

## Learning from Finland

“Do not train children in learning by force and harshness, but direct them to it by what amuses their minds, so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each.” Plato’s description of ideal education being one catered to the child rather than forced upon them still proves true today. Despite the efficacy of this philosophy, not all modern countries have aligned their systems of education to reflect it. However, those that have implemented reforms continue to top the global rankings. Among those countries is Finland, in which their overall approach to education reflects a core belief that the student’s happiness is paramount. Conversely, the United States of America maintains an embarrassingly low ranking, having held steadfast to methods that are largely detrimental to students. The far-reaching effects of the disparities in philosophy between these two countries are embodied in the schools themselves. Finland’s system of education is superior to that of the United States due to the consistency in the quality of their public schools, the comprehensive curriculums therein, and the aversion they have to standardized testing.

A country that strives for consistent quality in public schooling is striving for equality in education, whereas a country that enforces inconsistent quality in public schooling is perpetuating inequality. Finland has achieved largely invariable public schooling by making it illegal to charge tuition. As Michael Moore articulates in his 2015 documentary *Where To Invade Next*, this means that “for the most part, private schools don’t exist, and what that means is that the rich parents have to make sure that the public schools are great.” The effect of this law

is that the quality of a student's education is not dependent on their family's income but seen as a fundamental right. Such is not the case in the land of opportunity: the United States.

Privileged families are able to live in areas where higher tax brackets perpetuate student success through a higher appropriation of educational funding, while in other districts lower standards of living and lower tax brackets result in lesser funding for educational resources. (Al-Sharif, 193)

The United States' imbalance in funding by means of socioeconomic divides sustains those same divides and bolsters a fundamental inequality in opportunity. Because it is also not illegal to charge tuition in the U.S., private schools are quite common in higher income areas. Therefore, a large portion of the country's students are at a structural disadvantage with limitations on their very ability to become educated, while those with wealth can receive higher quality schooling solely on that basis. Meghan Smith, a U.S. native and teacher in Finland, says of her teacher training in America, "I was in these certain neighborhoods teaching these kids and telling them 'You can be anything you want to be when you grow up.' This is kind of a lie" (Moore *WTIN*). This is a disturbingly stark contrast to Finland, where "the neighborhood school is the best school" because the schools "are all the same" (Moore, *WTIN*).

An indication of a school's quality is the curriculum. A comprehensive curriculum caters to all facets of the brain and not only educates children more successfully but also helps them find what makes them happy. In *Where To Invade Next*, this is said by Finnish teachers to be the ultimate goal of schooling; "We try to teach them everything they need so that they can actually use their brain as well as they can (...) The children need to be baking, they should be singing, they should be doing art and going on nature walks (...) because there's a very short time that

they're allowed to be children" (Moore *WTIN*). This style of education shows a child many possibilities for themselves, teaching in a way that reflects respect for developing brains and curious minds. Meanwhile, U.S. curriculums display a willful ignorance as they constantly become less diverse and skill-oriented. In many schools music, art, poetry, civics and multicultural content are gone (Moore *WTIN*, Au et al, 18). This further narrows possibilities for a large number of students, and seemingly rejects many of the country's proclaimed beliefs.

The common denominator for these discrepancies in systems are standardized tests. While embracing such testing is a key factor in the overall decline of American public schools, Finland's success can be linked in part to the rejection of standardized testing. While in Finland, Michael Moore heard continuously that America should stop teaching to a standardized test. "1/3 of the time students are in school is spent preparing for the standardized test," which means the U.S. is teaching its students to "do well on those tests and (...) not really teaching them anything" (Moore *WTIN*). Preparing for a test with limited subject matter means many of the aforementioned cuts have to be made to the curriculums. The ultimate reason why is more disheartening. President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which mandated standardized testing and tied funding to scores, saw that schools with subgroups of students that did not show steady improvement lost their federal funding" (Au et al, 14). This looming threat controls subject matter and overall instruction in the nation's schools. The changes implemented in response to these pressures "negatively affect non-white students disproportionately (...) and (...) are greatest in states with high populations of students from low-income families and students of color" (Au 17). Despite rhetoric around the bill of 'closing the achievement gap', the system of testing itself cannot survive if everyone is a 'winner' (Au et al, 16). The irony of the

policy's tag line is that "closing the achievement gap (...) means that equal numbers of (...) kids fail" (Au et al, 16). Under the guise of benefitting students, standardized testing has contributed directly to the preservation of societal inequality that leaves many children behind, lacking the education they deserve.

Finland's position on standardized testing in addition to its child-gearred philosophy highlight crippling flaws within the education system of the United States. The abysmal global rank in education that has derived from disproven practices sustained by the American government is hypocritical and reprehensible. A complacency exists within the U.S. that allows a self-perpetuating inequality to worsen by the year, though more effective methods remain available. The United States' system of education is long overdue for reform, and would be greatly improved by the implementation of Finnish ideology.

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