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### The Finnish Line: An International Teacher Exchange Program

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The Finnish Line: An International Teacher Exchange Program

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of Educational Foundations & Policy Studies

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science:

Transformative Education & Social Change

By

Anthony A. Marano

May 2024

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## Abstract

This delve into the educational landscape of the United States and Finland uncovers areas of potential growth in the United States with the incorporation of the Finnish Model. By examining first hand experiences inside the Finnish education system, this study proposes a program that could bring international developments in academics, and overall happiness into our domestic education system.

First will be presented the position and philosophy from which this thesis will be approached. This will help to prove relevance when viewed through this specific and critical lens. Next, will be a brief historical overview of the systems in question and an examination of their priorities. Following, will be the proposal of the program and a detailed description of how it is set to work within the domestic landscape. Finally, there will be evaluation methods and questions for further research.

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## Dedication

This piece of my soul is dedicated to everyone who ever touched my life or worked to be an inspiration. Firstly, my parents who provided me with all that I'd ever need. Who worked long hours and late nights to make sure that I could be here today. My siblings, for giving me the kick in the behind to constantly be a better person. My uncle who is not only a role model to me, but a professional mentor, advisor, and confidant.

This piece is dedicated to my soulmate, who has lost sleep, cried with me, and pushed me to continue on, all in the name of this thesis. Thank you for being my editor, cheerleader, and supporter. You have carried me through this experience and I am forever grateful.

Finally, this piece is dedicated to my beautiful daughter to whom I will dedicate my life.

## Acknowledgements

Pasi Sahlberg, if you are reading this, I want to acknowledge you for your dedication to sharing the Finnish Model with the world. Without your passion, this thesis would be impossible.

Thanks to Dr. Elmore for showing me a documentary which changed my life and the course of not only my master's studies but also my teaching career.

Most importantly, I have to acknowledge Brother Doug Morris.

*“Any fool can make something complicated. It takes a genius to make it simple.” — Woody Guthrie*

For being a beacon of hope amidst a storm of despair, I have to thank you. Your influence throughout our time together was constantly brain tickling and awe-inspiring. I am a better man for having had the opportunity to learn from you. Never for a second think that the world at-large, but specifically the world of higher education does not need people like you in it.

In peace and solidarity, Brother Anthony

## Chapter 1

### Introduction and Positionality

I am a twenty-something, white, male, educator, and I currently teach in an affluent area of Pennsylvania. Most of my students live well above the poverty line, and do not go without, in terms of physical and academic resources. Although now contracted to teach high-school business classes, I have a more diverse set of experiences as an educator than most of my coworkers. Previous to becoming a certified teacher, I spent significant time teaching in a school district located in the City of Chester, and later taught students in the heart of Delaware County. It was during this time that I encountered classrooms without pencils, 11-year-olds who could not read more than their own names, parents without the resources to promote their child's education and tired curriculums that hadn't been revised in decades. These early moments in my teaching journey surely humbled me. I came to understand very quickly how fortunate my time as a child, and a student, had been. In many ways I was able to recognize my privilege through these experiences. I attended a well-resourced school district growing up; I had a ride to and from school every day, someone to wake me up and make me breakfast, and I lived in a middle-class household with two present parents who worked to provide me with every resource and opportunity I could ever desire or need. My parents always put me and my siblings first and when possible, sheltered us from the struggles of parenthood to make it seem like it all came easy. Furthermore, my parents always emphasized the power and importance of my own education.

Highlighting the privilege of having involved parents has recently become more apparent in my life, as my wife (also a teacher) and I have just welcomed our first child. The sacrifice parents make for their child's future is something you only truly realize when you become a

parent yourself. Not every day is glorious or even positive, but you push through so that your child can have better than you had. Being a young dad and younger educator, I am starting to see just how important a child's education is, from even early on. I must say, however, that this sacrifice and awakening in parenthood makes being a teacher much more difficult. In the moments where children express disinterest in being students or investing in their education, you want to scream from the rooftops or call their parents in, so that the sacrifice can be recognized. Unfortunately, I'm finding that in this regard, the youth (and education of the youth) may be wasted on the young.

However, I digress. You see, in my short five-year career, I have taught every grade from K-12, with the exception of 8th grade. I have taught a variety of subjects and levels, including Kindergarten Special Education and now 12th Grade Honors Business courses. I spent my first full professional year teaching in an elementary school, including roles such as Reading Support Teacher, Gifted Education Teacher, and even an extended substitution as a 5th Grade Teacher. I took this substitute position very seriously and my coworkers quickly saw that I was not a passive conveyor of information, as some of the subs could be. Why is this relevant? Because my first-year experience, along with the time that led up to it, was formatively important to the educator that I am today. Though it was not long, I learned quite a lot throughout that year in 5th Grade, even more than I ever expected to. Unexpectedly, my first professional year of teaching then happened to be the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. So, quickly, in the second semester of the year, I became a full-on cyber teacher, as well.

As any educator who taught through the COVID-19 Pandemic could tell you, "If we got through that, we could get through most things." (However, with the mass exodus of teachers we are experiencing in the field of education, maybe that is not as true as we once thought). What



was a difficult task of first year teaching to begin with, then was multiplied by the mandates of pandemic education, it was NOT an easy transition for me, personally or professionally. I was berated by parents, disconnected from students, and then in the fall that followed, told to instruct via Zoom for 90 straight minutes. You see, I had transitioned to a high-school business position in a new district during that summer. As the year progressed, I was tasked with entertaining 12th graders at home, while half of their peers were in my physical classroom. This experience taught me the importance of personal relationships in an educational setting, because without a relationship, the students had no reason to turn on their cameras and couldn't be forced to participate. In those couple of years, with some repeat students, we spent so much time apart that the time we spent together felt exponentially more meaningful. The relationships I formed over the course of the pandemic with my high school students are truly irreplaceable to me. In turn, lessons about marketing transformed into lessons about trust and loyalty. Additionally, projects about accounting in business became academic research into what life after high school would really look like. Frankly, I never really went back to the "old ways" of education or teaching from pre-pandemic. After thinking outside the box for those few years, it was hard to put myself back in, and be trapped by antiquated curriculums and tired processes. I feel as though I am a more effective educator because of what I had to do during that trying time.

This experience, in a way, brought me to my thematic concern. As my coworkers and curriculum tried to shove me back in that pre-pandemic box, I started to look into better ways to reach students so that I could innovate within the systems that were in place around me. As I started to transform the way I was teaching, everything just felt right. The responses and reactions that I was getting from students would regularly validate the efforts I was making. Students would bring topics to me that I never expected to talk with them about. They felt

comfortable opening up to me and I was wondering why. I spent time collecting feedback from them and a lot of what I can report centered around a few different themes: First, they felt seen. Students expressed to me that those moments of outside the box experiences made them feel like they were being valued as individuals which made them feel more comfortable speaking out and made the process of actually learning much easier. Additionally, they felt as though they were actually uncovering and discussing things that would help them in their everyday lives. They expressed discontent with a lot of what they were learning about in core classes, but were interested in learning about emotional regulation, decision making, and interpersonal relations. Then it became my job to fit this into the framework of a business class, and I was definitely up for the challenge.

Fast forward a bit, during a class in this master's program, I saw a film that brought me great clarity. The film was a Dan Rather Reports film called "Finnish First". I felt for one of the first times that there was a system out there, already in place, that fit my style and navigated a child's education in the same way that I was running my class. The film was released in 2012, but here I was in 2022, feeling like it was years ahead of where our U.S. educational landscape was. How could this be? The more important question that came to me was, how can I bring this to my school, so that I'm not the only one approaching teaching in this way?

The driving points that made me ask myself that question still stand out in my head today: In Finland, every student, every day, has to spend sixty minutes outside, rain or shine! So, in essence, recess does not go away after grade school. Additionally, administrators get back into the classroom and teach lessons frequently. This stood out to me because it keeps the administration connected to the culture of the school. I have found in conversations with my administrators and students alike that sometimes, it feels like there is a bit of a disconnect

between admin and teachers, and therefore admin and students. Additionally, I have learned through these conversations that it can be difficult for administrators to remain relevant for anything other than discipline when they are swamped and trapped in their offices for the majority of the school day. With the opportunity to get back into the classroom, administrators in Finland are given the chance to return to their roots, humanizing themselves to the student body and the teaching staff alike. This, in turn, keeps the administration's skills sharp, so that they may readily offer relative and progressive advice to those they are tasked with leading.

Aside from these initial differences that stood out to me, I learned that Finland has a system built on trust, relationships, and teacher autonomy. After watching this documentary, it was even more obvious to me that the educational system of the United States had great room for improvement, and that driving forces of change could easily come from the influence and functionality of the Finnish Education System.

In order to better understand this need for transformation, I will use the following pages to lay out the details of my concern. First, you will find a statement of critical action research, which is vital to understand before reading a proposal for a system aimed at transformation. Next will follow a detailed description of my concern. You will then find an explanation of the philosophical perspective from which I am considering this issue as well as an outline of the relevant history of both the United States' and Finnish systems of education. Additionally, you will find a brief highlighting of some of the tenants of the Finnish system that could prove useful if we were to adopt them here in the United States. Last will be a clear proposal of the transformative system that will aim to integrate Finnish ideals and structures into the American system of education.

