shows educators where their students are going in the long run, but allows them to choose how they get there.

The main difference between the CCSS and the Finnish national standards is specificity. Both of these sets of standards are implemented in just the same way, giving educators a sense of where all students across the country should be but not enforcing a strict set curriculum. However, the CCSS are much more specific and rigid in their outline, which does not leave room for much individualization or creativity in meeting the standards.

Literacy and math alone in the CCSS total 146 pages for grades K-8, while the Finnish national standards are just 82 pages for all twenty-one subject areas in the K-8 grades, including studies in:

- Mother tongue and the second national language
- Literature (of which there are 11 different options depending on the student's first language)
- Foreign languages
- Mathematics
- Integration and cross-cultural themes
- Environmental and natural studies
- Biology and geography
- Physics and chemistry
- Health education and physical education
- Religion (of which there are 3 options)
- Ethics
- History and social studies
- Music and visual arts
- Home economics
- Various optional elective subjects
- Educational/vocational guidance counseling

(Finnish National Board of Education, 2010)

Whereas each grade has a stringent progression of standards to meet in the United States, Finland has a broad, open set of standards to be met by the end of lower-secondary school (an 8th grade U.S. equivalent) which leaves educators with much more leniency in their grade to grade teaching procedure.

As I stated before, the Finnish standards tell teachers where their students are going, but does not require that they get there in any predetermined fashion as the United States' CCSS do. This permits Finnish educators to individualize their instructional process to a greater level because they do not have as specific of a timeline to follow. All students in Finland are still given an equal education in order to reach the same end goals, teachers just have the opportunity get their students to those end goals in a way that is more tailored to their educational needs.

Test-based accountability. The second common overarching theme in the GERM countries is the significance of test-based accountability for students, teachers and school districts. Because the standardization of curriculum forces the focus of education to be placed on the outcomes of that curriculum and instruction, there became a need for the consistent measurement of those outcomes. Prior to 2010 each state was able to employ their own unique state test to measure the students' performance in that state (Gewertz, 2015). However, with the CCSS in place after 2009, the U.S.

Department of Education wanted all states that had adopted Common Core to be measured in the same way, which meant creating a national assessment. This gave way to the two current national performance assessments, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced Assessment, which both commenced in the spring of 2015 (Gewertz, 2015).

The federal government uses the results from these tests to either reward improvements in scores or sanction declines in scores. With the enactment of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001, test-based accountability systems were made a requirement for schools in all 50 states to expand the role of the federal government and its funding in schools. Some scholars have even said that holding individuals and institutions responsible for the quality of their instruction based solely on the scores their students receive on external high-stakes tests has become “the cornerstone of the U.S. federal education policy,” (Hamilton, Stecher, & Klein, 2002). In the years since the NCLB Act was first established, it gained a lot of criticism from educators around the U.S., leading to its annulment in December 2015 when President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to replace it. This new act shares a lot of qualities with the NCLB Act, but modifies many provisions in order to lessen the federal government’s involvement and allow more flexibility in testing at the state government’s discretion (Korte, 2015).

The idea behind test-based accountability measures stems from the desire to have a means to quantifiably measure the quality of education that is being given by the teachers in schools. Education officials wanted to create a system that would promote the aspiration of teachers to cover more material in a set amount of time by being more effective in the strategies and methods they implemented in their classrooms (Hamilton, Stecher, & Klein, 2002). By giving teachers a timeline on which students needed to learn certain curriculum by, it was thought that teachers would put in the extra work necessary to identify the most efficient ways to get their students to learn the material within those set timeframes (Hamilton, Stecher, & Klein, 2002). Again, this is a concept that sounds helpful in theory, but in reality is flawed in the eyes of many educators and scholars.

A large disagreement with test-based accountability comes not from the overall idea of it, but from the aftereffects that it has on teaching. Sahlberg (2015) stated that “the problem with test-based accountability is not that students, teachers, and schools are held accountable per se, but rather the way accountability mechanisms affect teachers’ work and students’ studying in school,” (p. 146). Because they are being held responsible for students’ scores, teachers’ motivation in the classroom is changed from internal to external. Even though test-based accountability succeeded in making teachers want to find the most efficient ways to teach their students the material

within a set timeframe that does not always mean the students were taught in the best way possible. Efficient learning does not equate to meaningful learning that will stick in students' long term memories. Some scholars have identified this learning gap as a problem that creates a tendency for teachers to teach students to succeed in taking tests instead of to succeed in deeply learning the content (Popham, 2001). It has been stated that test-based accountability "can lead to [teachers] coaching students to perform better by focusing on aspects of the test that are incidental to the domain the test is intended to represent," (Hamilton, Stecher, & Klein, 2002, p. 18). The focus is moved from learning to simply performing well on the assessment.

