FINLAND EDUCATION AND P.I.S.A.: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE
by
Bethany J. Nelson

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Abstract

This paper examines Finland’s ongoing success on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA, examination which has been administered every three years since 2000. As the United States continuously scores average in all three subject areas (Reading, Science, Math) of the PISA exam this paper looks to Finland for an explanation for their continued success on the exam, and focuses on the research questions of 1) What characteristics of Finland’s education system impact the country’s success on the PISA and 2) What are key similarities and differences between the Finnish and American education systems?

In this review of literature, I will describe attributes of the Finnish education system and provide a broad comparison of these attributes to the United States education system. First, I describe the impact of literacy; secondly, I make a comparison of the societal attributes of Finland and the United States; third, I examine the classrooms of both nations; and I end by noting the different approaches Finland and the United States take on assessments and assessing their students. In Chapter 3 I outline five possible theses consistent across this review that could be part of the reasons for Finland’s continued success on the PISA examination, 1) Teacher Education, 2) National Curriculum, 3) Differences in Social Attributes and size, 4) Preschool in Finland 5) Language and TV. Finally, I concluded this paper by listing broad scale, and more specific, recommendations that could be implemented to improve the PISA scores in the United States.
Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2000 the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a group funded by 30 countries that monitor social and economic trends, began facilitating an international examination. Every three years the OECD conducts the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA exams for a select set of the involved nations’ 15-year-olds. Each nations’ students are assessed on their performance in reading literacy, mathematics literacy, and science literacy” (Baldi, 2007, p. iii). OECD officials also take advantage of PISA assessment by including questionnaires for students and their principals to answer according to Välijärvi, Linnakylä, Kupari, Reinikainen & Arffman (2000). The results of these questionnaires allow for a dissection of possible factors connected with individual nations’ performance on the PISA exam (Välijärvi et al, 2000, p 2). By paying special attention to the PISA exam we may gain a new perspective on how the education system of the United States is doing in comparison to other nations.

In the PISA examination, the three core academic areas are assessed every three years with an intense focus on one academic area each cycle. Historically, regardless of the specific intensified focus, the United States maintains a constant “C” average in all PISA subject areas tested—Reading, Mathematics, and Science. Given the consistent average, educators are left contemplating possible explanations for these results.

The 2006 PISA examinees were comprised of fifty-seven jurisdictions made-up of 30 OECD nations and 27 non-OECD participants (Baldi, 2007). Science was narrowed into three subcategories (identifying scientific issues, explaining phenomena scientifically, and using scientific evidence). These combined scientific categories result in possible scores from zero to
1,000 with a PISA mean set at 500 (Baldi, 2007). In the case of the United States, the standard deviation is 100.

On the 2006 PISA science assessment, the United States overall average score was 489. This mean score was lower than the OECD average of 500. In comparison to the other fifty-seven jurisdictions who participated the United States scored lower (in science literacy) than their peers in 16 of the other 29 OECD jurisdictions and six of the 27 non-OECD jurisdictions (or lower than 22 jurisdictions in total). Twenty-seven jurisdictions had lower scores than the United States (Baldi, 2007).

Further explored in Chapter 2, regardless the focus subject area the PISA assessed the United States scored at average levels. These findings imply several questions: If the United States is only average, then what is a successful education system? What nation(s) consistently score well on this PISA examination? In the 2006 PISA, Finland's students placed first in science and near the top in math and reading. Specifically, Finland had the highest average score in the combined subject area of Science Literacy at 563 (Baldi, 2007).

Finland’s trend of success on this international test carries back four cycles to the first PISA examination, which was given in 2000. Finland’s consistent test results point to the following question: Why are Finnish students consistently placing in the top performances on the PISA exam?

The past 20 years has been the longest sustained period of educational reform in the United State’s history (Colvin, 2003). In spite of the intense reform, the United States’ PISA scores do not suggest educational success. Finland, however, possesses a reputation of educational excellence.
Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to describe potential reasons for Finland’s successes on the PISA examination and construct a broad stroke comparison of the Finnish education system to that of the United States. In the last decade of PISA tests, the United States’ scores have been well below the desired average and, in many cases, nearly 100 points behind Finland’s PISA scores. PISA studies also indicate Finns were among the best readers in the world (Finnish, 2010) and Finland was the highest scoring country in Reading—according to the PISA test—in 2000 and 2003 (Brozo, 2007).