## Chapter 2

### Thematic Concern, Conceptual Framework, Critical Lexicon, and Philosophy

#### *A Statement on Critical Action Research*

What is critical action research? Critical Action Research (CAR) is more than just studying the past to learn about the future. This system of exploration looks different in varying contexts. Generally speaking, critical action research is a tool used to challenge the conventional methods of learning and growing. By asking questions aimed at critique and transformation, researchers are led through the process of research by getting their own “boots dirty,” so to speak. Critical action research is not a passive search engine query— those truly engaged in this radical process are on the ground working to discover the answers to their transformative questions. It is not a perfect process. It is messy, raw, and most often, it is entirely unfinished.

Critical action research can be tracked throughout a set of experiences. When one becomes engaged in the process of CAR, they become a social agent. By tapping into an inherent ability to be a social agent, you are stepping into your role as an active participant in the shaping of our collective future. Through historically informed perspectives, those who engage in this activity are encouraged to not only shed light upon, but also actively take part in, impacting the practices of tomorrow.

Many times, as humans, we are lulled into a sense of complacency or as it could be stated, we go into “default mode.” Kind of like when a professor is talking, and you’re on your computer. You may be hearing them, but are you really listening and learning? When we operate on this default setting, we are subject to blind acceptance of the will of those who are in control of the message. It is ever more important each day that we become social agents through critical action research. As dark as it may seem, many would agree that right now, our world is in

danger. What may be even worse than this inherent danger, is that when we operate in this “default mode,” we are failing to do anything to help our situation improve. We, as individuals and a collective whole, are faced with challenges that are mostly created by the human race and will take some SERIOUS social agency to change. In order to embody the type of social agency referenced above, I believe that critical action research is needed to even begin to understand the problems that we face, let alone solve them.

I offer a line of questioning to prove the relevance of this innovative practice: As an educator, are you still inspired by what you do? Are you confident that your students are inspired by your teachings? Do you feel as though your lessons are providing opportunities for students to actively participate in society? Do you operate as a conveyor of information or a leader of action?

If you feel uninspired, disconnected from society, or as though you are merely a conveyor of facts, go ahead! Keep teaching those worn-out lessons about spelling and grammar, investments, and profits, even the American Revolution. Are they doing anything remarkable? Or are they putting kids to sleep and earning you a paycheck?

Thankfully, for now, we are still around to answer these questions. Largely an important question to be posed is, “can we afford not to engage in critical action research?” For me, the answer to this question is bold and stark, no. Without this practice, we may fail ourselves and every generation that we seek to educate.

Critical action research is just that– critical. It will make people uneasy. It will have people wanting to stomp out the growing flame that is your researched movement. The powers that be, in one’s specific industry or system, will likely not be appreciative of your critical action research, and that is how you know you are on the right track.

By setting up your own systems, which may or may not yield measurable results of transformation, you are setting the groundwork for a career filled with the type of research that not only changes the lives of the people in your classes, but more importantly, the world in which you live.

This framework is vital to the process of transformation in education for more than a few reasons. To really understand if you are transforming anything, you need to know what existed PRIOR to the transformation. Through the framework of CAR, you ignite opportunities to track the prerequisite understandings and habits of the students you are teaching. This baseline information is vital to the research process that will inevitably follow in the experience that you create and develop. It gives you a well-informed launching point for progress monitoring and data analysis.

In addition, this framework uses its criticality to make students challenge their existing schools of thought, which is the opposite of “default mode.” By offering students a chance to look at the world from a different perspective, teachers engaged in critical action research show their students that it is safe to evaluate their biases and privileges for the betterment of others. We are showing them that thinking independently is learning, and when that learning informs action, the transformation begins.

In my experience, critical action research has coupled itself nicely with experiential learning. This innovative way of educating students is on the rise in popularity in our educational system, and I put it to use in my own classroom each day. “Learning through doing” shows students that books are not the only way to transmit and obtain knowledge. By actually going through an experience firsthand, students are practicing the skills it takes to engage in the world around them and all of its activities.

This framework for research is something of a revolutionary practice if done right. Truthfully, it can be just as dynamic and beautiful if done wrong. The key is, not to wait to implement it. Do not wait until you fully understand or have all of the pieces. Dive into the messy nature of this transformative tool as soon as you can. Develop a process that aims to solve a problem or answer a question and make ways to track the progress all the while.

### ***Thematic Concern Statement***

The public educational experience in the United States is largely standardized and rigid in nature, by design of the system. There are countless defined outcomes, required curricular processes, and one-dimensional measurements of progress. This leaves very limited room for creativity, expression of ideas, and true demonstration of knowledge. While it may serve the system well, this uniform experience does no favors for the mass of our students. By causing a disservice to the kids, we are systemically hurting our collective future. It is my belief that we are teaching students more about complacency and their role in a system than we are about free thought and innovative problem solving. In attempting to deconstruct a superficial system, the goal of this thesis is to propose an experience for educators inside the United States to get outside of their accepted norms and continental lines. My intent is to propose a system where educators can diversify their experience and broaden their horizons to become more holistically trained and able to impact not only the students in front of them, but the communities surrounding them. This system will give the educators the opportunity to travel abroad to immerse themselves in an experience that is sure to change their perspective forever.

### ***Conceptual Framework***

1. What is the philosophical framework from which I am considering this concern?
2. What about the historical and current states of American pedagogy indicate a need for transformation?
3. What are some of the significant values and processes that help the Finnish education system stand out?
4. Which Finnish principles are easily transferable to American education and how?

### ***Critical Lexicon***

#### Constitutive Terms

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Autonomy</b>	<p>“The concept of teacher autonomy refers to the professional independence of teachers in schools, especially the degree to which they can make autonomous decisions about what they teach to students and how they teach it.</p> <p>In recent years, teacher autonomy has become a major point of discussion and debate in American public education, largely as a result of educational policies that, some argue, limit the professionalism, authority, responsiveness, creativity, or effectiveness of teachers.” (EdGlossary.org 2014)</p>
<b>Dialogical</b>	<p>“Of, relating to, or characterized by dialogue.” (Merriam-Webster, 2024)</p>
<b>Egalitarianism (egalitarian)</b>	<p>“1) a belief in human equality especially with respect to social, political, and economic affairs 2) a social philosophy advocating the removal of inequalities among people” (Merriam-Webster 2024)</p>



<b>Bureaucratic</b>	“a system of administration marked by officialism, red tape, and proliferation” (Merriam-Webster 2024)
<b>Holistic</b>	“Holistic education is a comprehensive approach to teaching where educators seek to address the emotional, social, ethical, and academic needs of students in an integrated learning format. Emphasis is placed on positive school environments and providing whole-child supports (services that support academic and nonacademic needs, also known as wraparound supports) to students.” (American University 2020)

<p><u>Operative Definitions</u></p> <p><i>For the purpose of this thesis, the following definitions will apply:</i></p>	
<p><b>Term</b></p>	<p><b>Definition</b></p>
<p><b>Pandemic Education</b></p>	<p>When discussing pandemic education, I am referring to the experiences that those of us lived, taught, and learned through during the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020 and the following years.</p>
<p><b>Transformative</b></p>	<p>When referencing transformational or transformative practices I am referring to conduct that aims at rewriting the traditional standards and values of systems set in place in our current educational landscape.</p>
<p><b>Social Agent (agency)</b></p>	<p>Social agency or a social agent in this context is the act of or a person who takes active participation and accountability in the world around them. A true social agent does not bury their head in the sand to perpetuate their ignorance. They work to understand more and engage with the world around them so as to make reasonable change when able.</p>
<p><b>Default mode</b></p>	<p>I am referring to the way that individuals and actually the collective we, seem to revert back to our factory setting when presented with a set of directions. This mode is passive, accepting, and submissive in nature. We do what we are told and do not ask questions in default mode.</p>
<p><b>Complacency</b></p>	<p>Complacency is the lack of critical thought and questioning. Staying in the system you enter into and accepting what is given to you instead of pushing for better or more.</p>
<p><b>Positionality</b></p>	<p>This refers to the stance of an individual in regard to their situation. Their positionality is their perception and beliefs on a given topic.</p>

<b>Lernerteacher</b>	The learnerteacher is an individual who engages in a constant reciprocal process of learning and teaching. They strive to deepen understanding while also sharing what they know. This is a humbling title as it serves as a constant reminder that you are never done learning and growing, and you never are too good to listen to those whom you are teaching.
<b>Pedagogy</b>	All educational processes, systems, beliefs, standards, etc.
<b>Liaison</b>	The liaison in this thesis is the organizer of the program of proposed transformation. This person is in charge of the whole system to be set in place. This term is used many times in the work and is interchangeable with terms such as: leader, organizer, coordinator, manager, etc.
<b>Summative</b>	In regard to assessment, this term refers to cumulative evaluations given as a summary of experiences in learning and practicing.

### ***Philosophical Positionality***

My philosophy is one written with the acknowledgement and acceptance of my privilege. I am blessed with lots of resources and means to get what I need. As a man, I have natural biases that can sometimes cloud my judgment or perception of a given situation. This is not exclusively because I am a male, but I do have certain biases because of that fact. I genuinely enjoy learning about things I do not know. This has stuck with me throughout my educational journey. I am inspired. I feel as though through my time in school, I was gifted with lots of incredible educators and opportunities. What I see in our current educational landscape is not what I believe is best for our students or the masses of our society. My philosophical positionality of education fits somewhere on a spectrum that would be supported by some and criticized by others. This statement is one made with the understanding that the same could be said for a majority of the world's educators. By no means do I see myself as entirely unique or beyond comparison in the educational world. I understand my role in the system, though I have deeply observed my ability to work around it. By limiting myself to the constraints of a system set up to produce clear and defined answers, I would neglect the creative intelligence of myself and the many young minds I encounter.