Finland also flipped test-based accountability on its head. For starters, there are significantly fewer standardized tests that occur for Finland's youth. In Finland there is just one big matriculation exam that occurs at the end of the general upper-secondary school (a high school equivalent to the United States). This is a very high stakes external test that students who go through general upper-secondary school must place well on in order to increase their chances at attending university. Students who choose to go the vocational upper-secondary school route are not required to take this exam, though they are assessed in a multitude of other ways, mostly performance based. This schooling format is the same all across the nation, with Finnish students having no external high stakes tests in the primary and lower-secondary

grades. This falls in stark contrast to the annual state tests that are required in the United States in multiple subject areas starting in the third grade. This schooling format with little standardized testing leads to educational accountability in Finland being based on things other than student performance alone.

The type of accountability used in Finland's education system is based not only on quantitative test scores but also on qualitative measures grounded on professional responsibility and trust between the nation's educators. This type of accountability is referred to by researchers as "intelligent accountability" (Sahlberg, 2007). Intelligent accountability is a balance between internal accountability measures as well as certain external accountability. Internal accountability can be seen in everything a school does. Schools are always being held accountable through things in their control such as the upkeep of daily school processes, courteous interactions within the community, self-evaluations and critical reflections by students, teachers and administration to name a few. These measures go hand in hand with the external monitoring of student work samples and a range of evaluations deemed developmentally appropriate for that level of learning to keep educators and school districts accountable for the quality of the education they are providing their students (O'Neill, 2013). Aside from a mixture of both internal and external measures, intelligent accountability also

places a strong importance on “mutual responsibility,” meaning that schools are held accountable to policy makers and school boards for the overall value of the education they are providing while policy makers and school boards are also held accountable to schools for providing the necessary resources for education to be successful. With all of the aspects that make up intelligent accountability in place in Finnish schools, the focus is taken off of the results of standardized testing and placed more heavily on the performance of the schooling profession as a whole.

However, this is not to say that Finnish students are not being assessed at all. Finns prefer to focus on assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning. Assessment for learning is the process of identifying where students are at with their learning and using that information to interpret where they need to get to and how best to get them there. Finnish teachers are constantly formatively assessing their students to better inform their instruction and guide students to meet the learning goals laid out for them. Anneli Rautiainen, head of the Basic Education Unit of the National Board of Education, explained the nature of testing in Finnish schools by stating that “Evaluation will become continuous, guiding and supportive. Grades will not be based on test results alone. Tests are part of learning, but not the heart of it. You can also demonstrate your ability by realising projects or through oral presentations. If you fail in a test, you can try again later, and learn things in

between,” (Lehtniemi, 2016). Rather than having summative tests be the only indicator of student learning, Finnish teachers work to persistently evaluate their students as they are learning to identify the next best steps for learners and give them multiple opportunities to prove their progress. Using formative assessments in this way allows teachers to better understand student thinking in order to spot and address misconceptions immediately as well as to extend student thought for those who are ready. Written formative feedback by teachers is also given to Finnish students more frequently than grades are handed back which helps students to self-evaluate their learning and become more invested in the process of education instead of just the ending letter grade. Many schools in Finland are even making a move to get rid of numerical grades altogether. This new system gives up the well-known quantitative grading system and replaces it with a simple indication of completion in each subject matter instead of a letter grade. When looked at this way, a pass/fail system seems to be less informative than a typical grading scale, but when looked at more closely it is actually quite the opposite. Finnish teachers accompany their indication of completion with individualized written and oral feedback for students and parents. Parents were hesitant at first, but now seem to accept the new system as a way to get more extensive feedback on areas of success and ones that need improvement. Though only a handful of schools have formally adopted this

system, most Finnish public schools are considering it (This is Finland, 2016). Evaluations with a greater emphasis on formative assessments such as the ones that Finland has put in place have been found to increase student success at meeting learning outcomes considerably (Black, Chris, Clare, Bethan, & Dylan, 2003). Hendrickson (2012) even went as far as to say, “Perhaps the United States should look to Finland for examples of research based formative assessment practices to replace the current reliance on summative, high-stakes assessment,” (p.489).

Teacher and school accountability measures are arguably where the United States and Finland differ the most. The U.S. overuses external tests to hold their teachers accountable while Finland has almost no external testing anywhere to be found. The differences between test-based accountability and the intelligent accountability that is used with Finnish teachers are night and day, one is only quantitative and the other is primarily qualitative. Louhivuori, a veteran teacher in Finland, explained Finnish accountability by stating that “We [Finnish educators] have our own motivation to succeed because we love the work, our incentives come from inside” (Hancock, 2011). Looking predominantly at quantitative data takes all of the humanity out of teaching. Solitary test scores on a standardized assessment do not tell you what kind of relationship a teacher had with their students or how far the teacher has come with their students; they explain nothing about the

students' social, emotional, or moral development throughout the year. Giving standardized tests so much power over education shows students that they are nothing more than a mark on an exam and their personal journey through education means little without good grades. This is not the message that should be sent to students; students should understand that they are learning to become educated and contribute to society, not just to pass a test.