Research Question

1) What characteristics of Finland’s education system impact the country’s success on the PISA? 2) What are key similarities and differences between the Finnish and American education systems?

Definition of Terms

**Educational Success.** Scoring in the top three in all subject areas (Reading, Mathematics, & Science) in each of the years the PISA test was given.

**Educational Norms.** Referring to key factors comprising a nation’s education system, such as the age students start school, teacher’s education and standards, and national guidelines and expectations for their schools.

**National View on Education.** What does a nation say about their education system? Is education important to them? What does a nation do to show that education is or is not important to their societies?
Census Data. The physical size of a country in proportion to their population. What percentage of their populous are enrolled in public schools? What is the make-up of their population? How are their schools funded?
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Success in Finland’s Classrooms

With Finland’s consistent success on the PISA examination, there is a need to examine possible reasons for their ongoing success. Finland’s societal attributes are quite different from the United States. Finland is more socialistic by nature in the sense that their education is free. All elements associated with education are free to their students, such as lunches and transportation. Their students are not asked to bring a bag of their own supplies the first day of school which implies there will not be a handful of students who do not have a big box of crayons at their desk as is, sometimes, the case in the United States. The entire nation of Finland exercises these standards; it is assumed that every child begins school at the same level (Opetushallitus, United States, Education, 2010). Zooming in even closer, it becomes evident that there are even more facets to Finland’s education system.

In this review of literature, I will describe attributes of the Finnish education system and provide a broad comparison of these attributes to the United States education system. First, I describe the impact of literacy; secondly, I make a comparison of the societal attributes of Finland and the United States; third, I examine the classrooms of both nations; and I end by noting the different approaches Finland and the United States take on assessments and assessing their students.

Literacy Success

Finland ranked first in literacy on both the 2000 and 2003 PISA (Brueggeman, 2008) examinations. Along with the 2000 PISA the OECD included a questionnaire that concluded that not only did Finland’s students show the highest reading literacy performance (Välijärvi et al., 2000, p7) but that there were many potential reasons for this success. Finnish students had the
highest interest in reading and 41% listed reading as one of their favorite hobbies (Välijärvi et al., 2000, p. 19). According to Kaiser (2005), Finns read more newspapers and take books out of libraries at higher rates than all other countries. Välijärvi et al., 2000, confirms that 44% of the Finnish students assessed on the PISA in 2000 reported borrowing books from the library at least once a month which is the highest reported library usage of the 32 counties assessed in that cycle of the PISA (p. 21). It is estimated that each inhabitant of Finland visits the library 13 times a year (Brueggeman, 2008).

Finnish students are not only strong readers but also have a self concept of being readers themselves. During a 2008 study Brueggeman based on direct observations of five Finnish first grade classrooms and their adults: Forty-nine children, 20 parents, 5 teachers, 1 student teacher, and 3 administrators, many of the first graders interviewed provided a real purpose for reading when they were asked ‘What is reading?’. Sample answers to this prompt were ‘reading to a younger brother or sister’, ‘reading TV captions’, and ‘when you read you learn’.

**Educational Norms**

Finland supports comprehensive schools and children are kept together for the first nine years. As students from Finland enter the upper-secondary, or high school, students are tracked by their interests (Kaiser, 2005) towards vocational studies or college bound studies. Teachers are required to obtain a master’s degree, which is not the case in the United States. Currently, every Finnish college student is allotted a stipend to live on and is assured free tuition for the duration of a six-year course of study or 55 months (Kaiser, 2005, p. B01).
Finland’s Views on Education and being a Teacher

Education is important and present in Finnish society. Finland’s teachers are respected and, in spite of a set National Curriculum, Finland gives their teachers much leeway with their choice of materials and curricula in general. Whereas the United States has reformed their education system in such a manner—e.g., The No Child Left Behind Act—teachers are expected to follow strict guidelines to teach basic math and reading skills. Finland and many other European nations instead focus on subjects such as history, literature, science, etc., where the students learn reading and math incidentally (Ravitch, 2009). The European view differs from the United States view regarding what encompasses a national education system.