Alex Venet (2023) stated "It should be our goal as teachers to create classroom spaces where we learn alongside our students in the pursuit of a better world," (p. 180). This was a powerful statement that resonated with me because it serves as a reminder to teachers that just because they have a degree, it does not mean that they are to stop learning and growing. What type of humanizing, even unionizing, experience does it create when a group of students get to see a teacher learn as they do? How much do we stand to gain by letting up on the ideal that we

as educators are the most well informed, most capable in the room? If handled appropriately, there is not much to lose and yet so much to gain.

When I read and consider this, I am urged to think about the time spent in a graduate class learning. Specifically, I think of the conversations I had among the class with one of our colleagues' daughters. She was no more than ten years old. Due to the humility and understanding of the program of learning, we as “learnerteachers” were able to sit, patiently, and intently listen to a fourth grader tell us about the world from her mature little lens. This offered us an opportunity to gain perspective on how things look and feel from those that we truly work for each day.

In my heart, I feel the pain of the students who learn or at least operate under the teachers who feel it necessary under their management styles to remain in control of all aspects of the classroom all the time. Letting go of the controls a little is no sign of weakness. I see it more as a sign of maturity, confidence, and self-awareness.

What is the purpose of education? In my philosophical stance, the purpose of education is to bring people together and to raise people up. We hold so much emphasis on the standards and progression of curriculum in our society that we often forget that we are dealing with the livelihood of individuals every day. Often, their identities fall to the back burner and come second to all that we, as educators, feel pressured to cram into our time together.

From the perspective of someone who values human connection, believes in the capabilities of students, and denounces standardized testing and traditional means of assessment, the purpose of education shifts focus towards holistic development, empowerment, and societal impact.

The purpose of education is to foster an environment of holistic development for those involved. This is a strong facet that I embody in my theoretical framework. Children ought to be educated to be well-rounded individuals who understand the value of working as a part of a collective. Teaching the whole child is something that I prioritize over focusing solely on a defined curriculum. Education ought to aim to nurture the whole person, including their intellectual, emotional, social, and physical well-being. It ought to value creativity, critical thinking, empathy, resilience, and ethical decision-making as essential aspects of a well-rounded individual. I acknowledge the possibility that I as a teacher spend more intentional time with some children than their own parents do and for that reason, it is just as important that I teach them to be functioning members of society as their parents do. Things such as advocacy, respect, trust, and humility are among the lessons that many districts will not require I teach, that I do anyway.

Education is about empowering students to recognize their potential, cultivate their passions, and take ownership of their learning journey. It fosters a sense of agency, self-confidence, and the ability to set and achieve meaningful goals. Students ought to be able to see the fruits of their labors in their everyday lives. This is to say that students should be able to walk away from their educational experiences and recognize the areas in which they have grown and the authentic and meaningful takeaways.

Education ought to play a crucial role in preparing students to be active and responsible citizens who contribute positively to their communities and the world. It should emphasize values such as social justice, environmental sustainability, equity, and inclusivity. These tenants should be embodied by the educators who are in control of the students' time. With this being the reality, students will more easily be able to see the applications of these stances in the real world.

Education ought to aim to foster critical thinking, inquiry, and a deep understanding of societal issues. It should encourage students to question assumptions, analyze information critically, and develop a distinct perspective on complex issues. By raising critical consciousness, education empowers students to recognize and challenge injustice, inequality, and systemic barriers. It cultivates a sense of social responsibility, activism, and the courage to advocate for positive change in their communities and beyond.

Education should value meaningful relationships, collaboration, and communication skills. It should encourage students to engage with diverse perspectives, empathize with others, and work together towards common goals. When we work together, we accomplish so much more. It is my feeling that our societal system is very individualistic. I am of the belief that this is a designed element of our society. We, the people, are easier to control when we stand apart. As an educator, I feel it is my responsibility to bring the students together and help them realize what they are capable of when they collaborate, communicate, and connect effectively.

Education should prioritize student interests, strengths, and learning styles. It should advocate for personalized and flexible approaches to learning, where students have a say in what and how they learn, and teachers act as guides and mentors. With this as the focus, differentiation and accommodation become commonplace in the classroom. Children do not have entirely linear thought processes and so expecting them to learn on a linear plane is a simple way to lose them for the duration of the time spent educating them. It would be simpler for us as educators to be able to move from point A to point B in a set of lessons or a unit that we are instructed to teach, but I find it vitally important to understand that often this is not the way that these experiences play out.

This principle makes a strong case for my belief in differentiation of instruction. Though it may be difficult to manage in a room of thirty students with one teacher, it is necessary as all students come in and leave at different levels of understanding each day. They should be approached as such. This generally helps students feel more represented and comfortable in the spaces that their learning takes place, in my experience.

I denounce the system of standardized education. Instead of relying solely on standardized tests and grades, assessment should focus on holistic growth, learning progress, and real-world application of knowledge and skills. It may include project-based assessments, portfolios, peer evaluations, and self-reflection. Education should be balanced on the border of chaos and control in my mind. This is where true genius resides. There should be no two journeys which fit completely into the same box. Students are varied and unique in their needs despite some of their similar systems of development. Creativity and student construction of materials and responses should be encouraged at every turn.

I believe that assessment ought to follow suit. When students are asked to demonstrate their understanding of what they have learned, I do not believe it should be on a multiple-choice test or fit into a formula of use. It ought to be expressive and creative. Students should be able to write their understanding and wonderings regarding the topics at hand. When possible, verbally, and physically expressing themselves is something that I emphasize. My students know it to be true that I do not give tests or quizzes in my class. They do not align with my philosophy on education.

Regarding educational theorists that also support my educational philosophy, I can think of one in particular that truly matches up: Paulo Freire. As Freire (1970) wrote clearly: “The movement must begin with the human-world relationship” (p. 85). Although throughout his



book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) gave us a tilt-o-whirl and deeply thorough view of upheaving unsuccessful systems of education, he laid it out simply in regard to where educational change must start, through the lens of humanness. This includes teaching with love, promoting dialogue, forcing decision making, planning for activism, and much more. Freire deepens the basic needs of the masses and tasks the education system with providing a starting line for the growth of these skills and qualities (be them bad or good). Seems simple, right? Not when the starting place has a more-than-recent history of being neutral towards, and even disengaged from, these qualities.

To be more specific, my teaching philosophy and the words of Freire meet happily at “love.” As humans we have such a hard time accepting it, especially from those outside of our immediate family. But what can I give a child if not the safety net of unconditional love, persistence, and authoritative educational boundaries? It might not be easy, but to humanize the system of education within which I teach, it is a pillar of great necessity. Freire (1970) argues that “no matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is a commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation” (p. 87). In this metaphor, the oppressed are, of course, the students and their liberation is the control of their own education. So, if we are looking for a starting place in humanizing the education of these students, loving them is the backbone of engaging them in the process of their own learning. Freire (1970) adds that

...the young perceive that their right to say their own word has been stolen from them, and that few things are more important than the struggle to win it back. And they also realize that the educational system today— from kindergarten to university— is their enemy. (p. 32)

In reaction to this, personally and professionally I see that as an educator I can easily appear as “part of the system.” For some students, merely standing in front of the classroom communicates that I have stolen freedom or control from them in some way. In the same regard, I have learned

in my last five years of teaching that by loving these students no matter how they greet me or no matter what they say to me or to each other in anger (and never letting a grudge carry over), I can build a foundation of humanness that permits much learning and progress, even if it is just within my own small classroom. This permits me to speak with students and prompt questioning on a deep and personal level, as Freire highlights is necessary for true learning and liberation.

My favorite way that Freire (1970) highlights the exchanging of words (referred to more commonly as dialogue) as essential for a humanistic classroom is when he writes, “Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers” (p. 85). To extend from my previous paragraph about love and unconditional acceptance, as the “oppressor,” I must understand what a heavy weight my words carry. In teaching I am not (most of the time) in a relationship of equal exchange. The way I speak and demonstrate my humanness and love for my students must be reflective and active—careful at all moments. What an art form if I have ever heard of one! But in their role as the oppressed (which I still have a hard time writing, even here), my line of questioning and dialogue should prompt them to reflect and act as well. It is their reflection that guides their action, whether it needs to be consistent or changed in the future, and that action is a demonstration of their learning. In essence, I am modeling the value of my words and therefore meaningful dialogue, so that they may do the same. More specifically and immediately I can say that my philosophy of teaching and classroom management has been based on this pillar of humanness. As Freire (1970) gracefully states that “to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person ‘depositing’ ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be ‘consumed’” (p. 86). For my students, their role in the classroom has been to ask the big questions and be ready for uncomfortable and indirect follow-

up questions. More questions, less concrete answers, and somewhere along the line: learning and developing their own knowledge and belief system, which to Freire, means freedom. This is the theoretical framework behind not only my teaching philosophy, but my proposal for foreign teacher exchange to promote new/updated thinking and professional practice, as is the topic of my thesis.

As stated by Freire (1970),

Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world. (p. 79).

