A Comparison of the American Common Core State Standards with the Finnish Educational System

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Abstract

With the failure of the No Child Left Behind policies of the 1990's, educational reformers wished to establish a *new and improved* set of standards for the United States to follow. However, since their inception in 2006-2007, the new Common Core State Standards have become increasingly unpopular due to the fact that they remain largely untested, and are riddled with inconsistencies. Standards that were put in place to make sure that every child is "job-ready" when they graduate have actually created more division between wealthy schools, who can afford the computers and textbooks required for the new standards, and poorer schools who can barely afford the outdated and worn out textbooks they already have. While many opponents of these new standards would like to see them eliminated completely, there are alternative methods of assessment that may actually enhance or improve the standards that are already in place. However, some countries have eliminated standardized testing altogether and are thriving. Ranked as one of the best educational systems in the world, Finland reformed their educational system over thirty years ago, and has continued to develop their educational system with continued investment, teacher training, and the practice of trust.

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Chapter One

A Comparison of the American Common Core State Standards with the Finnish Educational System

Although Common Core State Standards have been implemented into 45 states, it has become increasingly unpopular among a large percentage of educators, parents, and students. Created with the intention to standardize learning across the United States, the program has been mired in controversy since its inception in 2008. Teachers, still reeling from the high-stakes No-Child-Left-Behind Standards (NCLB) of the 1990's, were told that the new standards would increase learning, allow teachers to teach lessons on a deeper level, and that they would "level for the playing field" so that all children would have equal opportunities for learning (Heitner, 2014). Instead, teachers have had the new standards thrust upon them with little to no training along with an enormous amount of pressure to make sure their students excel at the end-of–the-year state-mandated tests. Some students, who were struggling before the new standards were implemented, now find themselves even further behind, and parents feel increasingly frustrated with the stress and confusion these new standards are causing in their children.

As Common Core standards continue to "flounder", the time may be ripe to examine other educational options for American students. While reading articles about other countries that have created successful curriculums, I came across several articles about Finland, and was immediately intrigued to learn about their successful educational system. Recognized as one of the top five nations in the world in the areas of education, healthcare, and quality of life, Finland believes that their most valuable natural resource is the potential of the human mind. Further, they believe that the more educated the

citizen in Finland, the better their life will be (Kangaslahti, 2013). For my research, I will compare the Finnish educational system to the American educational system. Secondly, I will examine the strengths and weaknesses of each system, and lastly, I will discuss why the Finnish educational system should be incorporated into the American educational system or replace it altogether. While I am aware that completely replacing the American curriculum with the Finnish curriculum may not be possible, incorporating some of Finland's best practices into the American curriculum may alleviate some of the problems plaguing the Common Core standards.

The Context of the Problem

In 2006-2007, Janet Napolitano, the former Governor of Arizona, served as the Chair for the National Governors Association. During that time, she became concerned that the education American children were currently receiving was inadequate in an increasingly global economy. In her article on the history of common core, author Allie Bidwell (2014) stated, "The more she thought about it, she came to the conclusion that America couldn't lead the world in innovation and remain competitive if we didn't have an internationally competitive education system" (p. 1). A task force was created and consisted of: commissioners of education, governors, CEO's, and experts in higher education. By 2008, a report was released, and Common Core State Standards, were established. Currently, 45 states have adopted Common Core Standards, including the District of Columbia. Since its inception however, this controversial program has been riddled with problems.

While the Common Core Standards were designed to improve the quality of education for all students across the United States, the new standards are becoming

increasingly unpopular among educators, parents and, students alike. Rather than test the program before it was "rolled out", many educators feel that the program was implemented too quickly, and that the standards were not field tested or grounded in research (Bidwell, 2014, p. 1). Academic standards also tend to vary from state to state, so while some states that have typically high academic standards, are expected to meet or surpass the new Common Core standards, other states, which have typically low standards, are not expected to do as well on the standardized tests. It has also been reported that there are currently no textbooks that are aligned with Common Core standards, but large textbook companies like McGraw Hill, are attempting to remedy this situation.

Lack of supportive materials and training has also led to frustration and burnout among teachers who used to love the profession (Los Angeles Times, 2014, p. 1). Even though the i*ntentions* behind Common Core standards were put in place to improve the education of every student in America, the program has become mired in a political tug-of war between Federal regulations and states' rights. Teachers are now leaving the profession in droves, and more parents are choosing to have the students opt out of state testing altogether.

For many teachers, Common Core standards are stifling. Teachers, who used to spend hours designing fun and creative lessons for their students, now spend hours preparing their students for rigorous standardized tests. From day one of the new school year, many students are expected to "prepare" for their standardized tests with little wiggle room for extra-curricular activities. In a recent article about why she decided to have her daughter "opt out" of the standardized testing this year, author Karin Klein

(2014) wrote, “My guilty sense was that I had gone along with the mind-numbing academic program for far too long; done too much to prep her for a life of tests and not enough to prep her for the pursuit of great and original adventures” (p. 3). Parents, who used to be able to help their children with their homework, are often confused by the new teaching methods, and worry about the stress standardized testing inflicts on their children. Finally, for low-performing schools, funding based on student test performance can be catastrophic. For these schools, low-test scores may result in the termination of teachers or the doors of their school being closed forever.

Statement of the Problem

As stated in the context of the problem, the Common Core curriculum has been riddled with controversy and problems since its onset in 2008. Although its original intent was to prepare American students for a global economy, reforms were implemented before the program was fully tested. As a result, a curriculum that was originally designed to establish “standards” that all schools should follow has become a quagmire of miscommunication, frustration and confusion for parents, educators and students.

Standardized testing has become the benchmark to measure a student’s learning, and for that reason, they are expected to prepare for state testing from kindergarten through the 8th grade. Although Common Core standards have been implemented into 45 states, several states are now choosing to opt out of this curriculum. Those states that have opted out of the Common Core standards are using other methods and models to measure what their students have learned. Not only are these alternate ways to measure learning being used in other states, they are being used in other countries as well, and have seen much success. Therefore, this proposal will compare the American Common

Core Standards to the Finnish educational system to show how a small, rather unassuming nation has developed one of best educational systems in the world.

Research Questions

This research will examine the Finnish educational system. The data collected will support the idea the Common Core standards practiced in America, can be modified or replaced altogether. The following questions will be used to gather information:

1. Are Common Core State standards necessary? Why or Why not?
    - Are there other methods to assess learning besides standardized testing?
    - If so, what other kinds of methods are available?
    - Should these alternate methods be incorporated with Common Core standards? Why or Why not?
2. How does Finland view education in their country, and why is their educational system so successful?
    - What are some current challenges Finland's educational system is facing?
3. What are the practices Finland uses to maintain their excellent educational standards?
    - Why do they feel these practices are important?
4. Can American Common Core standards be modified or replaced with Finnish standards?
    - What are some ways that Common Core standards can be improved?

Null Hypotheses:

- When comparing Common Core standards with reforms in the Finnish educational system, there has been a difference in results.
- When comparing the Finnish Curriculum to the American Curriculum, there is a difference in results.
- When comparing Finnish practices to American practices, there is a difference in results.
- When comparing Common Core standards to Finnish Educational standards, there is a difference in results.

Significance of the Study

When Common Core standards were established in 2008, the intention behind the reforms was to establish consistency in the American educational system. This was to be accomplished by creating a singular or "standardized" curriculum that every American student could follow. In her article on the history of Common Core, Bidwell (2013) states, "The entire purpose of the standards, was to determine what students need to know and demonstrate the ability to do in order to be prepared for an entry-level college course" (p. 2). However, since its inception, the curriculum has been mired in controversy. Some argue that the program was designed with little to no teacher input and was never fully researched before it was introduced into the American school system. Others claim that the standards encourage children to think "deeper", and to "analyze" rather than just memorize the material they are given (Gardner & Powell, 2014). Clearly, it is a subject that has deeply divided the nation, and while some states are embracing the curriculum, others are opting out of the program entirely. One critic of the program feels

that because America is so diverse, a completely standardized curriculum will be impossible to achieve. Tienken (2011) feels that the cookie-cutter approach to Common Core standards is "terribly naïve" He states, "This approach lacks a basic understanding of diversity and developmental psychology. Further, at its core, it eschews science and condones forcing children to fit the system instead of adjusting the system to fit the needs of the child" (p. 61).

The vast amount of articles, social media discussions and debates about Common Core standards show a clear need for a closer examination of this curriculum. While this curriculum does have its strengths, there are currently more problems than successes with the program. Clearly, the aim behind Common Core standards is to make education more equitable for students, but the lack of materials along with untrained teachers, are hindering this program enormously.