Teaching is a selective field in Finland where they only educate their best applicants. This selectiveness is evident as there is one vacant space for every ten applicants in the universities which train teachers (Kaiser, 2005), which results in training the best of the best. All teachers in Finland exit their teaching programs with a Masters degree and some experience in their area of educational discipline (Välijärvi et al., 2000, p 63).

Finland and the United States—a Comparison of Countries

Recognizing the views on education, educational success and views on literacy that make-up Finland’s education system initiates the question how Finland has come to own these qualities. It needs to be noted that to compare Finland and the United States is like comparing a watermelon to a blueberry. This difference in size and numbers of students obviously affects each nation’s abilities and methods for educating their students…both positively and negatively.

Finnish Students

In 2008, Finland had approximately 560,000 students in basic education (ages 7-16) (Education, 2009). Finland has very few minority students as their foreign population is
approximately 2% (Gautschi, 2005). In 2004 Finland spent 6.4% of their GNP on their public education (Education, Education Statistics, 2010). Finland is roughly the size of Missouri and has only 5.4 million residents (Kaiser, 2005).

**United State Students**

In 2009, the United States public school systems educated nearly 50,000,000 students ranging from prekindergarten through grade 12 (Snyder, 2010). In other words, a rough estimate of the United States 50 million is 100 times Finland’s 560,000. If one includes preschool, which can start as early as age three, students in the United States could be enrolled in our version of general education (or public school) for nearly 17 years (Snyder, 2010). During the 2008-2009 school year the United States spent 7.6% of their GNP on their public education (Snyder, 2010).

The United States is also a nation of ethnicities. In 2007, 55% of United States students were white, 17% were black, 21% were Hispanic, 4.8% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1.2% was Native American or Alaska Native (Synder, 2010). In Finland, only approximately 2% of students are non-native Finnish students.

The population of the United States was near 307 million in 2009 (Snyder, 2010), which is substantially larger than Finland’s population of 5.4 million. This larger number does put us at an advantage in some ways as the United States introduces more students into the National workforce than Finland based on sheer numbers alone. The size of the United States is demonstrated by the 2006 PISA. This cycle of the PISA test’s highest scoring level on the science portion was a ‘6’ with the lowest level as a ‘1’. The U.S. had 1.5% or 67,000 of their students assessed earning a ‘6’, this is the highest raw number of students for any nation. Finland had 3.9% of the students who scored a ‘6’ which is 2,500 students. If we are viewing percentages of the U.S. and Finland, or 1.5% and 3.9% of their students scoring a ‘6”, Finland was more
successful because they have a higher percentage of students scoring at the highest level on this portion of the PISA exam. If, instead, we consider the total number of students earning a ‘6’, the U.S. population is much larger and the United States students make a bigger mark in the world (Bracey, 2009, p. 450).

**Inside the Classrooms**

Societal attribute could be one explanation for the differences in Finland and the United States’ performances on the PISA examination. As Finland is more socialistic, smaller in physical size, has a much smaller number of students, and less minority students, one could attribute Finland’s more successful record on the PISA examination as these facts. Though, there are a few other elements that should be examined—the classrooms of each nation for example.

**Finland’s Classrooms**

According to Opetushallitus (2010), the basic education is considered comprehensive and is all-inclusive. Basic education begins for all children the year they turn seven and spans for nine years encompassing ages seven through sixteen. During basic education, a Finnish child’s school is determined only by their locality (Opetushallitus, Education, 2010). Many classroom contain two teachers. When a second teacher is present in the classroom during lessons they assist with struggling students, (Korpela, 2009) allowing for the general classroom teacher to focus on the lessons at hand. Finnish children attend school 190 days a year and their days are shorter in hours (Ministry, General Education in Finland, 2010) than days logged in the typically school in the United States.