Focus on core subjects. These effects of test-based accountability lead to the third common overarching theme found in the reforms within the GERM countries: an unbalanced focus on core subjects. With the emphasis of education placed so highly on the performance of students on high-stakes math, reading and writing tests, a large portion of instructional time is inclined to be placed on those subjects alone (Hamilton, Stecher, & Klein, 2002). Education systems all over the world have placed this high level of importance on core subjects over other subjects to ensure that students are more prepared for national and international assessments. This has led to many school systems stealing instructional time from other subject areas, such as social studies, art, music and physical education, to create more time to focus on literacy and numeracy (Sahlberg, 2015). Sahlberg (2015) wrote “these core subjects have now come to dominate what pupils study, teachers teach, schools emphasize, and national education policies prioritize in most parts of the world” (p. 145). Later in this same text Sahlberg (2015) pointed

out that though students would gain a better understanding of literacy and mathematics, they would be lacking in other essential skills necessary to thrive in life (teamwork, curiosity, problem solving, leadership, communication, etc.). Since the enactment of the NCLB Act in 2001 36% of districts admit cutting instructional time in social studies and 28% of districts report the same about science in order to devote more time to literacy and numeracy (Barth, 2008).

This so called “teaching to the test” has become a major concern behind standardized curriculum and test-based accountability measures; remember, John Hattie (2012) found that focusing on test taking within the classroom is not an effective use of instructional time (with a very low effect size of just .27). People in support of the emphasis on core subjects argued that teaching to the test is not all bad. Augustine (2013), the chairman of the National Academies’ congressionally mandated review of U.S. competitiveness, called attention to the fact that “teaching the test is the whole point. Exams are instruments for measuring student proficiency. And...measuring something is often the best way to maximize or improve it”. Dan Ariely (2010), an economist from Duke University wrote, “CEOs care about stock value because that’s how we measure them. If we want to change what they care about, we should change what we measure.” Following this line of thought, the concept

of high-stakes testing is not what is creating the problem of teaching to the test; it is the format and focus of those tests that create it.

Because there are vastly different accountability measures in place for Finnish educators and schools, it follows naturally that there is no need to teach to the test simply because there are no tests to teach to. Without the looming fear of their students' performance on high-stakes tests to worry about, Finnish educators can focus on teaching the whole child. This means that rather than teaching students to be good test takers, they can spend all their time and energy teaching students to be good students, citizens and individuals. Not only do Finnish educators want their students to be successful in school, but also in life in general. For this reason, Finns value each subject just as much as the rest and do not place more importance on any one subject matter over another. In Lehtniemi (2016) Sahlberg stated that "Unlike in other countries such as Britain and the US, we don't feel in Finland that there are important subjects and less important subjects. All subjects play an equally important role. The goal is to give youngsters a broadly-based education, and not to make them learn single subjects well." Numeracy and literacy have undoubtedly taken over the bulk of the curriculum in the United States, whereas the curriculum in Finland includes subjects like environmental studies, ethics/religion, visual arts, second language, music, history/social studies, and optional subjects such as home

economics, artistic and practical electives, guidance counseling, and third languages depending on local curriculum decisions all in addition to the traditional core subjects (Finnish National Board of Education, 2012).

The aim of Finnish education is not solely to assist children in gaining knowledge but also in the growth of their personality, moral character, creativity, ethics, and necessary skills (Sahlberg, 2015). By looking at the list of subject matter covered in Finnish compulsory school it is obvious that Finns are in the business of educating whole children, not creating test taking machines. They place just as high of importance on teaching good morals and citizenship as they do on math and reading; the Finnish education system truly reflects the nation's ideal that education has a nation building function as discussed previously.

Another aftereffect of teaching to the test in GERM countries is the movement away from play. When I discuss "play" I am referring to it in the sense that it is a structured or unstructured time when students have the chance to be physically active and give their brains a break from curriculum. This is purposefully a very broad definition because many schools incorporate play in their own way, so I want to analyze the different forms and structures that play can take within a school setting. Brown (2009) defined play as "a state of mind rather than an action" (p.60). There is no set distinction of what is and is not play, it all depends on how someone feels

while doing it. If an action can take your mind off of everything altogether and make you think of only the task at hand, whether it be how fun or difficult it is, then that is play. It is the feeling you get that classifies something as play, not the characteristics of the action itself. This state of mind can be very freeing and has a plethora of benefits that come alongside it.

The benefits of play fall into three categories, though there is quite a bit of overlap and interdependency between the three. These three main benefits of play are social interactions, emotional development and learned skills through play. Play is irrefutably a social event; children are constantly playing with one another and learning massive amounts about the way social interacts work and how best to act in them. Some of the social behaviors that play teaches children are fairness, cooperation, teamwork, altruism, responsibility, perseverance, trust, and communication (Brown, 2009). Engaging in play with peers is the best way for students to foster friendships and belonging among the group. On an emotional level, play helps children practice self-control, creativity, psychological stability and coping skills (Brown, 2009). Amongst these social and emotional skills, children also gain an understanding of the world around them, strengthen neural connections, better retain knowledge, and enhance problem solving skills when given ample time to play because play sparks increased growth of the frontal cortex of the brain (Brown, 2009). This long list of skills, and many more, are all

associated with the ability for children to play; kids grow and learn so much during play that it would be a shame to keep that from them. Brown (2009) wrote that “Play isn’t the enemy of learning, it’s learning’s partner. Play is like fertilizer for brain growth. It’s crazy not to use it” (p.101). With all of the developmental benefits children gain from play, it should be incorporated in every stage of learning, which is supported by John Hattie’s (2012) research that identified the implementation of play programs as being greatly effective when teaching children (with a large effect size of .50).