However, there are other options. With this study, I will examine Finland's educational system, and discuss how some of their practices can be incorporated into the American curriculum. Ranked as one of the top five educational systems in the world, this tiny country has surprised everyone with the vast success of its schools. An examination of how they achieved this success and how they maintain that success may be beneficial to an American system that has gotten off to a very shaky start. While it may be too late to eliminate Common Core standards altogether, it may still be possible to change its current direction to arrive at more positive results for everyone.

Research Design and Methodology:

Using qualitative research, I will examine the results of previous focus group studies regarding Common Core standards. For internal data, I will use secondary

sources. Secondary sources include published articles, books, and periodicals, and each of my articles will be no more than five years old. Using information from website, books, and articles, I will also research the Finnish educational system, and examine its strengths and weaknesses. I will include articles and periodicals about the strengths and weaknesses of the Common Core State Standards as well. At this time, Strayer University does not have a panel to review my thesis. Therefore, only secondary sources for my research are acceptable at this time. Even though I am not able to interview educators at this time, future inclusions of interviews and opinions from educators on this subject, may present an opportunity for further research.

The Organization of the Study:

Chapter 1 will include information about the American Common Core State Standards, and describe why these standards should be examined. I will also include research questions and explain why I feel this study is important. At the end of chapter one, I will include a brief description of each chapter's contents.

Chapter 2 will contain the Literature Review. Using published articles and the Internet; I will discuss some prevailing attitudes and concerns about the Common Core Standards, some myths about the standards, and the strengths and weaknesses of those standards. I will also examine the history of the Finnish Educational System, some prevailing attitudes and concerns about the Finnish system, and the strengths and weaknesses of the Finnish school system as well.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss research question number one. Over the course of this chapter I will explain why proponents feel that Common Core Standards are necessary, but offer alternatives to standardized testing as well. I will also determine if these

alternate methods can be incorporated in to the Common Core Standards or should replace them altogether.

In Chapter 4, I will introduce my research on the country of Finland. I will discuss Finnish culture and how the Finnish view education. Further, I will examine why the Finnish education system is so successful, and I will discuss some current challenges in the Finnish educational system as well.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss the practices Finland uses to maintain their educational standards. I will also discuss why they feel these practices are important.

In Chapter 6, I will discuss and conclude my research on the Common Core State Standards and the Educational System in Finland. I will also make suggestions for future research on this topic.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

"In Brooklyn, as in India, they examine a pupil, and when they find out he doesn't know anything, they put him in literature, or geometry, or astronomy, or government, or something like that, so that he can properly display the assification of the whole system"-Mark Twain

Introduction:

For most people, the words "Common Core" seem to generate an instant opinion. They either love it or hate it! Established in 2008, the controversial curriculum was designed to standardize learning across the United States, but the transition from the NCLB (No Child Left Behind) acts to the new Common Core standards has been anything but smooth. While proponents of the program feel that the program will garner critical thinking and more analytical skills among learners, opponents feel that the new curriculum is detrimental to learning. They worry that the program has been implemented before it has been fully tested, and that teachers are not receiving the materials and/or training they will need for the new curriculum. Parents are being bombarded with propaganda that either praises the new curriculum, or warns them about the downfall of the American school system. As the controversies around these new standards continue to increase, it is clearly an issue that has sharply divided the nation.

While the system isn't perfect, there are some components of the program that have worth. Rather than toss out the entire curriculum, examining alternative curriculums and *improving* Common Core standards may be the answer. With one of

the best educational systems in the world, Finland is a country that deserves a closer look, and incorporating some of their best practices into the troubled Common Core standards may prove to be beneficial to everyone.

What is Common Core?

From 2006-2007, former Arizona Governor, Nancy Napolitano served on the chair of the National Governors Association. While serving as chair, she became increasingly concerned that the American Educational system was not preparing its students to thrive in a global economy, particularly in the areas of math and science (Bidwell, 2014). Due to her concern about the future of the American Educational system, she created a task force composed of CEO's, governors, and educational experts, and asked them to design a new set of standards that *every* school could implement into their current curriculum. However, because some of the No-Child-Left-Behind (NCLB) standards under President Bush in the 1990's were still in place, there were several obstacles the task force needed to address first.

In her article on the history of Common Core, Bidwell, (2014) wrote, "The controversy over standards-based education reform is nothing new. [Under] President George H.W. Bush, the idea of a federal intrusion into the public education system has become a rallying cry for opponents of common standards " (p. 2). Under NCLB, the federal government required schools to test their students and report the results of those tests back to the government at the end of the year. As a result, schools who did not score well, were labeled as "bad schools''. Schools, who had always thrived in the past, were forced to fire good teachers, and if test scores did not improve, faced the risk of being shut down completely. Still reeling from the

negative effects of NCLB, the task force was driven to complete a new set of standards that were completely *state-led* (Bidwell, 2014, p. 2).

Another obstacle they faced, was deciding on what kind of standards to establish. One of the difficulties in establishing these standards was the fact that academic standards already varied widely from state to state. For example, Massachusetts was known to be a high-performing state, while the state of Tennessee was not. The task of creating a common set of standards for every state would be difficult, but not impossible. Dane Linn, who served as the director of the National Governors Association, under Napolitano, described how the task force created the new standards. Every time a new draft was created, the set of standards was posted online for public viewing. Linn stated, "Anyone and everyone [who viewed the final draft could] submit comments, questions and concerns. They received more than 10,000 responses" (Bidwell, 2014, p. 3).

However, since its inception in 2008, the transition to Common Core State Standards remains mired in controversy. While some proponents wish for *more* federal involvement and support, opponents of the standards fear that the federal government will take over a program that was intended to be state-led. At the end of Bidwell's (2014) article, Linn stated, "Historically, we should have been forewarned about the debates of the past. But we never envisioned that it would become the political football that it has become over time" (Bidwell, 2014, p. 4).

Some Misconceptions about Common Core:

Since its inception in 2008, the Common Core State Standards have been surrounded by controversy. Because it is such a polarizing issue, its supporters

claim that opponents of the standards have perpetuated several "myths" about this program that have poisoned its success. For example, most people believe that Common Core is not state-led. According to an article published by the Tennessee Journal (2013), the Common Core standards have been state-led since it was established in 2008. Further, the article states, "The standards were not developed by the federal government, but rather were a result of states working to develop higher academic standards for students"(p. 2).

Another misconception about Common Core is that schools must follow the standards "to the letter", with little or no revisions to the suggested lessons. While it is true that the Common Core Standards have been put in place to serve as a *guide* for what students should know, proponents stress that it is not a curriculum (Tennessee Journal, 2013, p. 3). Teachers in Tennessee and other states who have adopted the Common Core State Standards are still allowed to choose their own textbooks and customize their own lesson plans within their classrooms.

In fact, some proponents claim that under the new State Standards, teachers have more freedom than they did before. The Tennessee Journal (2013) article emphasizes this point by stating, "The new standards are clear and focused, allowing teachers to explore important topics in depth with students, rather than skimming the surface of numerous topics and [preparing] them for tests" (p. 3).

A third misconception revolves around funding. Opponents of Common Core State Standards believe that states have been forced to adopt the new standards in order to receive funding from the federal government. Again, proponents claim that this is simply not true. They claim that,"[States] were asked to show their

commitment to working with other states to develop and implement standards that prepare students to succeed in college and to compete in a global economy" (Tennessee Journal, 2013, p. 5).

Finally, there is the misconception that Common Core Standards have prescribed methods for answering questions, and when a student strays from using those methods, their questions will automatically be marked wrong. Proponents of the standards say that Common Core Standards raise the bar for students because the standards challenge them to examine *why* they answered a question the way they did, and to explain their reasoning for choosing a particular answer as well. Further, proponents claim that, "There is a large difference between a student who can recall a math answer by memorization compared to a student who can recall a math answer and explain why the corresponding answer is correct" (Tennessee Journal, 2013, p. 6).

Despite the controversies that surround the new state standards, proponents of Common Core, feel that the standards have value and are worth fighting for. Proponents often claim that, "Rather than a 'mile-wide, inch-deep' curriculum, leading to superficial coverage of topics, the Common Core State Standards focus on the core skills required for success in college and career" (Tennessee Journal, 2013, p. 1).

Supporters often conclude their argument for Common Core by emphasizing that local school districts can still choose their own textbooks, purchase their own materials and design their own lesson plans (Tennessee Journal, 2013, p. 3).

While the merits of Common Core continues to be debated, those who support the Common Core Standards will continue to address misconceptions and provide guidelines for learning in order to prepare students for an increasingly global economy.

Some Concerns about Common Core State Standards

While the NCLB standards under President Bush, were not perfect, the Common Core State Standards that have replaced NCLB, are steeped in their own controversies and problems. Despite the various articles touting the benefits of Common Core, educators, parents and students have several concerns about the new standards being implemented into their schools.