Finland’s basic education teachers have a Masters degree and teach all subjects with the exception of any foreign languages. Further, each school has special teams of professionals that the main classroom teachers can turn to for help with classroom issues as they arise in the
classroom. These teams consist of a nurse, a general trustee, a special educator, and a psychologist, all of whom have additional training in their venues of education and their relevance to the children they work with. The teams are present about once a week and free up the classroom teachers to focus on teaching as ‘teaching is central’ (Gautschi, 2005). If a student is struggling and the secondary teacher is not able to help, the team is the next to step for intervening. This qualified team will take on the needs to make the struggling students education work for them.

During the first two years of school, Finland’s teachers focus their attention on their nation’s complicated language with the intent that mastering their first language is essential to studying future languages (Gautschi, 2005). It is reasoned that a child cannot be expected to master a new language until they have firm handle on their native language. Foreign language instruction takes place during several different years of the Finnish school plan. They learn a second language during the fifth year of schooling and a third language during the seventh year (Gautschi, 2005).

School days start between eight and ten o’clock and end between one and four o’clock (Centre for Educational Assessment, 2006). Teachers are addressed by their first names and there is a casual atmosphere (Korpela, 2009). Classrooms are considered ‘active’ in the sense that pupils determine their ‘weekly targets’ with their teachers and then choose the tasks they will carry out each week, working at their desired pace (Korpela, 2009). They have few minority students in Finland but teach children in their native tongues (Centre for Educational Assessment, 2006). Finland is officially a bilingual country where both Finnish and Swedish is spoke and taught—though Finnish is the more common of the two (Gautschi, 2005).
on average, 19 students in each Finnish classroom and most of the classrooms with larger numbers, greater than 20, have a second teacher in place (Gautschi, 2005).

A national curriculum gives local governments direction with a broad outline but does not dictate specific parameters for how students are educated. Local governments are responsible for their own schools and teachers are granted autonomy. Finland’s very own students often take part in deciding how and what will be studied from year to year. National testing, school ranking lists and inspections do not exist in Finland, (Opetushallitus, Education, 2010) which is an alarming contrast to the solid assessments and accountabilities evident in the United States current system and with the concepts and goals of No Child Left Behind.

**Classrooms in the United States**

Though significantly larger in size and by number of students, the United States also has some ‘Norms’ in their education system. In 2009, there were nearly 50 million students prekindergarten through grade 12 enrolled in public schools, (Snyder, 2010, p 2) in the United States with 5.8 million attending private schools (Snyder, 2010, p 3). Students in the United States are usually assigned schools by their locality (much like Finland’s children) but in the United States there are more options for schools of choice and private or charter schools.

In the United States teaching, though an admirable profession, is not as ‘respected’ as it would be in Finland. Also--.8% of U.S. teachers, according to statistics from 2009, are teaching without a bachelor’s degree (Snyder, 2010, p 23). Forty-seven percent of teachers in public schools in the United States have at least a bachelor’s degree and 51% have a Master’s or above (Snyder, 2010, p 23).

As the United States does not have a national curriculum at this time we look to individual states for the educational guidelines deemed important. The 10th Amendment in the
Bill of Rights determines that the individual states are responsible for overseeing topics the national government does not already control. Therefore, the United States is a nation of 50 different set curriculums. It should also be noted that there is no official language in the United States.

In stark contrast to Finland’s lack of formal assessments is the overabundance of assessments prevalent in the education system of the United States. With 50 different education systems to examine for their assessments it is best to focus on one to answer our questions. The State of Michigan has seven forms of assessment and four systems of accountability on their Department of Education website (State of Michigan, 2009). These are in addition to the standard ACTs and SATs that are a prerequisite for college bound students.

Assessments in Finland and the United States

The PISA examination is the only common assessment link between the nations of Finland and the United States; therefore, it is the most logical pillar for comparing the successes of these nations. Brueggeman conducted a study based on direct observations in 2008 and concluded, through a series of interviews of teachers, professors at a teaching college, parents and first grade students that no standardized tests are imposed. Brueggman also points out that grading is not imposed until level five or six as teachers state that testing would cause harm and pressure children during a time when students need to be building their confidence.