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that children ages 5-17 achieve at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity (mvpa) per day (European Commission, n.d.). Since the average American school day lasts about six or seven hours, it is recommended that students receive at least 30 minutes of mvpa each school day to help get them closer to their goal of an hour a day (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2016). However, recent studies show that in 2006 only 42% elementary aged students and 7.5% of lower-secondary students in the United States were meeting the recommended 60 minutes of mvpa a day (National Physical Activity Plan Alliance, 2016). Similarly, in 2013 only 50% of primary school students and 17% of lower-secondary students were getting an hour of mvpa every day in Finland (European Commission, n.d.). These most recent data points we have from these two countries show us that

in terms of physical activity Finns were bad, but Americans were worse. To combat the problems the low percentages of youth who are physically active both countries have programs in place to promote physical activity in schools. *Finnish Schools on the Move* encourages physical activity in Finnish schools both before and after school (walk/cycle to school instead of bus) and during school (more time and space for physical activity during breaks, including physical activity during lessons, etc.) (European Commission, n.d.). In America, the Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE America) puts former first-lady Michelle Obama's program *Let's Move!* into action by providing evidence-based resources, exclusive activation grants, professional development, progress incentives, and a customized Action Plan to any school that joins the movement (Let's Move Active Schools, n.d.). There are two main ways that students get this physical activity in at typical public schools: recess and physical education class. These two types of play differ a lot in their structure, though both have one same goal in mind: get students moving to get their brains working, because "without physical discharge, kids become antsy and unfocused" (Brown, 2009, p.184).

John Medina (2017), a molecular biologist and author of "Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home, and School," created a list of 12 "brain rules" which are essentially scientifically supported functions of the brain. Of these 12 rules, Medina found that the number one

undeniable brain rule is “Exercise boosts brain power.” The two major findings to back up this claim are that exercise increases the amount of oxygen travelling to the brain, which is strongly correlated with a surge in mental alertness, and that physical stimulation through movement promotes the formation, endurance, and resistance of neurons, which are the cells in our brains responsible for processing and transmitting information (Medina, 2017). This research proves that students learn better when they have constant neural stimulation through movement and should not be learning in a sedentary environment such as the current classroom norm.

A large percentage of most school’s opportunity for students to obtain physical activity comes from recess which varies widely in length and frequency from school to school in many countries. For instance, in the United States some elementary schools have a morning recess, lunch recess and afternoon recess, while others only have two of the three. As stated before, American schools typically have 6 lessons every day that are about 50 minutes long, which totals 5 hours of in class instruction time (Sahlberg, 2015). Within these 5 hours of instruction, students in the United States only get 30.2 mins of recess on average (Barth, 2008). Education officials in the U.S. have been cutting back this recess time for years trying to create more time in the day to teach students what will be on their big standardized tests. On the other hand, the schools in Finland are required to give 15 minutes of

recess for every 45 minute lesson (Sahlberg, 2015). Because there are typically 4 lessons in a normal school day this totals 3 hours of instruction with 1 hour of recess which is almost half the amount of sedentary class time and double the amount of unrestricted recess time than is usually seen in the United States. A Finnish primary school teacher, Maija Rintola, explained their inclusion of so much unstructured free play time by simply stating that “Play is important at this age, we [Finnish educators] value play” (Hancock, 2011). This is the mindset that drives the unanimous presence of play in Finnish schools across the country while in the United States only 5 states even legally required a daily recess, of which only 2 required at least 20 minutes, in the 2012-13 school year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014).

Physical Education (PE) classes do not fare much better as far as frequency goes. Of the 50 states in the U.S. only 6 require PE to be taken in every grade, only 3 require the recommended 150+ minutes of physical activity a week in a PE class, and only 1 (Illinois) requires PE to be taken every day in every grade in the K-12 school system (Treadwell, 2013). In Finland primary and lower-secondary students are only required to take two 45 minute periods of PE on a weekly basis, which is similar to what local authorities decide for most U.S. schools as well (Yli-Piipari, 2014). The difference here is that the obligatory 90 minutes of PE per week in Finland is

the bare minimum that can be (and usually is) added to, while in the United States the 90 minutes is what has already been added.

The amount of play in education is one variable that neither nation does exceptionally well with. Play has an importance that often gets overlooked in the education field because the impacts of it are not measured and quantified in the same way as everything else. However, Brown (2006) repeatedly argues the benefits of play by stating that “the ability to play is critical not only to being happy, but also to sustaining social relationships and being a creative, innovative person” (p.6). This is one aspect of education that both nations need improvement on, the United States slightly more so than Finland. Finland at least gives their students the opportunity to be physically active for at least an hour every day during breaks and even more so on days with PE. The next step for Finns is getting their students to use the time they are given to be physically active, while the United States still needs to increase time offered to students for this purpose.