For politicians, who are ideologically divided on most issues, a concern about Common Core State Standards is a topic discussed on both sides of the aisle. Liberals fear that the Common Core Standards, that were supposed to have replaced the high-stakes NCLB standards, will result in *increased* pressures for both students and teachers in the areas of testing and evaluation, while conservatives question who is actually *behind* the push for Common Core Standards. Some conservatives suspect that the multi-billion dollar textbook industry and corporations like Microsoft may be the driving force behind the recent push for Common Core Standards because these companies can readily provide all the materials and supplies required for schools who are implementing Common Core Standards into their curriculum (Williams, 2014, p. 4).

Some politicians are also deeply concerned about the federal government imposing regulations on a program that was originally intended to be state-led.

While both sides rarely agree on anything, *both* liberals and conservatives share strong reservations about Common Core Standards. “But in Common Core [both liberals and conservatives] see a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach, drafted in private, that ignores how teachers teach and children learn” (Williams, 2014, p. 3).

Educators have a vast array of pressing concerns about Common Core Standards as well. To begin with, many educators are alarmed by how fast the Common Core Standards were rolled out before they were fully tested and/or evaluated. Even more alarming is the fact that out the 135 members on the official Common Core panels, few of those members were actual teachers. Although teachers were asked to share their thoughts *after* the program was implemented, zero parents and a minimal number of “educators” were present when the State Standards were being created (Heitner, 2014, p. 2). Further, because the program has been rolled out so quickly, many teachers are not receiving the training and support they will need to incorporate the Common Core Standards into their classrooms.

Those same teachers, who are struggling to master the requirements of the new standards, are also struggling to maintain individuality in their classrooms. Teachers know that each child is unique and learns in his or her own particular way, but fear that if they spend too much time with one particular child, or too long on one particular subject, they may miss required benchmarks throughout the year and as a result, find themselves without a job (Steinmann, 2014, p. 3). Teachers are also concerned that children who are faster learners will be forced to slow down their learning pace so that slower learners can catch up. This causes the faster learners to

become restless and bored, and embarrasses the "slower" learners because everyone is waiting for them to catch up with the rest of the class (Cantrell, 2014, p. 2).

Perhaps the largest concern for teachers and their students is in the area of testing. Not only do teachers feel that standardized testing is not always an accurate way to measure learning, they also fear that more rigorous standards will cause students who are already struggling to fall further behind (Heitner, 2014, p. 4). In his interview with Sharon Steinmann (2014), Baldwin County school board member, David Cox summed up how teachers in his county feel about standardized testing. "With no scientific evidence, or mathematical proof, that standardized tests truly judge ability, we should not be wasting time and money administering them, and should certainly not be judging student and teacher performance based on the data" (p. 4).

While teachers and students struggle to meet the demands of the new standards, parents are becoming increasingly vocal about their frustration with the new standards as well. While most parents tend to agree that the American school system needs improvement, they worry that the new standards are *not* improving the quality of education for their children, and that the standards are actually causing their children to fall further behind. This has led to frustration, anger and discouragement, and many parents worry that their children will simply give up learning new concepts entirely (Cantrell, 2014, p. 2).

Parents, who learned traditional math concepts when they were in elementary school, are now scratching their heads over the "new" methods that are

required to solve math problems, and feel frustrated when they cannot help their children with their homework. One angry parent stated that in order to complete her homework, her daughter had to demonstrate four different ways to add, and she is only in first grade (Rubinkam, 2014, p. 1). Another parent lamented that his daughter went from loving math, to crying about it (Rubinkam, 2014, p. 2).

Parents are also voicing concern over what appears to be a new "nationalized" curriculum, feeling that if the federal government has control over what students are learning, they may be exposed to doctrines or political ideologies that go against the values parents are trying to instill in their children (Cantrell, 2014, p. 3). "Instead of a child having their critical and creative thinking skills challenged and expanded by great literary works, they are reading documents about climate change and executive orders issued by the President" (Cantrell, 2014, p. 3).

Despite pressures from supporters to accept the new standards, parents do have some options regarding the new standards, and are beginning to fight back. In light of its decreasing popularity, many parents are choosing to have their child "opt out" of state testing at the end of each year. As a result, several states have passed legislation stating that a student's grade cannot be affected if they choose to opt out of testing altogether (Klein, 2014, p. 3). Further, in some states, politicians have begun drafting legislation that will prevent teachers from being terminated when their students do not score well on standardized tests as well.

Some Pros and Cons of Common Core State Standards

The debate about Common Core Standards rages on, because each side can passionately cite numerous reasons why they are "right" and the other side is

"wrong". Proponents of Common Core believe that the new standards will improve education because they are internationally benchmarked (Meador, 2014, p. 1). This means that subjects students are studying in America, are also being studied in other countries.

For proponents, benchmarked standards are important, because they feel that benchmarked standards will help students become college and/or career ready after graduation-an important factor in an increasingly global economy (Liebtag, 2013, p. 58). Proponents also feel that the standards will make education more equitable for everyone. "Regardless of the state a student lives in or moves to during their academic schooling (aside from the handful of states who are not adopting the standards), the standards are the same and, ideally there will be a consistency" (Liebtag, 2013, p. 59).

Proponents also advocate the standards because learning is scaffolded (Gardner & Powell, 2013, p. 50). This gives teachers and indicator of what students have learned in the past and allows them to build on their students' current knowledge.

That being said, the new standards also mean higher expectations for students. With the new standards, students are now encouraged to be responsible for their own learning. Rather than simply choosing an answer on a test, they are expected to show their work, and justify their answers (Gardner & Powell, 2013, p. 51).

Finally, proponents feel that not only will common core standardize learning for students; it will standardize teaching methods as well. In the past, teaching has

been viewed as an isolating profession (Gardner & Powell, 2013, p. 53). Teachers, struggling with over-crowded classrooms and limited resources feel they *just don't have the time* to collaborate with other teachers. However, proponents of common core feel that if teaching methods become standardized, teacher workloads may actually lesson if teachers are willing to share their expertise and lesson plans with others. "After all, collaboration and meaningful dialogue will strengthen our practice. And as we join the larger conversations about helping students meet more rigorous expectations, we will demonstrate the complexity of our work, rather than hiding it behind our classroom doors" (Gardner & Powell, 2013, p. 53).

To summarize, while proponents make several valid points about the *benefits* of Common Core standards, several of these claims are still theoretical or in the early stages of implementation. It should be noted, that while these benefits sound promising, the evaluation of the *effectiveness* of these standards will take several years before the program can be determined to be successful or a failure.

While proponents of Common Core passionately support the new standards, opponents of Common Core are equally passionate about their *hatred* of the new standards. As more parents and states continue to opt out of the Common Core standards, opponents have become increasingly vocal with their shared belief that the new standards should be revised or thrown out altogether.

First of all, opponents feel that the new standards were rolled out too quickly. As a result, students and teachers have had a difficult time adjusting to new standards that are often inconsistent, confusing and unorganized (Meador, 2014, p. 3). Teachers, who used to love their jobs, are now suffering burnout or being

terminated for low-test scores, leading many teachers to leave the profession in droves. Secondly, the new standards, which were designed to make education more equitable for all students across the United States, have actually led to i*ncreased* inequities among schools. Currently, there are no standardized tests available for students with special needs (Meador, 2014, p. 4.) To continue, some states do not have all of the materials they need (including computers) to implement the new standards, and while some teachers are receiving extensive training on the new standards, some teachers are receiving minimal or no training at all (Liebtag, 2013, p. 63).

While proponents argue, that these inequities will lessen over time, opponents feel that the inequities will only worsen. In his article on Common Core standards, author Christopher Tienken (2011) writes:

> Mandating that everyone follow the same set of standards and perform at the same level of achievement guarantees that everyone will not get what they need and that certain groups of students, those that do not fit into the new system, will lose out. These latter students will be labeled 'not proficient' or 'in need' of academic remediation, when perhaps they just need more choices, more pathways, and more diversity of curricula within the system (page 61).

To continue, supporters of Common Core claim that increased standards will lead to a stronger economy because they feel that an educated populace drives the economics of a nation. However, opponents claim that there is no evidence to support this theory at all (Tienken, 2011, p. 59). While opponents concede that

education can lead to more opportunities for increased prosperity, they are quick to point out that the link between education and economic prosperity is tenuous at best. “[To] presume that grades in school and performance on standardized tests predict individual economic growth later in life [may] sound reasonable at first blush, but the cause and effect logic is untenable” (Tienken, 2011 p. 59). Presently, the United States is a perfect example of a country full of educated people who are out of work.