PISA and Finland

To start, the PISA examination results demonstrate that Finland has an education system uniformly successful throughout their entire nation. No school, district, or region is blatantly ‘better’—or more successful—than another is. Finland has a “comprehensive” education system, which keeps all their students together for the first nine years of their education. Following those
nine years the students are separated by their interests in either a vocational program or college bound course of study (Kaiser, 2005). We have already stated that Finland is also successful across all the tested subject areas in the PISA exam.

Finland’s PISA scores are surprisingly uniform throughout their entire nation whereas the United States shows an alarming discrepancy in their PISA scores by region, school, state, race and other variables. In short—Finnish schools are created equal and U.S. schools can vary immensely by region, state, and even city (Brozo, 2007).

**PISA and the United States**

In comparison, the United States has a broad range of success and failures among its States, Counties, Cities, and Regions. A large discrepancy in the United State’s PISA test between different parameters, such as regions and nationalities, it is evident in the 2003 Reading results—e.g. white students were ranked second of 32 countries in the overall PISA scores (right behind Finland) while African American and Latino American Students ranked 25th of the 32 countries (Brozo, 2007). These large discrepancies among regions, cities and ethnicities are even harder to swallow when one recalls the consistently average overall performance of the United States on this exam.

**Additional Assessments in Finland**

Importantly, aside from the PISA examination, Finnish students take no standardized tests (Kaiser, 2005).

**Additional Assessments in the United States**

The United States has become a nation transfixed on assessing their students. States are responsible for their own education systems so the types and numbers of assessments vary state to state. In Michigan, the MEAP test is facilitated in a mixture of the core subject areas
throughout grades 3-9. Michigan Merit exams are given to all 11th grade high school students in Michigan (with some 12th graders taking it as well) (State of Michigan, 2009). ACT and SAT test are also given in Michigan. These tests are not included in the many mini-assessments that are ongoing in Michigan’s classrooms throughout the general school year.

Considering the United State’s education reforms, e.g. No Child Left Behind, one cannot help but notice that the United States spends many more hours administering tests, and assessments, to our students (Ravitch, 2009). We are drilling and reviewing and focusing on the mastery of basic skills while nations, consistently more successful on the PISA examination, have been focusing on specific skills like reading and math. (Run on) These successful nations instead practice actual subjects areas and the basic skills are learned inadvertently (Ravitch, 2009). While we drill our students on ‘skills,’ other nations are reading classics and solving algebraic equations.
Chapter III: Analysis Relative to the Problem

By analyzing facts, statistics, and systems in Chapter 2 there seem to be a few consistent themes. In what follows, I outline five theses consistent across this review.

Teacher Education

One explanation for Finland’s continued success on the PISA exam lies in their teacher education. Finland’s teachers have master’s degrees. This is not true in the United States where students in poverty-stricken areas are 77% more likely to have an inexperienced or unqualified teacher (Colvin, 2003). The treatment of teachers is impressive in Finland because teaching is a highly respected profession. Teaching is a difficult profession to pursue in Finland as 10 applicants apply for every one position at a college training school (Kaiser, 2005). These reformations were not accomplished by accident; they were due to the extensive educational reformation (in Finland) during the 1970s and 80s. Only 50% of teachers in the United States have a Master’s degree or higher (Snyder, 2010, p 23).

National Curriculums

Another explanation could be that Finland has a National Curriculum established in their country whereas the United States does not have a nationally unified curriculum in place. Finland’s period of educational reform started with excessive centralization, creating a national curriculum, which eventually morphed into a more lenient circumstance where localities, and even individual schools, were given the power to decide upon their own curriculum, textbooks, and resources (Kaiser 2005). Finland’s National Curriculum serves as a guide but not a routine.