Steve Wright, in an article written in 2021, continues that, “Freire condemned traditional education as an engine of oppression and compared it to banking where a knowing teacher deposits information into empty students” (para. 4). In everyday practice of my educational philosophy, banking the information I have in my brain is honestly of no importance to most of my students, and to understand that (as difficult as it may be to accept) is to take the first step towards teaching to freedom, and continuing the process of educating myself and improving upon my professional practice in new ways.

Education as transmission, or the transmission model of education according to Freire, is a traditional approach to education that focuses on the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the student. In this model, the teacher is the expert, and the student is expected to absorb and reproduce the knowledge that is presented to them. The goal of education as transmission is to transmit a set of predetermined facts, ideas, and skills to students so that they can be successful in the world. This method is very teacher-centered and leaves little room for student innovation or creativity.

Most of the curriculum that has been used by teachers certified publicly in the United States over the last 20 years has been designed using a technique that encourages the transmission of predetermined facts, “Understanding by Design.” This technique of developing curricular tasks and measurements, proposed by Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins (1998), asks educators to identify clear goals of learning and knowledge, and to work backwards to create activities to get their students proficiently to that target. In proposal and practice, this sounds like it would be affective, but really it has aided the push for standardized assessments of these targets, and therefore standardized practice and lessons, further promoting education through transmission.

Opposingly, education as liberation is a more progressive approach to education that focuses on empowering students to think for themselves and to challenge the status quo. Paulo Freire first mentioned this idea in his book "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," and it truly stuck with me as I completed my master's classes and developed an in-depth educational philosophy. Freire argues that traditional education models are often used to maintain the status quo and reinforce existing power structures, and that education should instead be used as a tool for liberation and social transformation. In this model, the teacher is not seen as the expert, but rather as a facilitator who helps students to explore and discover their own ideas and opinions. The goal of education as liberation is to help students develop critical thinking skills.

I have observed and confirmed through reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that one key difference between education as transmission and education as liberation is the emphasis on the teacher. In education as transmission, the teacher is the authority figure who holds the knowledge and is responsible for transmitting it to the students. The teacher is expected to be the expert and to provide all the answers. In contrast, in the liberation model of education, the teacher is seen as

a facilitator who helps students to discover their own answers. The teacher's role is to provide support and guidance, but not to dictate the direction of the learning.

Another notable difference between these two approaches to education is the emphasis on the student. In education as transmission, the student is seen as a passive recipient of knowledge who is expected to absorb and reproduce the information provided by the teacher. The student's role is to follow the teacher's lead and to learn the material that is presented to them. In education as liberation, the student is seen as an active participant in their own learning. The student is encouraged to think for themselves and to challenge the ideas and beliefs that are presented to them. The student's role is to take ownership of their own learning and to explore their own interests and passions.

An additional and more practical difference between these two approaches to education is the emphasis on the content of the curriculum. In the transmission model of education, the curriculum is usually predetermined and fixed. The teacher is responsible for covering all the material that is specified in the curriculum, and the student is expected to learn it. In education as liberation, the curriculum is more flexible and open-ended. The teacher is responsible for creating an environment in which students can explore and discover their own interests and passions. The student is encouraged to pursue their own interests and to learn in ways that are meaningful and relevant to them.

Overall, education as transmission and education as liberation are two very different approaches to education that I feel are not compared or questioned with urgent frequency in the public-school setting where I teach, or America in general. Education as transmission focuses on the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the student, while education as liberation focuses on empowering students to think for themselves and to challenge the status quo— so

shouldn't we be doing just that, as educators? While education as transmission has been the dominant approach to education for many years, education as liberation is gaining popularity as a more progressive and empowering approach to education in our post-pandemic world. In my opinion, this questioning of pedagogy and evolution of change in education can't happen quickly enough. As a current (and relatively new) educator, I certainly hope to embody the spirit of an educator for liberation and make it a known part of my educational philosophy.

Most importantly, I have found the practice of education for liberation to be a more effective way of reaching, teaching, and keeping students in my business program. The more that I reject the banking concept of education, the more my students are met with the opportunity to discover their own forms of knowledge and consciousness. Sometimes, I find this method of teaching to be less traditional "teaching" and more leading, as I expect them to develop this skill, as I lead by example. Over the past five years, I have found this is a seemingly easier way to present new material. Not having to spend the time and energy reciting the curricular information leaves me feeling less drained at the end of the day. While this is true, there is also an element that becomes much more difficult in a system such as this. By becoming the educational leader who teaches without the banking model, I believe that students in my classroom are challenged to go past what they are trained to internalize "school" as being, and trained to be free thinkers, leaders and ask the bigger questions. This sets my class and practices apart from other teachers, the planned curricular activities, peer learning communities in my department and frankly, makes most professional development irrelevant to my methods.

I understand that not everyone shares my feelings or experiences. It is important to keep this in mind as an educator because not all of my students will always share in my natural love

for education and school. It may take more of an effort to motivate them to see the value in the process.

In essence, the purpose of education from this standpoint is to cultivate individuals who are not only academically proficient but also compassionate, innovative, and empowered to make meaningful contributions to society. It envisions education as a transformative experience that nurtures human potential, fosters interconnectedness, and promotes a sustainable and equitable future for all.

When it comes down to it, I am human. I was born and raised as humans are, I will die as such. All life is precious, and I cherish the chance to reach others with this message so that we all may find our meanings and chase them, unjudged and unapologetically. No matter how different we all present, we can all be reached if met on our own levels of understanding. By incorporating diverse perspectives of education, I think I can create a lasting and meaningful impact on our beautiful world for generations.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Narrative**

Throughout this section, you can expect to learn about the historical and current landscapes of the educational systems in both Finland and the United States of America. This analysis is imperative to truly understand the divergence of these two systems. In examining this split, the aim is to uncover some of the deep-rooted differences present in the educational systems. More specifically, the purpose of the study is to review the following facets of the educational atmosphere in both countries: teaching methods, curriculum and assessment, and teacher training and professional development.

The direct goal of reviewing the history of educational systems is to a) learn from them and/or b) not have history repeat itself, if need be. In the process of reviewing the history of these two systems specifically, one finds challenges that have ultimately led to successes within the systems, and successes within the systems have led to sustaining success in each country's education/development. The next question would then logically be, "What do the systems have to learn from each other?" and therefore, "What can the citizens learn from each other, as well?" Given the history and current reported standings, it is quite possible that we, in the United States, need to make adaptations and changes to our educational system in order to have as much academic success and overall happiness of citizens as our brothers and sisters in Finland. It makes sense that these two diverging systems would be different, given the history of each country and of their systems of education have varied greatly.

In the spirit of being lifetime learners and educators, we must not shy away from uncovering the mistakes of our educational histories and adapting as need be. We can use our own histories or the mistakes of our allies to create a system that evolves positively over time. As



an educator in the United States, I would say previous to watching the cited documentary and reading the cited text, I did not have exclusive knowledge of the history of Finland and its education system. However, I feel the study of this history and comparison of that and my own has shown many successes and much need for improvement. The question I ponder for myself, as an educator and designer of curriculum is, “If we are not to correct the educational practices that continually fail the next generation, how can we expect to celebrate any significant successes in the future?”

### ***Relevant History of American Education: An Introduction***

The history of education in the United States has been shaped by complex social, cultural, economic, and political factors, which have contributed to both successes and failures in the country's educational system. The early colonial period was marked by informal education, where parents and religious institutions were responsible for educating children. In the mid-19th century, the idea of a universal, public education system began to take shape, and by the early 20th century, most children in the US were enrolled in public schools. However, when viewed through a critical lens, several significant issues emerge, including systemic inequalities and the persistent marginalization of certain groups, such as people of color and those from low-income backgrounds (Mallot, 2021).

The establishment of public schools in the United States in the 19th century was a significant step forward in making education more accessible to all, but this too was not without its flaws. The system was often structured to reinforce existing social hierarchies, with wealthier families able to afford better education for their children. The quality of education provided to children of color and those from low-income families was often inferior, with lower-quality

facilities, less experienced teachers, and limited access to resources and technology (Mallot, 2021).

In the mid-20th century, the civil rights movement brought attention to these issues, and a series of landmark court cases and legislative acts sought to address them. However, the challenges persisted. Today, schools in many low-income areas still lack the resources and support necessary to provide a high-quality education to their students. Racial and socioeconomic disparities in education outcomes persist, with students of color and those from low-income backgrounds more likely to attend underperforming schools, drop out of high school, and face barriers to higher education. During more recent decades, there have been several attempts to “even the playing field” in regard to access to quality education, such as bussing in the 1970’s and school vouchers in the 1990’s, but it is still evident that U.S. schools in low-income areas are failing in comparison to those with more resources (Teachers Institute at Yale, 1992).

Due to this inequality, there is ongoing awareness of the need for systemic change in the United States' education system. Calls for equitable funding, teacher training, and curriculum reform have come from educators, advocates, and policymakers alike. Additionally, as included in a 1992 study of equality in education by Yale University, Jeanne Oakes exclaims that,

Given the precarious position of the United States in the global competition for economic, technological, and military superiority, we can no longer sacrifice the equality of our schools to social goals. This view promotes the judicious spending of limited education resources in a way that would produce the greatest return on “human capital.” Phrased in these economic terms, special provisions for under achieving and minority students become a bad investment. In short, equality is in; academic excellence is out. (p. 3)

The history of education in the United States is a complex one, marked by both progress and setbacks. When viewed through a critical lens, it becomes clear that many of the challenges that

have historically plagued the system persist to this day. Addressing these issues will require a sustained effort and a commitment to equity and justice in education.