All in all, high-stakes external tests lead to teaching to the test and placing greater importance on test subjects while brushing others to the side, but when there are no external tests in place teachers are left to use their time however they wish. Finnish educators do not have the added pressure of standardized tests and so they can spend the shorter school day covering more subject areas and giving students more time to play. Educational

researcher John Hattie (2012) stated that “Overly concentrating on achievement can miss much about what students know, can do, and care about” (p.3). Finns widely accept this mentality of teaching the whole child, not just pieces of their knowledge in isolated “superior” subjects. This is helpful to students because it aids them in becoming more well-rounded citizens with a broader educational base.

Competition and school choice. The fourth and fifth common overarching themes found within the GERM are increased competition between schools and the ability for parents to choose which school their child attends. These two factors are undoubtedly connected with one contributing to the other and vice versa. School systems have begun to provide alternative forms of education aside from the traditional public school classroom in order to offer parents more choice in their child’s schooling. Examples of these alternative forms of education include Chile’s voucher system, Sweden’s movement of free schools, religious schools in the Netherlands and the U.S.’s charter school systems (Sahlberg, 2015). Since more types of schools have joined the equation, it has created a fierce rivalry between schools to try to win parents over so their children will attend one school over another.

Also among the competition is not only a goal of gaining new students, but retaining the students already enrolled. This is the concept that drove the support of competition between schools because it became thought that

schools would work harder to aid their students and families in fear of losing them to another institution. Milton Friedman first proclaimed this theory in the 1950s with his belief that parents should have freedom of choice when it comes to their children's education because that choice will encourage "healthy competition" among schools, which will in turn inspire them to better serve the diverse needs of their learners (Howell, Peterson, Wolf, & Campbell, 2006).

However, critics of school choice leading to "healthy competition" claimed that "because school learning is strongly influenced by children's family background and associated factors, equity of outcomes requires that schools are funded according to their real needs to cope with these inequalities. School choice often leads to segregation that increases inequity of outcomes," (Sahlberg, 2015). In other words, competition has driven advantaged and disadvantaged students to become separated and more concentrated in certain school districts, which leads to an unfair distribution of resources. This point was supported by a study done in Philadelphia from 2001-2005 that found schools with higher needs students were given less funding, less resources and less experienced teachers because they performed worse on high-stakes assessments and were not given the benefits of test-based accountability measures, while more funds, resources and

experienced teachers were pooled in schools in lower need of them (Argue, Honeyman, & Shlay, 2006).

One thing Finland prides itself on is the accessibility of their public education system for all children. Competition between schools and the option for parents to choose where their child is enrolled create segregation between students in a myriad of ways (high and low need, economic status, ethnicity, etc.), which leads to the unequal distribution of resources. Finns do not have this problem that many GERM countries are facing because all children are entitled to a completely free, equal education throughout all of Finland. Though this might also be the case in other countries such as the U.S., a high level of competition between schools reduces the accessibility for certain groups of community members to attend certain schools. In Finland, it is a widely held belief that all schools are invested in providing equity of outcomes by funding schools according to their real need. In the U.S. schools are funded according to set local, state and federal budgets which often do not account for the actual need a school is facing, but are rather based on previous performance on standardized tests or predetermined demographics. Because all public school tuition, textbooks, transportation, materials, and lunches are free to all Finnish students, it can be guaranteed that every student will have an equal opportunity to learn a balanced curriculum from a skilled teacher no matter where they were born or what socioeconomic

background they come from (Walker, 2016). It is known across Finland that “Instead of competition and comparison, comprehensive schools focus on support and guidance for the students as individuals,” so parents are not left trying to work their child’s way into a “better” school because all schools operate equally with the same goals in mind: treat each student as an individual, teach them the way they learn best, and find their unique talents while helping them develop other skills along the way (Korpela, 2014).

Though some degree of school choice is offered to parents in both countries, the level of competition among schools is vastly different. As discussed previously, schools in the United States are always trying to “one up” other schools to get the best and the brightest students to attend. However, this ends up creating segregation among students because schools’ attempts at gaining students inadvertently target certain groups of students, causing them to pool in schools rather than stay spread out. This becomes a problem when high need and low need students are separated and then given the same amount of resources, when in reality the high need students require many more resources to perform equally as well as the low need students. Remember, the Finns believe that equality is everyone getting what they need to be successful, not everyone getting the exact same thing. For this reason, Finland funds its schools based off of their real need as it is assessed by local authorities. Rather than competing with one another, Finnish schools

cooperate with one another to ensure that they are all keeping up the same high level of equality across the board. This allows parents to send their kids to school wherever they want and know that they are getting the best possible education they can. Less competition between schools creates greater equity of outcomes for students, which is beneficial to them because they are guaranteed to get their needs met and have access to a high standard of education just like everyone else across the country.

Just based off of these five themes of reform discussed, it can easily be determined that Finnish students are much better off than American students. Time and time again Finnish schools provide more for their students on a personal level than the schools in the United States ever do. Finland reforms have shaped an educational environment that is able to be individualized, fills their students with a greater sense of worth, gives students further opportunity to learn, and is more equally accessible. For these reasons, Finland comes out on top in both statistics and providing more for students.