In spite of the United States’ best efforts, we have not yet matched the educational excellence connected with Finland. A large discrepancy in the United State’s PISA test results has been noted between different regions/nationalities in the U.S.
The past 20 years in American history have been the longest sustained period of educational reform (Colvin, 2003). This period of reformation has not, yet, concluded in a set national curriculum, which may be part of the problem. Many of the nations continuously doing better than the United States on international assessments all have a National Curriculum (Ravitch, 2009). Finland is among these nations.

**Differences in Social Attribute and Size**

As was discerned in Chapter 2, there are several societal attributes that impact Finland’s educational success. Finland’s successes in the field of education could be connected to general facts about Finland such as it 1) is a smaller nation—not as populous as many other industrialized nations, 2) Schools are not competitive (against each other) and 3) Finland does not have the ratio of minority students that we have in the United States. In addition to these obvious explanations are a few theories which may be the cause for Finland’s successes.

The United States produces more high-quality students than Finland…. thus leading to more graduates from the United States hired throughout the world (Brozo, 2007). Finland has a much smaller population and even the larger percentage of their students who do well is smaller than the United State’s smaller percentage of highest achieving students. Conformity is the norm in Finland. American individualism is something that holds little merit in the make-up of Finnish society. In life, we are presented with incidents where either trait ‘normalcy’ or ‘individuality’ may be more beneficial. Students who have a drive to succeed on their own terms are living examples of the historical “American Dream”.

**Preschool in Finland and the United States**

When nations start formal education is another difference that can be noted between Finland and the United States. As primary school begins for Finnish children at age seven, they
do not receive any formal instruction in reading until that point. Brueggeman, 2008, states that 1/3 of seven year olds enter first grade already reading in Finland. Prior to primary school, all children, from eight months on, have the option of attending a free full day daycare. There is also a pre-primary education program in which about 96% of Finland’s 6 year olds chose to participate (Ministry, Pre-primary Education). In Finland, pre-primary education is centered on “learning how to learn” versus learning subject area content (Jimenez, 2009).

The United States has a preschool program, though it is not free for everyone. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that 63% of 3-5 years olds were enrolled in some form or pre-school or Kindergarten in 2008 (Snyder, 2010, p 5). It should be noted that pre-school starts at age 3 in the United States and that we have an alarmingly reduced number of students participating in preschool when we compare to Finland. Thirty-three percent less families in the United States have access to preschool programs for their children.

Finland’s larger percentage of children taking part in their preschool program(s) could attribute to the fact that Finland has a better literacy program and one could argue that a more successful literacy program could connect to success on the PISA examination. This potential connection could especially be associated to Finland’s consistent success on the Reading portion of all the PISA examinations.

Language and Television

The languages of Finland and the United States are extremely different. English is notorious for its many rules and oddities which make spelling difficult to master. Finnish has a “shallow orthography” and allows for direct translation of the sounds you hear to what you write (Opetushallitus, 2010). Finland’s direct correlation of sound to letter suggests that phonics would be easier to utilize, more consistently at least, in Finnish. Brueggeman, 2008, recognizes that
Finnish typically has one sound per syllable whereas English sometimes has two consonant sounds for one symbol; for example, the soft and hard pronunciations found in the consonant “g.”

While discussing differences in language and early literacy, it should be noted that Finland does not produce many television programs in either of their national languages. Therefore, children are often exposed to Finnish subtitles on the bottoms of their televisions when they watch any show or cartoon (Rothstein, 2001). If this happening, of captions on cartoons, is part of the reason for Finland’s undeniable successes in reading and literacy, then we should note that the quick word recognition is easy to replicate. Brueggeman, 2008, reiterates that children want to be able to read TV captions.
Chapter IV: Recommendations

Recommendations

Finland’s success on the PISA examinations is probable to relate to several factors. Through thirty years of social reform, the Finns have been able to create an education system that—according to the PISA examination—produces the world’s top students. At one point Finland was conservative and divisive—with their children selected for a fast track to college, or denied college at the fourth grade level. The social reform from 1972 to the 1990s resulted in the comprehensive education system Finland has today (Kaiser, 2005). To improve on international tests, such as the PISA, the United States needs to follow Finland’s example.