### ***Priorities of the System***

The top vocational priorities and moral values of any education system shape the way that we conduct ourselves as citizens in our societies. They also shape the way that educational policies are made, school districts are organized, and students/staff are treated within the system itself. As “free” as we may be in the United States, our public educational priorities today include standardization, competition, and individual achievement. These number-based values, among other trends making their way to board minutes across our country, stand out as points of potential reform in the near future, even though we continue to live in an individualist society. In seeking to reform our system of education, we must first understand how these particular values made their way to the top of the historical, curricular and societal lists of priorities.

The overarching prioritization of individualism in American schools and society definitely affects the rest of the morals and values we see presented frequently in schools. In fact, individualism has made such an impact on the divergence of the “West and East,” as some may say, that there have been thousands of research studies devoted to how a push for individualism changes the minds and lives of Americans distinctly. Some studies highlight that this push for individualistic success starts earlier than public school, as made clear by an article published by the Manhattan Institute. As stated by Hymowitz (2021), “American parents... put their emphasis on unleashing and supporting their little ones' individuality,” and that “American education institutions — led by professionals, many of whom are parents themselves — inescapably reflect these same cultural norms” (p. 34).

According to Kay Hymowitz in 2021 in the Manhattan Institute, there are many organizational and now traditional aspects of American public education that have individualist foundations. For example, “The small classroom is crucial for American educators trying to manage the cultural contradiction between each child's individuality and the presence of other equally unique children” (Hymowitz, 2021, p. 27). Furthermore, Hymowitz illustrated that,

American parents and preschool teachers are unknowingly preparing children to thrive in a particular sort of classroom. When an American middle-class youngster arrives at the kindergarten door on the first day of school, he has already been empowered to make decisions for himself, to speak up about his preferences, and to have his talents and interests recognized and prized. He is the perfect customer for a child-centered, constructivist classroom dedicated to intrinsic motivation. (Self-Centered Pedagogies, para. 1)

Therefore, a child raised by parents raised in an individualistic society, entering into a world of individualist education, practices certain behaviors and accepts certain norms that are individually motivated.

One of the standout individualist characteristics of American schools is the emphasis on standardization and testing. The importance of individual students' standardized test scores is rooted in the belief that consistent, uniform standards and assessments are necessary for determining student and school performance. This not only allows for the comparison of individual test scores, but also for comparisons of school districts and regions, as if they are also a feature of individualism. This emphasis on standardization can also be seen as a way to ensure that all students have access to a consistent, high-quality education. In theory, giving every student the same evaluations sounds like a potentially positive measure, however, we've seen over time that in the United States, the allocation of resources does not support the validity of the test: A child with less resources is less likely to “measure up,” so to speak.

Besides obvious inequalities (geographical, financial, racial, etc.), the significant flaw in using individual test scores to compare students is that these standardized tests cannot fully measure true knowledge or understanding. A study done by American University (2020) on the Effects of Standardized Testing on Students mentions that, “Standardized tests fail to account for students who learn and demonstrate academic proficiency in different ways. For example, a student who struggles to answer a multiple-choice question about grammar or punctuation may be an excellent writer” (Sect. 2, Bullet 2). Additionally, “Standardized tests are thought to be fair because every student takes the same test and evaluations are largely objective, but a one-size-fits-all approach to testing is arguably biased because it fails to account for variables such as language deficiencies, learning disabilities, difficult home lives, or varying knowledge of US cultural conventions” (Sect 2, Bullet 4). Inevitably, these unfair and biased evaluations place individual schools and/or individual students in competition with each other, whether the match up is fair or not.

Competition is another prioritized value of American education that made its way to the forefront naturally, after standardized tests became the norm. The value placed on competition in the American education system is based on the belief that competition motivates students to work harder and strive for success, on these exams and in life. This can also be seen in the emphasis on college admissions processes, academic awards and honors, and now is even making headlines in regard to public, private and post-secondary school sports. Competition is also seen as a way to prepare students for the competitive nature of the workforce, and considering the cultural importance of “work,” in the U.S. today and always, the competition is fierce.

An additional difference separating the educational culture of the United States and the rest of the developed world is our undying devotion to our “jobs.” Our choice of work, here in the U.S., is more of a defining characteristic of who we are and not just “what we do.” Like the other priorities mentioned previously, this is not something that randomly appears once a child reaches the age of 18 and becomes a legal “adult.” This concept of work or vocation as an identity begins early on in a U.S. citizen's education. In 2019, Kalleberg and Marsden published a study on Work Values in the United States in which they argue that other countries:

emphasize the importance of a person’s experiences outside the work context, like socialization in the family of origin, learning during education, and other factors arising before labor force entry. Social backgrounds shape the importance people place on work, while both human and social capital help people to obtain work that is consistent with these work values. Such theories point to group affiliations, circumstances, and experiences outside of work that influence the importance people assign to job facets and prompt them to try to select jobs with particular attributes (and employers to select workers who hold certain values). (p. 45)

Meanwhile, in the United States, we compete, using standardized measures, for the best job for us as an individual, completely casting aside what would be best for the rest of the citizens or the greater good of the community. Usually, this leads to an emphasis on individual financial success in our capitalist society.

In the United States, some of the top priorities outside of education include economic growth and individual freedoms. The U.S. has a long history of prioritizing economic growth, which has driven its status as a “global superpower.” It also places a high value on individual freedoms, such as freedom of speech, religion, and the press, which are enshrined in the country's Constitution. These priorities, combined with the standardization and competition presented early on in the system of public education and the general culture of the country, have led us to the curriculum and instruction we promote today.

## *Curriculum and Assessment*

As mentioned previously, the American education system has now long emphasized standardized curriculum and testing, with a focus on the academic subjects of math, science, and reading. However, the curriculum has been criticized for being too narrow and not addressing the needs of students in terms of preparing them for the real world. There have been many educators and educational philosophers that have critiqued the system with hopes of changing it.

For example, John Dewey pushed for vocational schooling and learning by experience. Dewey was an influential American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer who more specifically believed that education should be centered on the needs and interests of the child. He made significant contributions to the theory of experiential learning through his philosophy focused on practical application and his work on progressive education. Dewey exclaimed that students should be actively involved in their learning and that education should not be limited to the passive reception of information. He advocated for learning by doing, where students participate in hands-on activities that connect to their interests and daily experiences. Furthermore, John Dewey saw education as a means to develop practical problem-solving skills and foster critical thinking. He argued that students should encounter and solve real problems, encouraging them to think deeply and critically about the world around them. He concluded that, instead of standardized testing, it is meaningful experiences that enhance student learning and understanding. Dewey also stressed the importance of social interactions in the learning process, striking down the American priority of the individual. Unfortunately, the curriculum and assessment that is prioritized today, as described previously, is not largely in line with Dewey's philosophy.

The system of standardization has also been criticized by Professor Noam Chomsky, an educational activist and intellectual, who judged standardization for its lack of true application in helping students reach their potential. Chomsky (2015) stated, "The assessment itself is completely artificial. It's not ranking teachers in accordance with their ability to help develop children who will reach their potential . . . It's turning us into individuals who devote our lives to achieving a rank, not into doing things that are valuable and important" (Timestamp, 1 min 18 seconds).

Another critique of the standardized system came from Paulo Freire. Freire critiques from abroad, as a renowned Brazilian educator and philosopher, who has been celebrated for groundbreaking work in critical pedagogy and social justice in education. Paulo Freire (1921) promoted education as a tool for liberation, challenging traditional hierarchical structures in the classroom and society. At the core of Freire's philosophy is the concept of conscientization, or critical consciousness, where individuals become aware of the social, political, and economic forces that shape their lives. He believed that education should empower individuals to critically analyze and transform oppressive systems, fostering a sense of agency and empowerment. Freire's influential work, most notably articulated in his seminal book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, emphasizes the importance of dialogue and collaboration in the educational process. He argued against the "banking model" of education, where knowledge is passively deposited into students, advocating instead for a dialogical approach where teachers and learners engage in mutual dialogue and problem-solving. This dialogical pedagogy encourages active participation, critical reflection, and the co-creation of knowledge, leading to a more democratic and inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, Freire emphasized the interconnectedness of education and social change. He believed that education should not only equip individuals with academic



knowledge but also empower them to challenge social inequalities and work towards a more just and equitable society. Through his work, Freire inspired generations of educators and activists to view education as a transformative tool for liberation, promoting dialogue, critical thinking, and collective action in pursuit of social justice. It would be easily agreed upon that public education in the United States is specifically designed to keep teachers and students from uniting in a spirit of social justice in today's world.

Meanwhile, closer to home, Malott (2012) critiques the standardized system by arguing that the current curriculum has been used to perpetuate social control and oppression, with an emphasis on training students to be obedient and conformist rather than critical thinkers. Over time, these critiques have caused small ripples in the design of curriculum and assessment, but they have been repeatedly drowned out by others in power, who support standardized tests and assessments.