Education Today

Finland's Education System

Present day education in Finland has grown out of all of the changes made throughout the Finnish reform movements to be a high functioning, successful system that embodies the values of the nation. The current school

system in Finland starts with optional early childhood education from ages 1-6 and one year of preschool at age 6 which is also strictly optional. After this comes the compulsory basic education with nine-years of an elementary program that begins when children are 7 and ends when they are 16 or have reached the necessary requirements. Once graduated from the rudimentary levels of schooling pupils voluntarily transition to either general upper-secondary or vocational upper-secondary schools which are structured without grade levels but typically last until students are about 18 or 19 years of age. A third option during this time for students who do not wish to take the academic or occupational route is to complete a one year 10th grade upper-secondary education before beginning work in the community. Students then have the choice to attend university or polytechnic to continue their education and training still free of charge, or move straight into the workforce (Sahlberg, 2015).

For this comparison I will only be focusing on the required elementary years of the Finnish school system, which is the nine-year stretch at the beginning of the mandatory public school system that includes primary and lower-secondary education, formally known as Peruskoulu (which literally translates to “basic school” in English). School years at this level are typically 190 days in length beginning in mid-August and running through the beginning of June split into two semesters, autumn and spring. Holiday

vacations are decided at a local level and may not be consistent from school to school, though summer break is uniformly about 60 days across the country.

On a daily basis Peruskoulu schools generally meet at around 8 in the morning and last anywhere from 4-7 hours depending on the day of the week and the grade level (Ministry of Education and Culture, n.d.). On average Finnish primary teachers spend a total of about 670 hours on instruction each year, which divides to being roughly 900 lessons annually. Day-to-day this totals only between 4-5 lessons of 45 minutes a piece for the primary grades. Lower-secondary levels of instruction have been found to total even less than the primary grades at just 590 instructional hours each year (Sahlberg, 2015).

The ordinary public Peruskoulu is said to be medium sized with about 300-500 students enrolled and a wide variety of subjects offered (Ministry of Education and Culture, n.d.). Though local education authorities make the curriculum decisions for each school individually, there are many commonalities between what is included in most schools. Common subjects provided in the primary grades are mother tongue (some students' first language is Finnish while some is Swedish, both are official languages of Finland), literature (in their mother tongue), a second language (usually the other national language that is not their first), a third language (almost always English), mathematics, environmental studies, world religion/ethics, history/social studies, visual arts, music, crafts, physical education, home

economics, artistic and practical elective subjects, guidance counseling and various optional electives (Finnish National Board of Education, 2012). In the lower-secondary grades of Peruskoulu, the last three years, the same subjects are covered as the primary grades just at a higher level, as well as with the inclusion of biology, geography, physics, chemistry, and health education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2012).

United States' Education System

Following the Global Educational Reform Movements, the organization of the public school system in the United States is much less consistent than those of other countries. Just as with many nations, they offer and highly suggest an optional preschool at the parents' expense that lasts from age 3 to age 5. At age 5 comprehensive public schooling begins with one year of kindergarten and continues from there in four main common patterns. The first of these routes labels grades kindergarten through 6th as elementary school then moves to junior high from grade 7th to 9th and ends with senior high in grades 10th through 12th. The second configuration starts with elementary school spanning from kindergarten to 6th grade as well with a combined junior and senior high for grades 7th through 12th. The third arrangement also begins with a kindergarten through 6th grade elementary school then moves to a middle school for grades 7 and 8 and ends with high school covering 9th through 12th grade. The last path moves from a

kindergarten through 8th grade elementary school and finishes with a 9th through 12th grade high school (Corsi-Bunker, n.d.). Though the make-up of the school years might involve different titles or amounts of schools in each of these models, they all begin with kindergarten and end with 12th grade and include 13 years of obligatory formal schooling. After the graduation of 12th grade students have the option to apply to a college of their choice at their own cost or start their job search.

Again, for the comparison of these school systems I will be focusing on the elementary levels which I generalize as kindergarten through 8th grade (K-8). A usual school year in the United States lasts around 180 school days starting at the beginning of September and ending in mid-June. Some school districts choose to operate their schools on semesters, trimesters, terms, or quarters; there is not one set way to split up the school year across the nation because it is the responsibility of the local school officials to decide. Along with this, local decision makers for each school have the power to choose the holidays that are to be taken off from school, though some nationally recognized holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving are unanimously no-school days. Summer break is also a relatively stagnant in its schedule, lasting about 12 weeks or 84 days. School districts are also in power to adopt their own daily school schedules, including start and end times, though the average national school day lasts from 6-9 hours (National Center for Education

Statistics, 2013). American educators spend approximately 1,131 hours teaching their students in the primary grades (K-3) and just slightly less in the lower-secondary grades (4-8) at 1,085 annual hours. This equates to an average of 6 daily lessons that are 50 minute long (Sahlberg, 2015).