In this paper we have explored a series of five potential theses which may explain Finland’s consistent success on the PISA examinations. The first possible theses noted Finland’s teacher training and the required Master’s degree for all of their teachers. A National Curriculum is the second theses serving as a possible explanation for Finland’s PISA successes. The third theses lies in the social attributes that comprise Finland—such as the number of students they educate, their socialistic government, and the nation’s physical size. Theses four addresses the high percentage of students who participate in Finland’s preschool program. The last and final theses mentioned in this paper connects to the idea that Finland’s PISA success is associated with their reading and literacy success which may be due to their orthographic language and the prevalence of print and reading in their society as a large.

All of the mentioned theses generate a list of recommendations that could bring more abundant successes on international tests to the United States, if implemented. The following recommendations are separated into broad (or national and state) recommendations, and specific (or district, school and classroom) recommendations.
**Broad Recommendations for Improving the Education System of the United States**

The following recommendations would need to be implemented on a larger—national, state or city-wide—level.

- Instate a free preschool system in which all children in the United States could attend. Student transportation should be included.
- Create a National Curriculum and set up a timeline which would eventually allow for schools and districts to take over their own education and would emulate the freedoms educators in Finland are allowed within their own National Curriculum.
- Simplifying our child study and referral systems would make it easier to help our struggling students.
- Less accountability connected with assessments. Schools in the United States should not be compared against each other through national assessments.
- Requiring a Masters degree for all teachers in the United States.

**Specific Recommendations for Improving the Education System of the United States**

The following recommendations would need to be implemented on a smaller—district, school, classroom—level.

- Engage the students in whole group planning. This could possibly motivate our students in all subject areas.
- Do not rush reading instruction. Use the first few years of formal education to ‘learn how to learn’.
- Allowing students to choose the tasks they pursue could give them ownership and motivate them more thoroughly.
- Maintaining a smaller class-size or installing a team-teaching system.
- Have ‘teams’ of professionals (these teams consist of a nurse, a general trustee, a special educator, and a psychologist) to assist classroom teachers when issues with students arise so teaching can stay central.
- Eliminate unnecessary assessments and allow teachers to simply—teach.

**Areas for Further Research**

Throughout this paper it remains evident that Finland’s success on international tests is often paralleled with their nation’s penance for strong literacy. Finlanders are avid readers and have among the highest numbers of library goers in the world (Kaiser, 2005) and it would be interesting to investigate why this high account of literacy is prevalent. By examining when, how and where their children learn to read, and are exposed to literature would be a wonderful avenue for research. Delving into research as to how they learn to read, what they learn to read, and how reading fits into their everyday culture would be interesting to explore further.

As we compared the social attributes of Finland and the United States I could not help but wonder how Finland funds for their education system. Therefore, school funding is another area of possible research that may bring forth a plethora of pertinent information. Finland’s entire education system kindergarten through year five of college is free. How is this funded? And, how does Finland’s means of funding compare to that of our individual states?

**Conclusion**

This review of literature provided evidence that Finland obtains high scores on the PISA. Attributes of Finland’s education system have been discussed and examined throughout this paper. The impact of literacy has been noted and examined and the societal attributes of Finland and the United States have been weighed and compared. The classrooms of both nations have been looked at and the differing usage of assessments has been noted as well.
In Chapter 3 I outline five possible theses consistent across this review that could be part of the reasons for Finland’s continued success on the PISA examination, 1) Teacher Education, 2) National Curriculum, 3) Differences in Social Attributes and size, 4) Preschool in Finland 5) Language and TV. Finally, we concluded this paper by listing broad scale, and more specific, recommendations that could be implemented to improve the PISA scores in the United States. In closing, it is by no accident that Finland is doing so well and their intense reform was, seemingly, successful in the end. There is much to note from Finland’s experience and hope for a better educational future for our own nation. No one factor is responsible for Finland’s PISA successes and Välijärvi et al, 2000, states it best when they note,” The results of PISA reveal that there is no single factor behind the high performance of Finnish students” (p 17). It is evident that there is no one explanation for Finland’s PISA success.
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