Finally, opponents feel that “dictates from on high” from committees or panels outside of local communities, may actually cause more harm than good to students and teachers alike. Tienken (2011) writes, “Curriculum should be a local endeavor. When curriculum is treated as a distal variable-occurring distant from the student, handed down from on high, as is the case with the CCSS, its influence is weakened” (p. 61).

While it is true that some of the current weaknesses may be eliminated over time, it should be noted that new problems are surfacing at an astounding rate. As of today, there are no standards in place for Science and Social Studies, and the emphasis on high stakes testing has become a driving force behind the upsurge in homeschooling across the United States as well (Cantrell, 2014, p. 2). With the recent increase in the number of states and parents opting out of the Common Core standards, it may be time to re-evaluate our current standards and examine some successful school systems across the world. Ranked number five in the world for its outstanding educational system, Finland is a country that deserves a closer look.

An alternative to Common Core

If educational reformers ever decide to completely overhaul Common Core standards, the first item on their agenda, should be to thoroughly examine countries that have successfully revived their educational system. Among countries like Singapore, Norway, Sweden, and Canada, Finland is an excellent example of a country that turned its poorly ranked educational system into a success story. "Since the 1970s, Finland has changed its traditional education system 'into a model of a modern, publicly financed education system with widespread equity, good quality, large participation-all of this at a reasonable cost" (Sahlberg, 2009, p. 2). Currently, 99% of students complete their basic education, and about 90% graduate high school. Two-thirds of those high school graduates attend a university or technical school, and more than 50% of Finnish adults participate in some kind of adult education program. Finally, to emphasize how important education is to Finnish citizens, 98% of educational costs are paid for by the government (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p. 2).

Although there are numerous reasons for their success in the area of educational reform, three particular reasons are cited in almost every article on the subject. The Finnish school system is largely successful due to: a highly standardized teaching program, teacher autonomy, local rather than centralized control of schools, and effective leadership.

First of all, teachers in Finland are held in high regard because not everyone can be a teacher. Anyone who wishes to be a teacher must compete for a limited place among other college graduates, and only 15% of those who apply, will be admitted to the teaching program. Once they are admitted to the program, they will

participate in a three-year graduate level teaching program, free of charge along with a stipend for living expenses (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p. 8). "Unlike the United States, where teachers either go into debt to prepare for a profession that will pay them poorly or enter with little or no training, Finland made the decision to invest in a uniformly well-prepared teaching force by recruiting top candidates and paying them to go to school" (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p. 8). Unlike the United States, where there are over more than 1,500 different teacher-training programs, Finland has ONE, standardized teaching program that every teacher must complete (Sahlberg, 2014, p. 2).

While Finland may have thrown out standardizing testing for their students, teacher training is highly standardized, and regulated. Unlike the United States, where teachers often learn as they go, Finland practices quality control by making sure teachers are thoroughly trained *before* they are assigned a classroom of their own (Sahlberg, 2014, p. 5). As a result, teachers who are carefully selected and highly trained *before* they are allowed to teach are *trusted* to manage their classrooms and curriculum with the full support of both principals and parents. "A survey shows that education is strongly appreciated by the Finnish Youth, [parents] have been highly satisfied with the existing education system in which equal opportunity, not elitism is emphasized, and the teaching profession has been held in high regard by the public" (Lee, 2010, p. 387).

When it comes to successful reforms, local control is an option that is worth a closer look. In fact, many countries that have successfully reformed their educational system have switched from a state-controlled, centralized school

system to control at the local level (Lee, 2010, p. 393), Even though there *is* a national curriculum in Finland, the guidelines for that curriculum are less than ten pages long, and teachers are given large amounts of autonomy in their classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p. 6). Finland has also discontinued the "inspections" of classrooms, and teachers are encouraged to "self-evaluate" at the end of the year. They also collaborate on a regular basis with other teachers, and participate in team-meetings and planning. "The discontinuation of the inspection system has been associated with the public's 'trust' in teachers. The teachers are trusted on the basis that they are well-trained and supported by a high-quality teacher education system; thus, they are considered to be equipped with the 'proficiency and capacity' necessary to 'fulfill curricular aims' " (Webb et al., 2004, p. 99).

So how do Finnish classrooms differ from American classrooms? First of all, young students have the same teacher for all or most of their subjects. Classrooms are relatively small, and the culture of the classroom is typically relaxed and informal. Unlike the American school system, which is based on competition, Finnish schools focus on equality, support and guidance for each individual student (Korpela, 2012, p. 1). Teacher autonomy aside, Finnish schools also offer a free warm lunch, free dental and health care to all students, schoolbooks and all the materials students need to learn. Finally, because stakeholders manage educational development, the government and/or minister of education cannot mandate changes to the educational system without approval from the local community, teachers, and parents. (Kangaslahti, 2013, p.8). However, as ironic as it sounds, in

order for local control and teacher autonomy to be *successful,* effective leadership is essential.

Finnish leadership is effective in their schools because it is evolving, collaborative, and flexible. While many people mistakenly assume that Finland achieved educational success overnight, they have actually spent the last four decades developing and testing their country's educational programs (Kangaslahti, 2013, p. 7). Unlike the United States, where some opponents of Common Core dismiss the idea that education is linked to economic prosperity, the Finns feel that education is essential for social development. "Because their system [reflects] a rare combination of equality and efficiency for effective management; their economic growth and efficiency have been accompanied by equality and solidarity" (Lee, 2013, p. 383. In other words, citizens of Finland consider education to be an "investment" in their country's future. Not only are they *willing* to support change or innovative ideas in education, they are also encouraged to *provide* ideas for innovations as well. While some opponents of Common Core argue that there is no link between economic prosperity and education, Finland currently leads other countries in quality of life rankings. Citizens enjoy high minimum wages, excellent health-care and tuition-free education for everyone (Lee, 2010, p. 383).

Another way that Finland practices effective leadership in education is through collaboration. "Municipalities, schools and teachers have much more freedom in organizing education, designing the curriculum and choosing pedagogical and assessment methods (Kangaslahti, 2013, p. 12). Teachers are

encouraged to share ideas, and work together because collaboration is believed to be more beneficial than competition (Kangaslahti, 2013, p. 12).

Finally, Finland enjoys effective leadership because it is flexible. Rather than a standardized curriculum that all students must follow, teachers adjust their lessons and pace to fit the needs of each child. Different teaching methods are used based on the learning style of each student and learning assessments are personalized (Kangaslahti, 2013, p. 12). Unlike the American School system, where there are no common core standards in place for special-needs children, educational equality is a priority in the Finnish school system. In Finland, it is not acceptable to treat special-needs students like second-class citizens, and programs for special-needs education have been implemented in every school (Kangaslahti, 2013, p. 12).

While no educational system is perfect, a small country like Finland has consistently demonstrated, that high quality teaching, local control and effective leadership can turn any struggling school around if schools are willing to embrace change and put the interests of students first.

Conclusion

Even though Finland is a small country, others, including the United States, can emulate their educational system completely or vastly improve the standards that are already in place. Recognizing that their previous educational system was failing, this small, Nordic country completely re-designed their educational system in the 1970's, and over the last four decades, has become one of the top nations in the world for outstanding educational practices (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p. 4).

While some would argue that America is simply too big and too diverse to ever achieve a national set of standards, others argue that a national set of standards will bring the country *together* because everyone will be learning the *same thing* in each state. Further, some proponents argue that, "Today's student population is more mobile than ever, as families 'follow the jobs'. Standards shared across geographical lines will help students develop increasingly complex skills regardless of what state, school district or classroom they are in" (Gardner, 2014, p. 50).

Despite enormous differences in opinion, both sides do agree that there are problems with the Common Core standards that must be addressed. If replacing the standards completely is not possible, improving them must be a priority. In the following chapters, I will discuss some alternatives to Common Core, analyze why the Finnish Educational System has been so successful, and determine if the Common Core standards should be modified or thrown out altogether.

Chapter Three

Are Common Core State Standards Necessary?

Proponents of the Common Core Standards claim that a standardized curriculum will prepare students to compete in a global economy. They also support the idea that a standardized curriculum will ensure that third grade students, who live in Georgia, are being taught the *same* subjects in other states as well. They feel that with more rigorous standards, and an "improved" national curriculum, students will be "college-ready" and have a deeper understanding of math and science in an increasingly technical world. " [The] Common Core State Standards initiative [has been designed] to eliminate inconsistencies among states, districts and schools. The aim of this state-led program is to develop practices and criteria the entire nation can rally behind, so students can prepare for success in a global society" (Wray, 2014, p.2).