Curriculum across the nation is very standardized with consistent specific standards being set for each grade level in every state. These standards address the curriculum areas of English reading and writing, mathematics, history and geography (social studies), music, science, and physical education (Corsi-Bunker, n.d.). Along with the subjects that show up on the national standards most schools also teach arts and crafts and occasionally the inclusion of a second language. There is little uniformity among these subjects and they are often only added in if time permits.

Using What We Have Learned

After this detailed discussion of the differences between the Finnish context for schooling and the American one, it is obvious to see that the Finnish school system cannot simply be applied exactly as it is to the United States. As Sahlberg (2015) stated, “school reforms are bad travelers” (p. xxii), meaning that no two countries are alike and so neither should their school reforms be because each unique country has their own unique needs. Finland and the United States are vastly different in how they operate, which calls for a vast difference in how their schools operate as well. However, this is not

just due to the dissimilarities in size and levels of homogeneity as large portions of people tend to chalk it up to. Finland's neighbor, Norway, has a similar size and ethnic makeup as Finland, but has an education system much more similar to the United States (Hancock, 2011); if it were all about size and homogeneity, Norway would be equally as successful as Finland. So the question we are left with is: What can we take away from what we have learned about Finnish education and how can we adjust it to fit into the United States' situation?

Without a doubt, the biggest obstacle that the United States faces with education is the individualism spread throughout the nation. This common community outlook is just one aspect of society in the U.S., but it is a very large and powerful aspect that triggers a lot of the other variables of education as discussed previously. In many cases, individualism seems to be the spark that fuels the fire of educational hindrance. Individualism can be seen all throughout the societal features noted in the United States, in their high childhood poverty rates, minimal parental support with newborns, lower education expenditures, local school control with no common nationwide goal, lack of support systems for students at schools, and even the negative opinions towards teaching as a profession. All of these things show that, in general, the people of the United States are more concerned with getting what is best for them individually than helping their neighbors around

them as well. In the American school system there are some structures in place to assist in the well-being of students, but they are far from having the collective mindset seen in Finland that is willing to go above and beyond to ensure the health and happiness of everyone in society. This is what is slowing down education in the United States: individualism over collectivism. In an ideal world where nationwide attitudes could be changed at the drop of a hat, individualism is what I would advocate changing to help education advance in the United States based off of how things run in Finland. Though this could be a reality someday, for now it is only the ideal, hypothetical solution to education problems in the United States.

On a more attainable scale, if there were one single thing I would suggest as the most prominent idea to adopt in the United States, it would be accepting education as a nation building system as Finns do. Even if nothing else is changed, with the government remaining awash with political realism and society staying rampant with individualism, if the United States as a whole could agree upon the importance of education in the future of their entire country, a lot of problems could be fixed. If the whole system's mindset of education changed from being solely about performing well on tests to being about creating a better educated society, then ineffective classroom practices would inevitably be shed and more effective ones put in place. This would not require the government to outlaw high-stakes tests entirely either;

the focus would just be shifted away from test scores and fixed on meaningful learning. And in the end, test scores might even rise because students would be learning at a deeper and more sophisticated level which they would be able to apply to many areas of life, not simply standardized tests. This would mean making education a valued part of the community and raising children in an environment wholly engulfed in learning. Holopainen, Headmaster of Munkkiniemi School in Helsinki, Finland, emphasized the importance of education being ingrained in society with her statement:

A school is not a separate island of excellence — and there is a lot of room for improvement in schools too. In my opinion, the results of the [PISA] survey are rather an indication of the values and potential of society.

Children and adolescents [in Finland] grow up in an environment where education is highly valued across the board and where there is a high level of preparedness to do work. The value base is never questioned, there is generally a good, non-disruptive atmosphere in which to work, and there is a practical approach in all things (Korpela, 2008).

Finns accept education as one of their core community values across the nation, which means students and families alike are invested and involved in education throughout their lives because they acknowledge its important role

in nation building. However, even this is a huge step to be taken and a lot to ask of a country that is as divided in beliefs as the United States. In the future this would be something the United States could work toward, but it would take a lot of time and dedication, not to mention a whole other reform movement.

More realistically speaking, schools in the United States can begin moving towards an education system that is more highly-performing by making smaller scale changes that apply to the educational needs previously identified. Referring back to the research of John Hattie (2012), we can recall that the needs of the United States were made up of both things that they should start doing more of and things they should stop doing altogether. We will call these the do's and don'ts of education. The do's include educational strategies found to have an effect size greater than normal (average effect size=.40) by Hattie (2012) such as students self-reporting their grades (1.44 effect size), teachers providing effective feedback (.75), instruction on metacognitive skills (.69), teaching self-verbalization and self-questioning skills (.64), and implementing play programs (.50). The don'ts are then those that have an effect size less than the baseline set by Hattie (2012) which include a focus on test-taking skills (.27), competitive learning (.24), and ability tracking (.12). However, trying to solve all of the education problems seen in the United States all at once is a bit ambitious, and since we have just

spent an ample amount of time analyzing the effectiveness of Finland's educational approach, we can now identify bits and pieces of what we have seen work so well in Finland and modify them to fit into the needs of the U.S. school system.