Contrastingly, there are vetted educational philosophers whose work has been used in support of the standardized system's design. Benjamin Bloom (2010) was a prominent educational psychologist known for his work on the taxonomy of educational objectives, which emphasized the importance of clear and measurable educational goals. Bloom released his Original Taxonomy in 1956 and it has been taught and retaught in post-secondary educational contexts ever since. This innovative development in education, at the time, still remains in practice today, despite being nearly 70 years old. Personally, I was taught quite a bit about it in my undergraduate studies, as I pondered what the world was like educationally and technologically when this "taxonomy" would have been more relevant. Although Bloom's Taxonomy has since been updated, seeing a bit of a reconstruction in the early 2000's (Armstrong, 2010), I emphasize that this portion of teacher education begs for a revisit. Bloom

believed that education should be based on a system of standardized assessments, and that competition was necessary to motivate students and improve their learning outcomes, which may have been relevant in 1956, but is causing great detriment to our students in 2024.

The United States has adopted curriculum standards at the national level that reflect Bloom's quest, like the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English language arts and mathematics. These standards have outlined the knowledge and skills students are expected to acquire at each grade level. In theory, it makes sense to create a unified expectation, where students are offered lessons promoting mastery of the same topics and therefore prioritizing the same curricular tasks at the same levels. In practice, however, this idealistic concept does not consider differentiation in curriculum, assessment, or instruction. In many ways, this rigid standardization yields inequities and ignorance to the diversity and variance of students in different levels and locations. These educational differences are acknowledged and accepted in today's world, versus the educational rigidity of Bloom's timeframe.

Although most reading this piece would be familiar with the structure of today's school system in the United States, here is a brief overview of basic public education curriculum: The curriculum in our schools typically includes core subjects like English, mathematics, science, and social studies. In addition to the core subjects, schools may offer a range of elective courses, such as foreign languages, arts, physical education, and beyond. Schools with sufficient funding and support may offer career-based courses and technical education (CTE) programs, either on or off-campus.

In regard to assessment, even post-pandemic, standardized testing is still a significant component in measuring progress and learning loss. Students are assessed at different levels (3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 10th, 11th grades) by state-mandated assessments. Examples of widely

used standardized tests in the U.S. include the SAT, ACT, and state-level assessments such as the PSSA and Keystone tests in Pennsylvania. These assessments aim to measure students' academic progress and provide accountability for curriculum and teaching methods at the individual, school, district, and state levels. These assessments often influence curriculum decisions and teaching practices, but again promote the performance of the individual being measured against their classmates, and their school being measured against other institutions with completely different locations, socioeconomic statuses, language barriers, etc.

While there are curriculum standards and frameworks, teachers in the United States generally have a degree of autonomy in designing and delivering instruction, depending on how their schools perform on these assessments. Teachers have the freedom to adapt curriculum materials, employ different teaching strategies, and select instructional resources that align with the needs of their students. However, if an instructor of a “tested subject,” these teachers have less flexibility in regard to what they can focus on and/or for how long during the school year. High-stakes testing, in this context, has significant consequences, such as determining student promotion, graduation, or school rankings. Critics argue that the emphasis on high-stakes testing can narrow the curriculum and lead to “teaching to the test.”

The system in place puts a heavy emphasis on student assessment and evaluation, with standardized tests used to measure student achievement and teacher effectiveness. However, these tests have been criticized for being culturally biased and for not measuring a student's full range of abilities. Malott (2012) argues that these assessments are used to maintain the status quo and to perpetuate inequalities, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds are often those who perform poorly on these tests.

In addition to state-mandated standardized tests, school districts often administer their own assessments to gather data on student progress and inform instructional practices. These assessments may include benchmark tests, interim assessments, or end-of-course exams. These tests are used to evaluate student learning and provide feedback to teachers and schools.

In recent years, I have witnessed a growing interest in alternative assessment methods that go beyond traditional standardized testing, due to the reformatting and reviewing of educational practices post-pandemic. These methods include performance assessments, portfolios, projects, and authentic/experiential assessments that allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in real-world contexts. These approaches aim to provide a more comprehensive view of student abilities and promote deeper learning.

In regard to teaching methods, there is a growing emphasis on project-based learning and inquiry-based approaches in U.S. classrooms. These methods involve students engaging in hands-on, real-world projects, conducting research, and applying their knowledge to solve problems or explore topics of interest. They promote critical thinking, collaboration, and student engagement. Teachers today often employ differentiated instruction to meet the diverse needs of students. This approach involves adapting teaching methods, materials, and assessments to accommodate different learning styles, abilities, and interests. Differentiated instruction may involve small group activities, flexible grouping, and individualized support. Additionally, technology plays an increasingly prominent role in U.S. classrooms. Teachers use technological tools, such as interactive whiteboards, computers, tablets, and educational software, to enhance instruction, facilitate research, promote digital literacy, and provide multimedia learning experiences. During and after the pandemic, teachers have been challenged to use new tools,

assessments, and ways of thinking about their teaching, in a world that has certainly changed since most of the foundational principles of educational philosophy have been relevant.

### ***Teacher Training and Professional Development***

Teacher education and training in the US has historically been fragmented, with varying requirements and standards across states. Teacher education programs in the United States can vary in structure and content due to the decentralized nature of the education system. The teacher workforce is also highly segregated, with most teachers being white and female, and few teachers of color or male teachers. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2023) cites that 77% of teachers in America are female, it also states that 80% of teachers are white. This disparity is misrepresentative of the population of students in America which are only 46% white. (NCES, 2023) Malott (2012) argues that the teacher education system has perpetuated inequality by failing to provide adequate training and support for teachers in marginalized communities.

There are some common characteristics and trends in teacher education programs across the country. Teacher education programs in the United States typically offer bachelor's degrees in education, which may include a focus on specific grade levels (such as elementary or secondary education) or subject areas (such as math, science, or English). Some universities also offer graduate programs, such as master's degrees or doctoral programs, for individuals seeking advanced training or specialized certifications.

Teacher education programs are usually designed for pre-service teachers, who are aspiring educators chasing their initial teaching certification. These programs provide a combination of coursework, field experiences, and student teaching opportunities to prepare future teachers for the classroom.

Teacher education programs focus on a range of subjects, including educational theory, child development, teaching methods, curriculum design, assessment techniques, and classroom management. Courses may cover topics such as instructional strategies, educational psychology, multicultural education, special education, and technology integration.

Practical experience is a crucial component of teacher education programs. Pre-service teachers are placed in schools to observe experienced teachers, assist in classrooms, and gradually take on teaching responsibilities. Student teaching, typically occurring in the final semester or year, provides an extended period of supervised teaching practice in a real classroom setting.

Teacher certification requirements vary by state, but most programs align with the licensure requirements of the state education department. Graduates of teacher education programs typically need to pass standardized exams, such as the Praxis series, to obtain their teaching license.

Many teacher education programs emphasize the importance of ongoing professional development for teachers. This includes opportunities for in-service teachers to continue their education through workshops, graduate courses, or professional learning communities to enhance their teaching skills, stay updated on research and best practices, and meet the requirements for maintaining their teaching license.

It's important to note that teacher education programs can differ significantly between institutions and states in the United States. The structure, length, and specific requirements of programs may vary.

### ***Relevant History of Finnish Education***

The Finnish education system is widely regarded as one of the best in the world, with a high level of student achievement and equity. The interesting thing is, this was never the intention. Pasi Sahlberg (2015) claims that while many countries aim to be the tops in terms of world education leaders, they are quietly being passed by others with no true intention of doing so. Sahlberg mentions that many of the educators behind this system just remain focused on what is best for their own students, and that has made all the difference.

According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which assesses 15-year-old students' performance in reading, mathematics, and science internationally, the United States typically falls around the average or slightly below average among participating countries. Finland in years past has outscored the United States easily, though recently their performance has rescinded a bit (PISA Data, 2024). It is important to consider, however, that PISA results are just one measure of educational achievement and do not capture the entirety of the education system's strengths or weaknesses. They do not tell the whole story of what makes Finland a role model for American Education.

See, Finland tops another chart. They have topped this chart for the last six years running. They have been in the top ten since the study began in 2012. What chart, you ask? Finland tops the World Happiness Report. The report is a data-driven study which identifies the places in the world where the citizens are happiest. The measures they use are proven over the course of the last twelve years and they have consistently found that Finland has some of the overall happiest people. It can absolutely be argued, but as a matter of opinion, I believe that this is more important than outscoring every other nation in standardized academic based tests.

## *Historical Context*

The Finnish education system has evolved over time and has undergone significant changes throughout its history. This long and complex history dates back to the Middle Ages, when education was provided mainly by the church. In the late 19th century, Finland was part of the Russian Empire, and its education system was primarily designed to serve the needs of the ruling elite and was used as a means of promoting nationalism and Finnish culture. However, in the early 20th century, Finland gained its independence, and its leaders began to focus on building a more egalitarian society. (Eurydice, 2023)

One of the ways they sought to do this was through education reform. In 1919, the Finnish Parliament passed a new education act that established a comprehensive, public education system. The act mandated that all children receive nine years of basic education, and that this education be free and compulsory (Karhu, 2020).