With these admirable goals in mind, proponents feel that state-mandated, standardized tests are not only necessary, but also essential in order to measure how much a student has learned. However, there is some controversy about how effective standardized testing really is. "Common Core standards are a poor attempt by the federal government to 'improve' the educational system, which most Americans agree needs drastic changes in order to provide a higher quality education to children. Unfortunately, it seems that these standards are having the opposite effect, making learning more difficult for kids, leaving them discouraged and frustrated" (Cantrell, 2014, p. 1). In fact, recent results from current testing

indicate that test scores are actually declining, dropping in some states from 56% passing, down to 31% in the last year alone (Cantrell, 2014, p. 2).

While it is true that *some* testing is necessary to determine what students have learned, many opponents of the common core standards feel that standardized testing should not be the *only* determiner of what students have learned. While some students test well, others do not; so all students should be given opportunities to demonstrate what they have learned in a variety of ways. By all indications, alternative methods of assessment used along *with* state testing may actually give a much more accurate indication of what students have learned, than one standardized test can all by itself.

Alternative Ways to Measure Learning

Unlike a standardized test, which is typically given at the end of a school year, formative assessments, student portfolios, and performance based assessment tasks are all excellent methods to determine what a student has learned *over the course* of a school year. Rather than assuming what a student has learned or has not learned from one test, these three methods could be practiced throughout the school year to check for understanding, demonstrate knowledge, and/or to determine where there is a need for improvement. Although there are several methods to determine how well a student is learning, these three methods can be used to complement a standardized test or replace them completely.

Formative Assessments

Formative assessments are an easy and practical way to monitor a student's learning throughout the school year. While it sounds intimidating, it is simply an on-

going method teachers practice to check for understanding after they have finished a lesson (Sasser, 2014, p. 1). While they should never be used for grading purposes, formative assessments can help improve a student's grades because a teacher is constantly monitoring that student's understanding of the material. With formative assessment, teachers can quickly identify a student who is struggling without embarrassing that student in front of his or her classmates, and can take immediate steps to correct misconceptions or errors in thinking. In fact, many teachers feel that with formative assessments, they do less re-teaching because problems are addressed before a final exam is given (Sasser, 2014, p. 2).

Some examples of formative assessment are: 3-2-1exit tickets, whiteboard work or group activities (Wees, 2014, pp. 1-56). With a 3-2-1 exit ticket, a teacher hands out a piece of paper at the end of the class period, and students are required to fill it out before they leave. It asks them to list three things they learned that day, two things they found interesting, and one question they still have about the lesson. Not only are the students thinking about the lesson they just learned, they are also able to express themselves privately, without fear of embarrassment because they "asked a stupid question".

After the students have filled out their exit tickets, the teacher can look through them, and determine if the class understood what was being taught or if he or she needs to spend a little more time on the lesson that was presented that day. Exit tickets will also help teachers identify individual students who need some extra help as well. Finally, exit tickets can be included in each student's individual portfolio for parent-teacher conferences or end-of-the-year evaluations.

Whiteboard work is a fun way to practice formative assessment, and the students do not even know they are being evaluated while they are working (Wees, 2014, pp. 1-56). Whiteboard work is particularly effective for practicing math facts or spelling, and a teacher can quickly determine who is struggling and who is on top of the concepts being presented. With whiteboard practice, the teacher can call out a math problem and have students hold up their board when they are done. Once the teacher identifies a mistake, he or she can immediately help the student correct their answer, and if a student consistently makes mistakes, the teacher can take steps to give that student the extra help he needs (Wees, 2014, pp. 1-56).

Group activities are another way to practice formative assessment, and also teach students how to work collaboratively (Ryan-Romo, 2012, p. 4). A simple group activity that uses formative assessment is when a teacher breaks her students up into groups of three after she has presented a lesson. Each group must come up with three sentences that explain what they learned from the lesson. Then, each group shares their sentences with the class. The other students can ask the group questions or make suggestions to the group that is presenting. With this method, a teacher can observe how her students interact with one another, and determine if the class grasped the ideas presented in the lesson. Once the entire class has presented their sentences, the teacher put a copy of their questions in their student portfolios for end-of-year assessments later on.

A similar technique to this method is the *Think-Pair-Share* method (Ryan-Romo, 2012, p. 4). With this kind of assessment, students are encouraged to think about a question on their own, then meet up with another student to compare

answers. This is an excellent way to determine if students understand the lesson, and clear up any misunderstandings as well (Ryan-Romo, 2012, p.4).

While formative assessments shouldn't necessarily *replace* standardized tests, they can enhance a student's scores on a standardized test, because a teacher is continually monitoring a student's learning and guiding them *before* they take a test. Identifying where a student is struggling *before* they take a standardized test at the end of the year can be extremely beneficial to both the student and their teacher, and there is literally hundreds of fun and effective techniques teachers can use to assess learning (Ryan-Romo, 2012, p. 2),

Student Portfolios

Perhaps one the best complements or alternative to standardized testing is the student portfolio (Fernsten, 2014, p. 1). Put simply, a student portfolio is a yearlong compilation or sample of a student's work. It can include: writing samples, projects, recordings, lab reports, art, or journals, and can also include written observations from a teacher and notes from parent-teacher conferences. Often, the contents of a portfolio are stored in a container, folder or in some cases, a computer, and at the end of a school year or term, the student has a body of work that demonstrates all they have learned. "Considered a form of authentic assessment, it offers an alternative or an addition to traditional methods of grading and high stakes exams" (Fernsten, 2014 p. 1). Since some students are not good test-takers, portfolios offer them an alternative way to show what they have learned (Lowe, 2014, p. 1).

Although there are several different types of portfolios, process portfolios and evaluation portfolios are the most common kind of portfolios used by teachers and their students (Fernsten, 2014, p. 3). Process portfolios focus on the process of learning. Considered to be a work-in-progress, they showcase where a student began, includes their revisions and rough drafts, and often includes notes about what the student learned over the course of a project. Process portfolios may also include a process reflection. This is a written document that details what worked during the project, what did not work, and notes about what the student would do differently next time (Fernsten, 2014, p. 3).

Another commonly used portfolio in the classroom is the evaluation portfolio. Generally, this kind of portfolio contains tests, quizzes, projects or lab experiments and any other work the student may have completed over the course of the year. It may also contain written work or art projects. Like the process portfolio, it may contain notes about a project and the process a student used to complete it. "Evaluation portfolios do not simply include [a student's] best work, but rather a selection of predetermined evaluations that may also demonstrate students' difficulties and unsuccessful struggles as well as their better work"(Fernsten, 2014, p. 3).

The Benefits of Portfolio Assessments

Unlike a standardized test, which is administered once a year, a portfolio contains a large sampling of a student's work from the beginning of the school year, until the end (Fernsten, 2014, p. 2). Rather than simply filling in a bubble, a portfolio can show growth, struggles and progress, and presents more accurate picture of

what a student truly knows-especially for students who do not test well (Lowe, 2014, p. 1). Students who maintain a portfolio are able to see their progress, evaluate what they have learned, and develop plans for improvement with their teachers. “This one-to-one aspect is an additional bonus for those students who may be too shy to initiate conversations with instructors as well as for those who enjoy speaking about their work and may better understand what worked and what did not through a verbal exchange” (Fernsten, 2014, p. 4).

Perhaps one of the most appealing aspects of student portfolios is that they can either replace standardized tests completely or complement them in order to give a truer view of what a student has actually learned. Schools, who opt to replace standardized testing with student portfolios, will need to offer training on fair assessment practices, grading procedures and content, but once the program is implemented, it may prove to be an effective and beneficial alternative to standardized testing.

Even though proponents have discussed the possibility of all standardized tests being administered on computers in the not too distant future, the reality of that goal is completely different. Many schools struggle with a bare to almost nonexistent budget, and schools that barely have enough *books* for their students, scoff at the idea of all their students taking their state tests on a computer. For these schools, portfolios are an inexpensive and effective way to monitor learning.

Further, the schools that wish to use portfolios alongside standardized testing may also see a marked improvement in their students’ test scores and/or retention of knowledge. “Most importantly, portfolio assessments provide an

authentic way of demonstrating skills and accomplishments. They encourage a real-world experience that demands organization, decision-making, and metacognition. Used in a thoughtful, carefully planned way, portfolio assessment can foster a positive outlook on learning and achievement" (Fernsten, 2014, p. 4). While each school would have to determine their own standards for a portfolio system, it is a feasible and affordable alternative to standardized testing, with benefits that merit further consideration.

Performance Based Assessment Tests/Tasks

Despite the threat of withholding federal funds if states do not comply with Common Core Standards, several states have decided to opt out of this controversial initiative altogether. The New York Performance Standards Consortium, an alliance of 28 public high schools, is just such an example, and they have replaced their standardized tests with performance-based assessment tasks or PBATs (Neill, 2014, p. 2).