Keeping in mind the educational do's and don'ts listed above, the simplest thing that can be done within individual school districts, without the need for large scale national shifts in thinking, is placing a more direct focus on teaching metacognitive skills in the classroom. Finnish educators teach their students with these skills at the forefront of instruction from day one, placing the importance on learning how to learn over everything else in the classroom. Instructing students on how learning works and how they personally learn best gives them a reason to be invested in their learning which helps to create lifelong learners who can apply those skills across all content areas to develop steadily across the board. With this move to metacognitive skills instruction and more emphasis on the theoretical foundations of learning comes the minimization of using classroom instructional time to teach test taking abilities. By focusing first on teaching skills that are applicable to every content, students will learn the content more deeply without having to spend hours being drilled on basic facts throughout the school day. This will open up more time for instruction in contents other than literacy and numeracy and give students more

opportunities to make cross-curricular connections that will be more meaningful in real life scenarios. With this change not only will there be more time for other classroom content instruction, but for music and physical education as well.

This one change that teachers can make, placing a higher importance on the explicit teaching of metacognitive skills, covers three of the identified needs of the United States. Hattie's (2012) research showed the instruction of metacognitive skills and the opportunity for more play programs being included had a positive effect on student learning, landing them on the do list for education, while spending time on coaching test taking in the classroom had a lower than average effect on student learning, making it an educational don't. Though we can be wishful in thinking that changing the collective mindset of a nation is a possibility in the future, we must still be realistic in understanding that we cannot control the way people think and that change can begin with the action of just one person. New teaching trends seen in even just a small group of educators has the potential to spark educational reform for the better. That is the goal with swapping out test-taking skills instruction with metacognitive skills instruction, to initiate a ripple effect that has the possibility of spreading nationwide. This is a simple change in thinking that could alter the approach taken to classroom instruction in the

United States, slowly making public education a little more about learning and a little less about testing, one school at a time.

My Personal Application

As educators, it is important to recognize that we are only in control of the actions that we make personally within our own classrooms behind closed doors. It is unrealistic to believe that educational change can happen instantaneously or that one person alone can revolutionize American education. The only things that can be done are the things that are in our own control. This can, and should, include advocacy for reform, but more importantly it includes our personal classroom practices. Some of the things that are in my control as a teacher in my own classroom are establishing metacognition education, implementing brain breaks within instruction, and promoting cooperative learning as opposed to competitive, all of which are reflected as effective practices by the educational do's and don'ts previously identified through the use of John Hattie's (2012) research.

The first of these changes that I will make is by far the largest shift from typical classroom practices out of all three: teaching metacognitive skills. In my future classroom I will create a student-centered atmosphere where children will learn about how they learn best, not just memorize facts to perform well on a test. Instruction for this will include teaching many self-questioning skills to help them identify their growth in learning and make

cross-curricular connections. I will also guide my students into the role of self-reporting their own grades through many levels of scaffolding with student-friendly rubrics and goal-setting activities. Using self-questioning techniques and self-grading (both of which are listed as educational do's) mutually lead students to deeply reflect on their learning and better understand where they are at and how they can improve.

The second change that I will make in my future classroom will be to utilize the positive effects that physical activity has on the brain by the inclusion of frequent "brain breaks" for students. Brain breaks are times when students are asked to stop the work they are doing to complete some form of structured physical activity to stimulate brain function. Examples of brain breaks I will use daily in my classroom are GoNoodle.com which has physical activity videos for students to follow along with, giving students task cards to follow when they finish a content activity at a station during math or reading, and applying Dennison and Dennison's (1994) Brain Gym. Brain Gym is a set of 26 movement activities that help to coordinate the body and focus the mind to improve concentration, memory, responsibility, organization, and overall attitude (Dennison & Dennison, 1994).

The last difference I will establish in my classroom will be to move away from traditional methods of ability tracking and competitive education. By building a classroom environment that promotes cooperative learning,

students get affirmation for the areas they are strong in while also receiving low-risk help from their peers in areas that are harder for them. Using students' strengths to lead the content and raise achievement from all students is helpful because it transforms students into teachers, which is the best way for them to master a skillset. Putting this level of learning into the hands of the students is also a great way to lower the affective filter and raise confidence levels so that students are willing to take the risks that are necessary to grow.

One teacher doing these three things differently in one classroom will not alter the American approach to education by itself. My only hope is that I can make a change in my own future classroom to help my own students, and through that it is possible to catch other educators' attention and get them to begin questioning their practices as well. This at least opens up the possibility to spur a conversation about change without attempting to correct the entire nationwide system all at once. Bettering education on a national scale is an ideal goal to strive for in the distant future, but the only way to reach that point is by getting more people intrigued and involved, which can only begin if someone takes that first step in the right direction.

“The Finnish recipe for good education is simple: Ask yourself if the policy or reform you plan to initiate is going to be good for children or teachers. If you hesitate with your answer, don’t do it.” (Sahlberg, 2015, p. xxiii).

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