In the decades following World War II, Finland underwent a period of rapid economic and social change, and the country's education system struggled to keep pace with these changes. This resulted in significant disparities in educational outcomes between different regions of the country, with students in rural and remote areas often receiving a lower quality of education compared to their urban counterparts. It is important to note that much of the landscape was rural meaning that a large number of students were suffering at the hand of this reality. (Eurydice, 2023)

In response to these disparities, the Finnish government made a commitment to reform the education system and to create a more equitable and effective system that would provide all students with the same opportunities to succeed. This involved significant investments in teacher



training and development, technology and data analytics, and programs and services to support the emotional and social well-being of students (Rather, 2012)

Over the following decades, the Finnish education system continued to evolve. In the 1960s, the government introduced a new curriculum that emphasized individualized learning and student-centered teaching. It aimed to provide equal opportunities for all students regardless of their social background or abilities. Former member of the Finnish National Board of Education, Irmeli Halinen cited that one of the most important reforms turned out to be the doing away with any slower or advanced tracks before tenth grade. (Halinen, Dan Rather Report) In order to make this structure work effectively, the system of support for teachers in classrooms was increased significantly. At this point teachers were facing all children of all levels in the same classroom and had to be able to teach their class regardless. While Finnish teachers do a nice job of accommodating and individualizing instruction, this task was far beyond the scope of what most human beings would be capable of accomplishing at a high degree for any stretch of time.

Dan Rather reported that “half of all students in Finland receive some kind of special education support before they’re sixteen” (Rather, 2012). While this number is staggering to envision, it is only based on the perception that Americans have on special education. Often, that term comes with an assumption of inability or weakness. In Finland, the mentality is different. Special education is just seen as a way to help students keep pace in environments where they are susceptible to struggle.

This can look different in different times. Sometimes there will be a second teacher in the room to help students with exceptionalities in their understanding. Other times, students will be pulled during off-times to meet one-on-one or in a small group with an educator designated to provide learning support.

Perhaps another of the most significant recent developments in Finnish education was the adoption of the "Finnish model" in the 1990s. This model emphasizes equal access to education for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status or geographic location. This is where the previously mentioned initiative for egalitarianism can be seen. It also emphasizes the importance of teacher preparation, collaborative learning, and student-centered teaching.

Thanks in large part to these reforms, Finland was able to create a more effective and equitable education system that has consistently ranked among the best in the world. The Finnish approach to education has been recognized internationally for its focus on personalized, collaborative, and emotionally supportive learning, and has inspired education systems around the world to adopt similar approaches.

### ***Curriculum and Assessment***

The Finnish education system is based on a holistic approach. There are facets which aim to develop students' skills and knowledge in a variety of disciplines, including language, mathematics, science, social studies, arts, physical education, and health. However, it does not stop there. This holistic approach to education focuses on the intellectual development of a child, sure, but there is also an emphasis on the emotional, physical, and personal development of the individual child. The Finns believe that by placing this emphasis on their methods, they are able to more completely support the children in their classrooms, valuing them as children in the present moments rather than as data points of potential success for the future.

Sahlberg (2018) argues that play is a critical component of the Finnish education system, as it allows children to develop their creativity, social skills, and emotional intelligence. He notes that in Finland, children have plenty of opportunities to play both inside and outside of the

classroom, and that play is seen as an essential part of learning. This approach is in stark contrast to many other countries, where play is often seen as a distraction from academic work.

Sahlberg's (2018) emphasis on play in the Finnish education system supports the discussion of the student-centered teaching methods and the holistic curriculum in the Finnish education system. The use of collaborative learning, problem-solving, and project-based learning, all involve the integration of play into the learning process, which allows students to learn in a more engaging and meaningful way. These concepts will be explored further in the methods section, but it is important to note their prevalence in the Finnish model of education in regard to play.

To further represent the importance of play in education in Finland, it is vital to mention the breaks that come in between each of the periods. After each class period, students are given a 15-minute break. In this model if there were six periods a day for secondary school students, these kids would get over an hour of free time to decompress and use the time in whatever way they see fit. In the previously mentioned documentary, during this break time, students were seen playing games, socializing, and even doing homework (Rather, 2012). During recesses usually students are made to go outside regardless of the weather. This period of time gives the students a chance to get fresh air and to stay moving.

### ***Comfort and Trust in Education.***

The curriculum is flexible and allows teachers to tailor their teaching methods to the needs of individual students. Irmeli Halinen (2012) stated,

We don't have inspections, we don't have national testing, we don't have this stress, or teachers don't have to fear that they are punished because of bad results, but they can trust that they are supported. So, the teacher profession is independent, it's creative, you can really create your own reality in the school. you can create your own profession.  
(Timestamp, 32 min 5 seconds)

Something of this nature is important because teachers feel secure in who they are and what they are capable of. This notion emphasizes the autonomy and discretion of educators. This is one of the components of the Finnish model that is credited with making them so successful.

Furthermore, Headmaster of Aurora Primary School in Finland, Martti Helstrom put it eloquently, “In Finland, the key word is trust. Administrators trust in municipalities, municipalities trust in headmasters, headmasters trust their staff, and teachers trust their pupils” (Rather, 2012).

This level of trust is infectious and continues to emphasize the autonomy of educators in a way that is sure to increase self-efficacy and job-satisfaction. It is no wonder that Finnish nationals want to go into education at a very high rate.

It is not uncommon for students to be given space to rest and relax during a given class period. In fact, in many of the primary grades, students are required to take their shoes off when coming into school (Rather, 2012). This is an initiative that is meant to have students view their learning environments with respect and care, as they would their own home. Rigor is relative and it is understood that there are times when students need moments of peace to restore focus and productivity.

This is consistent with the previously mentioned holistic approach followed in Finnish schools. The trust and faith placed not only in the teachers as professionals, but also the public school system at large is represented in the way that curriculum is selected and presented. Sahlberg (2015) argues that “the true Finnish difference is that teachers in Finland are expected to exercise their full professional knowledge and judgment both independently and collectively in their schools. They control the curriculum, student assessment, school improvement, and community involvement” (p. 9).

The core curriculum is doled out to schools and educators, but the presentation and progression is left to the discretion of the individual teachers. It is expected that teachers are able to diversify and accommodate their lessons to match the naturally varying paces of the students in their rooms. Sahlberg, in the documentary, actually claims that the core curriculum given out is more of a suggestion than anything else. (Rather, 2012)

It is also accepted that not all of the major points of emphasis must be based in principles of academia. As shown, there are core competencies that go beyond the scope of reading, writing, and arithmetic to achieve that more holistic approach that has been discussed.

### ***Assessment and Evaluation***

In Finland, student assessment and evaluation are based on the comprehensive approach, which considers not only academic achievement but also social skills, creativity, and emotional intelligence. This is another emphasis on development of the whole child. In Finland, there are no annual standardized tests. National exams are not conducted until the end of upper secondary school, and even then, they are not used for ranking or public comparison of schools. Instead, the focus is on collecting data to better support growth and development of the students.

Teachers never have to worry about making sure they cover every concept that will be assessed, because the only true evaluations given are ones created by the teacher (Rather, 2012). If you were to ask, it is likely that Finnish educators would tell you this fact is absolutely instrumental in their continued success. Most evaluations focus on providing meaningful feedback and promoting student learning. As a byproduct of minimal standardized testing, there is no ranking of schools or students.

Finnish education emphasizes a balanced approach to assessment, combining different methods to provide a comprehensive view of students' progress. Assessments include formative

assessments (ongoing assessments during instruction), summative assessments (end-of-unit or end-of-course assessments), and self-assessments.

Finnish teachers have a high degree of independence in designing and implementing assessments. They have the flexibility to tailor assessments to fit their teaching methods and the needs of their students. This freedom enables teachers to use a variety of assessment methods, including written exams, oral presentations, group projects, portfolios, and practical demonstrations.

Feedback plays a crucial role in Finnish assessment practices. Teachers provide timely and constructive feedback to students, focusing on the strengths of their work and areas for improvement. Feedback is aimed at guiding students' learning and promoting their self-reflection and self-assessment skills.

Finnish education values individualized assessment that considers students' unique needs and learning profiles. Teachers strive to understand students' strengths, interests, and challenges and consider these factors when assessing their performance. This approach supports personalized learning and helps identify areas where students may need additional support.

Finnish assessment practices aim to capture a holistic view of student growth and development, considering not only academic achievement but also social and emotional aspects. Student well-being and engagement are considered important indicators of educational success.

The overall goal of assessment and evaluation in Finland is to support student learning, promote intrinsic motivation, and provide feedback for continuous improvement. The emphasis is on fostering a positive learning environment where students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning and develop a growth mindset.

The teaching methods in Finland are characterized by a student-centered approach, where teachers act as facilitators rather than lecturers. Collaborative learning, problem-solving, and project-based learning are common methods used in Finnish classrooms. Students are often encouraged to teach one another when they are able. This is helpful to the teachers as differentiation and inclusion is the norm in Finland.

The experience of the students and professionals in the Finnish education system places value on equity and cooperation and it is believed that this leads to a system where all students can learn well (Sahlberg, 2015). The relevance that this has in terms of teaching methods is that students who are further along and more readily capable of expressing their understanding are quick to jump in and help their peers. The lack of importance placed on competition fosters a culture of community and collective support rather than individual achievement.

### ***Teacher Training and Professional Development***

In Finland, teacher education and training is highly valued and rigorous. It only makes sense as teachers are one of the most precious resources that Finland has as mentioned in “Finnish First,” the documentary with Dan Rather, an American reporter.

Prospective teachers must have a master's degree and pass a competitive selection process. In some programs, only 1 in 10 students who apply into pre-teaching education programs are accepted as mentioned in the documentary. Admission to teacher education programs is based on academic qualifications, motivation, and personal interviews. Consistently, teaching is one of the highest responses of students when they are asked which career they would most like to pursue as an adult. In Finland, it is said that teachers command as much respect as doctors and lawyers.