Even though these schools have chosen to opt out of standardized testing, the performance tasks that have replaced them are not easy or "dumbed-down" by any means. In fact, they may be more difficult than the standardized tests they replaced. Rather than a multiple-choice, standardized test, where students "fill in the bubbles", "[PBAT students must complete four tasks] that include an analytic essay, a social studies research paper, a science experiment, and an applied mathematics problem. They incorporate both written and oral components" (Neill, 2014, p. 2). Further, for literature, each student must write an analytic essay and then orally defend it before a panel of teachers and outside experts (Neill, 2014, p. 3).

Despite the fact that most students in the Consortium schools live in poverty, 86% of African American and 90% of Latino graduates of the program go on to college, and 93% of those graduates remain in college after two years (Neill, 2014, p. 2).

Common Core or Compromise?

Despite the idea that the American educational system *must* embrace a standardized curriculum, or remain behind in an increasingly competitive global economy, there are alternatives to Common Core that say otherwise.

Even though supporters claim that Common Core testing is an essential and practical way to measure learning, the standards only measure a small percentage of what a student actually knows or has learned over the course of a school year. A standardized test cannot measure or encourage growth or improvement, creativity, or curiosity-all essential elements to foster true learning. Of course, supporters of Common Core say that this simply isn't true; teachers have more freedom than they have ever had to deeply explore the concepts and ideas behind their lessons (Gardner& Powell, 2014, p. 53).

Realistically however, if a creative and innovative teacher finishes the year with low-test scores, she will more than likely receive a poor evaluation or be terminated. If reformers are not willing to replace Common Core standards, perhaps compromise is the answer. Using formative assessments, and portfolio assessments along *with* a standardized test, may encourage students to be more engaged, eliminate some of the costs of testing, enable students to work at their own pace, and give them more time to develop their true potential (Stoddard, L. 2014, p. 2).

Another alternative to standardized testing is for schools to administer them *twice* a year instead of once at the end of the school year. Before they leave for the holidays, students could be tested on material they learned from the beginning of the school year through the end of November. When they return to school after the holidays, they could build on what they learned at the beginning of the school year, but *only* be tested on material covered from January until the end of the school year. Dividing standardized testing into two tests instead of one may reduce costs, the time devoted to testing, and students are less likely to forget lessons that were covered at the beginning of the school year. Additionally, teachers will have more time to cover new material, rather than spend an enormous amount of time re-teaching what students learned at the beginning of the year (Sasser, 2014, p. 1).

Finally, using other methods of assessment alongside standardized tests may relieve some of the pressure and stress for students and their teachers, and at the same time, give a truer view of what a student has actually learned. Unlike standardized assessments which only indicate what a student *does not* know, alternative methods of assessment give students the opportunity to show what they have learned over the course of the year, their strengths and weaknesses, and areas where improvement is needed.

Chapter Four

The Finnish Educational System

In order to understand the Finnish educational system, a working knowledge of Finnish culture may be helpful. Finland is a small country, with a relatively homogenous population. However in recent years, it has seen an increase in immigration. Although the social democratic party dominates their country, the citizens of Finland are relatively "apolitical". Rather than focus on national politics, the citizens of Finland tend to embrace social equality and solidarity with the attitude that the "strong aid the weak" (Lee, 201 p.383) For the Finnish, "These [tenets] have led to an egalitarian welfare state regime in which the public enjoys high minimum wages, small wage differentials, and universal social benefits such as tuition-free education" (Espering-Anderson, 1992; Espering-Anderson, 1998). While Finland is often ranked as a top nation for their quality of life, their educational system is internationally recognized for its excellence as well.

How does Finland view Education?

While there is no easy formula or simple solution for developing a perfect educational system, Finland's educational system has three defining characteristics that have made it one the most successful school systems in the world. It is equitable, viewed as a long-term investment, and based upon a mutual trust between parents, educators, and students.

Since the 1980's, Finland has made it a priority to provide every student with an education. Regardless of their background, income or geographical location, all Finnish students are guaranteed a free education until they graduate from college, vocational

school, or complete their studies (Partenan, 2011, p. 2). Further, all Finnish students are provided a free warm meal, transportation, and health services when they need them.

Unlike the American educational system, which tends to neglect special-needs students, special-needs students in Finland are now mainstreamed in almost every classroom. "Teaching is customized for the pupil and takes into consideration his/her level of current achievements. Different teaching methods are applied for those who learn quickly than for pupils who need extra support or special-needs education. Also, learning assessment is personalized [and] standardized testing does not exist" (Kangaslahti, 2013, p. 12).

For Finland, the idea of "the strong aiding the weak" is a central tenet to both their culture and their educational system (Lee, 2010, p. 383). Rather than compete with one another, students are encouraged to share ideas with one another, work collaboratively and help other students succeed. In order for every school to be a "good school (O'Toole, 2014, p. 1), the Finnish believe that *all* of their schools should provide a safe learning environment, free healthcare, and individualized guidance for each student (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p. 5). Once these necessities are met, the Finns believe that students are 'freed-up" to focus on their learning and thrive, both in the classroom, and in their communities.

For Finland, education is an essential ingredient of social development, and provides a foundation for building a strong community. In Finland, "The philosophy behind the system is laid in the idea that each individual ought to have equal opportunity in education and that one of the most important renewable natural resources in the

country is in the potential of [the] human mind; the better educated [they are], the higher is the standard of living in the country" (Kangaslahti, 2013, p. 9).

The Finns also view their educational system as a long-term investment in their country's future. While they strongly believe that providing a student with educational opportunities will lead to social prosperity and a better quality of life, students are not the only "assets" Finland is concerned about. In order for students to thrive and excel in their studies, The Finnish believe that *teachers* must be thoroughly trained first. Unlike the American educational system that revolves around standardized testing for *students*, the Finnish have developed a standardized *training* program for their teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p. 5). Contrary to the American educational system, "The Finns have worked systematically over 35 years to make sure that competent professionals who can craft the best learning conditions for all students are in all schools, rather than thinking that standardized instruction and related testing can be brought in at the last minute to improve student learning and turn around failing schools (Sahlberg, 2009, p. 22).

In America, there are currently over 1,500 training programs for teachers, and they vary from state to state. Finland, however, trains every one of their teachers *exactly the same way*. "[Finland] has set high standards for [its] teacher-preparation [program] in an academic [university]. There is no Teach for Finland or other alternative pathways into teaching that wouldn't include thoroughly studying theories of pedagogy and undergo clinical practice. [Finland practices] strict quality control before anyone is allowed to teach-or even study teaching" (Sahlberg, 2013, p. 5).

After they graduate from college, potential teachers are carefully selected from a pool of applicants. Only 10-15% of those applicants are accepted into the program and all

of the applicants are required to earn a master's degree over a period of the next three years (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p. 8). Unlike the American system, where potential teachers often incur a massive amount of debt for a low-paying occupation, Finnish teachers-in-training are paid a living wage, and their tuition is cost-free. At the end of their training, the new teachers have "paid their dues", are considered to be experts in their field, and have earned the trust of their superiors.

Once they are hired, teachers are free to manage their classrooms with little to no interference from the government or policy-makers. According to Darling-Hammond (2014), "[In the 1990's] policy makers decided that if they invested in very skillful teachers, they could allow local schools more autonomy to make decisions about and how to teach-a reaction against the oppressive, centralized system they sought to overhaul" (p. 6).

Once a teacher completes their program and is assigned a classroom, they continue to receive additional training when it is needed, and are encouraged to work collaboratively with other teachers and other schools as well (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p. 10). There are no teacher evaluations or inspections, and teachers are allowed to evaluate themselves or their fellow teachers on a regular basis. "[These efforts] to enable schools to learn from each other have led to 'lateral capacity building': the widespread adoption of effective practices and experimentation with innovative approaches across the system, 'encouraging teachers and schools to continue to expand their repertoires of teaching methods and individualizing teaching to meet the needs of all students" (Sahlberg, 2007, p. 167).

Finally, educators in Finland are treated as professionals, and viewed as valuable contributors to Finnish society. Because each teacher has earned a Masters degree, teachers are viewed as capable and competent experts in their chosen field. As a result, teachers are trusted leaders in their classrooms and in their communities, and will continue to receive additional training and support throughout their careers.

While equity, and treating education as a long-term investment are two important elements in the Finnish educational system, the trust factor is essential to understanding the educational system as well. In Finland, students and parents both place a high level of trust in the educational system, and teachers are autonomous in their classroom. Although there is a national curriculum, teachers are expected to manage their own classrooms and are thought to be fully capable of designing their own curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p. 6).

Unlike the American educational system, the Finnish school system is decentralized, and schools are locally controlled. Further, neither the government, nor the minister of education can mandate changes to the educational system without the consent of the other stakeholders in the system. In Finland, “Parents, teachers, politicians and sometimes even the students together in constructive collaboration have been involved in the development process of the country’s educational system” (Kangaslahti, 2013, p. 10).

While there exists a high level of trust in its teachers, there is also a high level of trust placed in Finnish students as well. In a typical Finnish classroom, students are often observed working independently on individual projects or with other students in the classroom. Even though the teacher is fully present, and aware of what the students are

doing, he or she is there to *guide* the students more than simply direct them (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p.7).

Although they consistently score very highly on the PISA exams, (The Programme for International Student Assessment) academics are not the only subjects students are studying. The Finnish believe that students should be encouraged to learn about their communities, develop a healthy self-image, and compassion for others. Vocational skills are encouraged as well. On a recent trip to Finland, one observer noted, "At one secondary school I visited, kids were cooking breakfast; at another, I saw that all the kids had learned how to sew their own bathing suits. More than one teacher remarked, "It's important for students to have different activities to do during the day" (Gross, 2014, p. 3). Typically students in Finland spend less time in a classroom than any other students in the world, yet they continue to excel on international assessments-a baffling concept to American students who may or may not receive thirty minutes of recess a day, with small breaks in between lessons that revolve around standardized testing.

Even though Finland continues to garner praise for its academic achievements, their educational system was not "reformed "overnight. For this small country, reforms began over thirty years ago, and continue to be an on-going process (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p. 6). While it is too early to determine if Common Core standards have actually improved the American educational system, the educational system established in Finland so many years ago, is an example of what a nation can achieve when it invests in education, focuses on equality, and trusts in the expertise of its teachers. At a recent conference at the Teacher's College of Columbia University, a Finnish educational expert remarked, "As for accountability of teachers and administrators, [there's] no word for

accountability in Finnish. Accountability is something that is left when responsibility has been subtracted" (Partenen, 2011, p.4).

Challenges for the Finnish Educational System

Currently there are several challenges for Finland's educational system. With recent increases in immigration, school choice, and changes in the economy, schools have found it difficult to maintain their goals for equality, but not impossible (Partenen, 2011, p. 6).

When "school choice" was introduced in the 1990's, many Finnish parents decided to move their children out of the poorer districts, and into wealthier districts for "better schooling". While Finland, wants every child to have the best education possible, introducing school choice into a system based on equality, quickly made some schools more desirable than others. Further, "[School choice] is seen to contradict the goals of equal educational opportunity and equality also mentioned in the law" (Rinne & Tikkanen, 2011, p. 3). To continue, many schools for special needs students have been closed, leading to the increase of special-needs students in the mainstream classroom as well (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p. 9).

While teachers are working to overcome the challenges of immigration and school choice, one recent challenge to the Finnish educational system has taken many by surprise. In 2013, PISA scores in math and science dropped from fifth place to twelfth place, leading some to speculate that Finland has become complacent (Strauss, 2013, p. 2). With consistent high rankings year after year, there are concerns that Finnish teachers have become a little *too* relaxed about the exams, and that students have become over-confident. Nevertheless, the recent drop in scores were a "shock to the system" for

Finland, and has forced them to re-examine some of their current teaching practices, and/or the quality of some of their teachers (Strauss, 2013, p. 3).

For those who have been looking for Finland's Achilles's heel, this recent drop in rankings may warrant some gloating, or an "I told you so!" However, it should be noted that like standardized testing, PISA scores *only* test students in the areas of math, science and reading, and the Finns are not unduly worried. While they are fully aware that these are important subjects, they are also aware that this limited testing only reflects a small percentage of what a student actually knows. In Finland, students are encouraged to learn about art, music, and practical skills alongside their academic studies; physical education, community projects, and caring for others are also part of a Finnish student's education (Strauss, 2013, p. 3).

However, while some educators might see a decrease in PISA scores as a reason for panic, and quickly put reforms in place to "fix" the problem, most Finns feel differently. "Many teachers and parents in Finland believe that the best way to learn mathematics and science is to combine conceptual, abstract learning with singing, drama, and sports. This balance between academic and non-academic learning is critical to children's well-being and happiness in school" (Strauss, 2013, p. 4). While educators are not *ignoring* this current challenge completely, they are confident that their outstanding educational system can overcome any current challenges they are facing, and any future challenges as well.

Chapter Five

Educational Practices of Finland

While it may be not be possible or even necessary to completely eliminate standardized testing in the United States, the Finnish educational system has several proven practices that educational reformers should examine and possibly emulate in the near future. With consistently high PISA scores, a high school graduation rate of 90%, and an impressive number of college graduates, Finland has shown the rest of the world that educational reforms *can* work. While no educational system is perfect, the following is a list of ten practices that have proven to be successful for the educational system in Finland.

1. **Finnish students do not start school until they are seven years old**. However, before they begin their formal schooling, 97% of Finnish children will have attended a high-quality preschool (Sanchez, 2014, p. 1). While they are in preschool, the children mainly focus on play and social interaction, along with preparation for Kindergarten. In Finland, every preschool is completely subsidized, so that every child has the opportunity to participate in early, childhood education (Freeman, 2014, p. 1). Every preschool teacher must have a Bachelor degree as well. In Finland, "Kids are almost all in some kind of day care, all of whom are working in the same curriculum that's aligned with what they're going to learn in school. That's a level of coherence that most U.S. kids will never experience because we don't have a coherent system with highly trained people in almost every classroom" (Sanchez, 2014, p. 2). For Finland, the

investment in early-childhood education will give students a solid foundation for successful learning all of their lives (Sanchez, 2014, p**.** 3).

2. **Students in Finland are given 75 minutes of recess a day** Unlike American students, who get an average of 27 minutes a day of recess, the Finns believe that fresh air and exercise enhance learning, rather than "interfere" with it. In Finland, "Outdoor, practical learning opportunities and healthy related physical activity sessions are a regular feature in the curriculum: helping to maintain a healthy body and mind" (Lopez, 2014, p. 2). Further, some schools are now offering different activities in the middle of the day in order to give students the opportunity to "think about something else and/or do something creative (Gross-Loh, 2014, p. 2).
3. **Standardized testing is nonexistent** In Finland, equality is valued over competition. Students take the PISA exam when they are 15 years old, and a matriculation exam when they graduate from high school for university placement. Ironically, "Finnish students do the least number of class hours per week in the developed world, yet get the best results in the long term. Teacher based assessments are used by schools to monitor progress, and these are not graded, scored or compared; but instead are [utilized] in a formative manner [for] feedback and [assessment]" (Lopez, 2014, p. 2). By using formative assessments, and individualized learning plans, teachers can make sure every child receives what he or she needs to be successful in the classroom.
4. **Students are given individualized instruction and attention** In America, teachers are expected to monitor a classroom with anywhere from 20 to 30

students, and they are expected to manage their classrooms with little or no assistance. Finland, however, is different. Classrooms usually have twenty students or less, and there is often more than one teacher helping the students (Lopez, 2014, p. 3). Teaching assistants are also a common sight in a Finnish classroom. However, unlike American teacher assistants, Finnish assistants are trained for one year and must have a Bachelor's degree before they can work in a classroom. Because there is no division in a classroom based on ability, students are encouraged to work at their own pace. However, they are also expected help other students who might be struggling as well. "By having professionals working in conjunction, the needs of the pupils can be better met within a happy and familiar environment" (Lopez, 2014, p. 3).

5. **Finnish students learn up to four languages or more** In Finland, students begin learning a second language on their first day of school. At the age of nine, they begin learning Swedish (the second language of Finland), and at the age of eleven, they begin learning a third language (usually English). Some students even learn a fourth language at the age of thirteen (Freeman, 2014 p. 6). Studies have shown that speaking more than one language makes students smarter, improves their memories, and gives them a competitive edge in the workforce. There is also evidence that speaking more than one language may stave off the early onset of Alzheimer's and dementia later in life (Merrit, 2012, p. 2). For the Finns learning more than one language works the mental muscles in the brain, and helps develop memorization and retention skills as well (Merrit, 2012, p. 2).

6. **Teachers are autonomous in their classrooms** Although teachers are given suggested guidelines for teaching; they are allowed to develop lessons and a curriculum geared toward the needs of their particular students. They are encouraged to work collaboratively with other teachers, and enjoy a high level of trust within their schools and communities. "From this secure base, in which high quality teachers are appreciated and trusted to do their job effectively as they see fit and political agendas are deflected, there emerges an impressive education system to be proud of that serves its students, communities and country very well" (Lopez, 2014, p.3). For the Finnish, teachers are seen as *facilitators* of learning, and they are encouraged to use different pedagogic approaches with their students. This pedagogical freedom leads to greater creativity and innovation in the classroom and a higher success rate for Finnish students as well (Lopez, 2014, p. 3).
7. **Teachers only teach for four hours a day** While this may seem shocking to American teachers, who usually teach up to five hours a day, Finnish teachers are given two hours each day to plan lessons and assess student work. This gives their students time for other activities, and teachers time to prepare and/or help students who are struggling (Freeman, 2014 p. 8).
8. **Teachers stay with their students for five years or more** Some Finnish schools are now keeping teachers with the same set of students from Kindergarten through sixth grade. They believe that staying with the same set of students enables teachers to bond with those students, and enables teachers to develop a path of

learning uniquely suited to the students they have known since Kindergarten (Freeman, 2014, p. 9 & Lopez, 2014, p. 4).

9. **Students can choose their own path** At the age of 16, students are allowed to decide if they would like to attend university or pursue vocational training. Currently 43% of students choose vocational school, but can apply for university at a later time if they change their minds. In Finland, both universities and vocational schools are completely subsidized (Freeman, 2014, p. 11).
10. **All teachers are highly trained** "In Finland teaching is a prestigious career. Children aspire to be doctors, lawyers, scientists and in the same breath teachers. They are respected and appreciated; they are highly qualified (requiring a Masters degree for full time employment) and job selection is a touch process with only the best candidates gaining the posts" (Lopez, 2014, p. 2). Further, once a Finn becomes a teacher, she will receive additional training throughout her career.

Opportunities for improvement or an impossibility?

While no educational system is perfect, Finland is an outstanding example of an educational system that puts its students first. Over the last forty years, this small country has worked diligently to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn in an environment that is safe, supportive and stable. Over the last few years, a slight decrease in PISA scores, increased immigration, and a fluctuating economy have presented challenges to their educational system that they are working to address. Just as it took time to develop an excellent educational system, Finland is aware that *maintaining* their excellent system is on going and that adjustments must be made from time to time. While it may not be possible to completely change or "fix" the

current educational system in America overnight, the educational practices of Finland, offer some ideas for improvement, and these proven methods may make it possible for the American system to “do better” than it is doing now.

Chapter 6

Discussions, Conclusions, and Implications for Future Research

Discussions

The purpose of this research was to examine American Common Core Standards, and compare them to Finnish Educational Standards. In order to compare the two educational systems, it was important to explain what Common Core Standards are, some misconceptions and concerns about Common Core, and its strengths and weaknesses as well. Once these elements were addressed, two main research questions emerged. The first question asked if Common Core Standards should be eliminated completely, and the second question asked that if Common Core Standards were *not* eliminated, were there alternative forms of assessment that could enhance or improve the Common Core Standards already in place? The research showed that if alternative methods of assessment were to be considered, Finnish Educational Standards are an excellent resource to emulate due to their consistently high-test scores and student success rates.

Chapter 3 asked if Common Core State Standards were necessary. While some proponents feel that there must always be some kind of accountability in order to measure learning, opponents of Common Core feel that standardized tests should not be the *only* form of accountability or way of measuring what students have learned. Additional research showed that if standardized tests could not be eliminated completely, other forms of assessment could be used *alongside* standardized tests in order to give a more accurate indicator of what a student truly knows. Although there are numerous ways to measure learning, formative assessments, student portfolios and performance-based

assessments are three tools that could complement or possibly enhance the results of standardized tests.

Formative assessment is a way for teachers to “check for understanding”, and to determine if teachers need to spend a little more time teaching a particular lesson. Formative assessments can be as simple as a pop-quiz or asking students to answer three questions about the lesson before they leave the classroom, It is simply a way to monitor who is understanding the material, and who might need a little extra help or encouragement. Using methods of formative assessment may lead to improvement on standardized tests because a teacher is able to monitor her students’ learning, determine their strengths and weaknesses, and adjust her teaching to increase their understanding before a student takes a test or final exam.

Student portfolios are another way to document a student’s educational journey. Simply put, a student portfolio is a body of work that a student keeps over the course of the school year, and is used to show what they have learned, how they have improved, and areas that may need some improvement. Portfolios can be kept in a notebook, or stored digitally and may include, test scores, artwork, classroom work, and notes from student-teacher conferences. Filled with information about a student’s growth over the course of the school year, portfolios can be a wonderful addition to standardized tests because they give a “face” to a student. Unlike the relative anonymity of standardized tests, which only show a small part of what a student actually knows, portfolios show the path of each student’s learning, how they have improved, and their strengths and weaknesses as well.

Similar to student portfolios, performance-based assessments give students a chance to "show what they know" at the end of the school year. Instead of a standardized test, students may be asked to write an essay and orally defend that essay. They may also be asked to do a presentation or demonstrate a science project. Unlike a standardized test, performance-based assessments ask students to re-visit the lessons they have learned over the year, and to demonstrate what they have learned in a variety of ways. Although they can be more difficult than a standardized test, a performance-based assessment asks students to *take responsibility* for what they have learned, *present* what they have learned, and to be prepared to *defend* what they have learned in front of their peers-skills that are not only essential for their success in school, but in a competitive job market as well.

Chapter 3 was concluded with reasons why alternative forms of assessment may complement standardized tests. First of all, alternative forms of assessment are inexpensive. Schools with the smallest of budgets can practice formative assessments, and help students develop portfolios as well. They may also relieve the some of the stress and pressure once-a-year standardized testing can generate, and finally, offering students the opportunity to test twice a year, may reduce some of the time teachers spend *re-teaching* concepts introduced at the beginning of the year. Further, issuing standardized tests twice a year will reduce the amount of time spent on testing as well because the first test will only focus on material covered during the first half of the year, and the second test will only focus on material covered during the second half of the year. Schools with only a few computers, or no computers at all, can use these forms of assessment in place

of standardized tests, and still have valid data to measure what their students have learned.

Chapter 4 introduced the Finnish educational system, and compared this system to the American educational system. However, before I discussed the Finnish educational system, I felt that an understanding of *Finnish culture* was essential. First of all, Finland is a small country, relatively homogenous, and apolitical. The Finns believe that the strong should always help the weak, and this tenet shapes their three prevalent views on education, which are, equity, investment and trust. In Finland, an equitable education is available for everyone, including children with special needs. Every child, regardless of his or her ability, background or income, is guaranteed a free and equal education all the way up to university. Secondly, the Finns believe that investing in their educational system will be beneficial to their society as a whole. Only a small percentage of college graduates are accepted into the teacher-training program, and during their three years of training, everyone is trained *exactly* the same way. During their training, all their expenses are paid and teachers are paid a living wage as well. Even though they are trained the same way, once a Finn becomes a teacher, they are trusted to manage their classrooms without interference or inspections. Teachers work collaboratively with other teachers, and are encouraged to design their own curriculums as well.

Finally, chapter 4 addresses some current challenges in the Finnish educational system. While Finnish students have consistently scored very high on PISA exams, increases in immigration, the implementation of school choice, and a changing economy may have led to decrease in test scores in 2013. Despite these challenges, the Finns

believe that the educational reforms put in place over forty years ago are stronger than ever, and they will continue to monitor and adjust their educational system as needed.

Chapter 5 listed ten educational practices of Finland, and discussed possible reasons why these practices may contribute to both a student's success in the classroom and in the "real world" later on. With educational reforms that were put in place over forty years ago, the Finns have established an educational system that any country can emulate. While it may not be possible to eliminate the highly controversial Common Core Standards, the Finnish educational system offers some alternative practices that American reformers may wish to consider simply to *improve* the Common Core Standards that are already in place.

Conclusions

The research gathered shows that while Common Core State Standards were created to improve student performance and test scores, the program has been mired in controversy since its inception. While proponents feel that that Common Core Standards will improve American test scores over time, opponents of Common Core worry that these new standards are simply a "quick fix" for a nation living in an era of instant gratification. While this research has offered alternative solutions to Common Core Standards, true reforms in the American educational system cannot be brought about until everyone is in agreement that there is a problem. Unfortunately, this controversial issue has so sharply divided its passionate supporters and its equally passionate detractors; a truly unbiased evaluation of its effectiveness may never be possible. Even though this research has shown that educational systems like Finland can thrive *without* standardized

testing, it has also shown that alternative forms of assessment can *enhance* standardized testing as well.

Implications for Future Research

Since Common Core Standards were implemented before they were fully tested, more time will be needed before it can be determined if the new standards are have improved the American educational system or made it worse. In order to continue this research, it is recommended that future results of standardized test scores be compared with early results to determine if any improvements have been made. Further, interviews with educators, suggestions for improvement, and extensive training may "shine the light" on some of the strengths and weaknesses of these controversial standards, and allow educators to have more of an influence on how the standards are designed and/or implemented in the future. In the meantime, continuing to evaluate the educational systems of other countries, and using alternative methods of assessment to enhance the educational systems already in place, may bring about the improvements so desperately desired by educational reformers both in the United States and around the world.

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