Pasi Sahlberg has had this to say about teaching degrees in Finland, “It’s a very competitive degree in the labor markets because they know that they have a high degree, that they’re good students, they’re able to work with other people, they’re able to teach” (Finnish First, 29 min 20 seconds). Collaborative learning is an essential aspect of teacher education in Finland. Prospective teachers engage in group work, discussions, and reflective practices to enhance their understanding of teaching and learning processes. Peer interaction and feedback are encouraged to foster professional growth.

Practical teaching experience is a significant component of teacher education in Finland. Prospective teachers spend a considerable amount of time in classrooms, observing experienced teachers, and gradually taking on teaching responsibilities. This hands-on experience allows them to develop practical skills, gain insights into classroom dynamics, and apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings.

Teacher education in Finland is seen as the foundation for a lifelong learning journey. Finnish teachers are encouraged to engage in continuous professional development to stay updated with research, pedagogical innovations, and societal changes. They are provided with opportunities for further training and collaboration throughout their careers.

The Finnish education system has achieved great success in providing high-quality education to all students regardless of their social background or abilities. The real credit for this among Finnish nationals is given to the teachers. They recognize educators with the utmost trust and respect for their commitment to the nation's children.

With such a level of output, it may be assumed that there is a strict level of rigor on teachers and lots of hours required of them. The opposite is actually true. In Finland, it has been cited that educators spend only 60% of the time in front of students teaching that their American



counterparts do (Rather, 2012). Much of their other professional time is spent getting together with colleagues to share ideas and support and planning lessons for the days ahead.

Finland has been further cited as a country which spends less time in school than most other countries in the world. On average, Finland spends only five hours a day in school. This is due to their focus on efficiency and well-being of their students. One may think that for this reason, Finns spend a larger portion of the calendar year. According to the National Center for Education and Economy, Finland has a national maximum of 190 days in school a year with many schools not using the full 190. Their end of school year break remains around ten to twelve weeks as well. (NCEE, 2018)

### ***A Quick Word on the State of Education***

According to the NEA, students completing teacher preparation programs in the United States has fallen by 35% in just the last ten years (Flannery, 2022)! This significant drop reflects the state of American education today very well. The people are disenchanted. Further than that blinding stat, NEA also reported in a survey they conducted that 55% of educators are considering leaving the profession earlier than they had planned (Flannery, 2022).

This state of existence is not sustainable. Something has to be done to turn it all around. We desperately need strong educators to help our children be the generation that this world needs. We need people to foster kindness, community, sustainability, and humility. What can be done?

For me, we need to bring the Finnish model home to the United States. The state of education and prospective teacher interest is vastly different. For example, on the Finnish page of the NCEE website (2024) they cite that, “On the 2018 TALIS survey almost 60 percent of

Finnish teachers agreed that teaching is highly valued, much higher than the average of 26 percent” (sect. Teacher Recruitment, paragraph 2).

It is no secret that the way that teachers are viewed, treated, and compensated plays a huge role in their job-satisfaction. Increased job-satisfaction is something that helps to keep people in the profession. Now, Finland does not pay their teachers exuberant amounts of money, it is actually somewhere around the global average. What we have discussed though is that their teachers have more professional time to prepare and less to actively teach. We also talked about the level of respect that teachers have in the country. Additionally, we have discussed the level of autonomy and trust that teachers are given in the country. All of these pieces and others make me say, bring the Finnish model to the U.S.

It may be said that in Finland, this model works more easily due to their lack of financial diversity and small population. In the Dan Rather report, this notion was debunked. It was mentioned that Finland is the size of the average state in the U.S. with around five-million people. In America the education systems are governed at the state level, so the task is not as daunting as it may initially seem (Rather, 2012). In terms of lack of financial diversity, Finland is a socialist country, and their schools focus on equitable funding and diversification of resources to ensure an overall equitable experience of education which makes more of a difference than financial disparities would.

One of the other bewildering facts, pertaining to funding, shared is that at the time, in 2012, Finland only spent about \$8,000 per student in the country where the United States spent \$11,000. Some of the overinflated costs that the United States foots the bill of are bureaucratic employees and standardized testing. Dan Rather cited that the Finland federal departments that oversee education had only six hundred administrators to oversee over a million students. It was

compared to the city of Los Angeles, California which employed over thirty-five hundred administrators to oversee about six hundred and sixty thousand students (Rather, 2012). This is an example of the inefficiency of the American education system.

In terms of money spent on standardized testing, the National Education Policy Center cited a study that showed that the United States spends 1.7 billion dollars on standardized tests a year. (Singer, 2023) In comparison, instead of the government creating tests for them, Finnish teachers are left to make their own tests. This not only saves a massive amount of money, but it also ensures consistency with their curricular processes.

### ***Conclusion of Comparison***

In conclusion, a comparison of the education systems in Finland and the United States reveals both shared characteristics and distinct approaches. Finland's education system has gained international acclaim for its focus on equity, teacher quality, and student well-being. The country's commitment to equal opportunities and comprehensive education has resulted in consistently high student achievement levels and high levels of reported happiness by their people.

In Finland, the establishment of the comprehensive school system in the 1970s aimed to provide equal educational opportunities for all children, regardless of background or social class. The emphasis on teacher training, autonomy, and collaborative learning has contributed to the success of the Finnish education model. Teacher education programs in Finland are renowned for their rigorous selection process, research-based pedagogy, and extensive practical training.

On the other hand, the United States has a decentralized education system characterized by state and local control, resulting in considerable variation in curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment practices. The United States has emphasized standardized testing as a means of

accountability and has experienced ongoing debates regarding the impact of high stakes testing on curriculum and instruction. Teacher education programs in the United States offer a range of degrees and certification pathways, with an increasing focus on pedagogical approaches such as project-based learning and differentiated instruction.

Despite their differences, both Finland and the United States share a commitment to quality education and student success. Both systems recognize the importance of effective teaching, student-centered learning, and ongoing professional development. Both countries also acknowledge the significance of addressing the diverse needs of students and promoting their holistic development.

As education systems continue to evolve and respond to changing societal needs, there is much to learn from the experiences of Finland and the United States. Finland's emphasis on equity, teacher professionalism, and comprehensive education can inspire efforts to promote educational equality and high-quality teaching worldwide. The United States' focus on innovation, diversity, and individualized approaches can contribute to fostering creativity and adaptability in education.

In considering the strengths and challenges of both systems, educators and policymakers can seek to create a balanced approach that prioritizes equity, teacher preparation, student engagement, and meaningful assessment. By drawing insights from the experiences of Finland and the United States, education systems can strive to provide inclusive, rigorous, and holistic learning environments that prepare students for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

## Chapter 4

### Design

#### *Purpose and Curriculum Theory*

The purpose of this program is multi-faceted. On a large scale, the purpose is to increase the cultural competence and overall ability of educators around the world. This level of transformation does not happen overnight, it takes time. There are, however, facets to this system that aim to transform more immediate experiences in the educational world. On a more local level, the idea is aimed at bringing international perspectives into individual communities within a district. Even more locally, the purpose is to improve individual teachers' abilities to educate. Something further that is more of a long-term initiative, albeit an often-overlooked unit of measure is the purpose of intending to increase societal happiness among those of us in the United States.

On a global scale, it goes without saying, that there is a vast amount of space for humans, and of course, educators, to challenge their misunderstandings and shortcomings of international systems of education. I would venture to say that not a single one of us has truly mastered the craft of education. I would also venture to say that not one single country has the clear and obvious BEST system for teaching and learning. There are points of growth available for each and every one of us. Each nation has its own sets of strengths and weaknesses and each other nation could stand to learn from them if we only opened our ears and our borders for the sake of collective growth and development. Personally, I have learned quite a bit and evolved as a teacher by studying the processes of education in Finland. I firmly believe that there are Finnish educators who could learn and grow by studying the practices of American educators. The point is, that this is a potentially mutually beneficial set of practices. There are no exclusive members

who will only take while the others only give. This system is meant to break down instances of ignorance and oppression through its open and critical lens.

On a district-to-district level, the purpose of this system is to bring in diverse perspectives to be shared and implemented in ways that are personal and meaningful to the community that they are serving. The thought is that it will open critical conversations about the everyday processes inside of schools leading to the challenging of norms that may not be best serving the community of learners that educators are encountering daily.

On an even more immediate level, teachers who engage in these exchange processes will be able to examine their own practices and biases to create a more holistically focused and appropriate learning environment for the students that they serve. I am a firm believer that experience is an incredible teacher. By allowing educators the opportunity to experience firsthand innovative international practices, they will be more likely to feel the aptitude to implement some of them into their own daily endeavors. By studying what goes on, yes, they will learn, but it remains theory until participation is coupled with the prior knowledge.

With focus on human well-being, is the consideration of societal happiness. The World Happiness Report has consistently ranked Finland's citizens as happier than those in the United States over the past twelve years (World Happiness Report, 2022). This disparity in happiness levels has sparked discussions about the factors contributing to well-being and quality of life in different countries.

One potential contributor to Finland's higher happiness levels is its education system, which emphasizes holistic development, student well-being, and a supportive learning environment (Sahlberg, 2019). Finnish schools prioritize factors such as student autonomy, teacher collaboration, and a balanced curriculum that includes arts, physical education, and

outdoor activities. These elements align with research indicating that factors such as autonomy, social connections, and a sense of purpose are key contributors to overall happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

An international teacher exchange program between the United States and Finland could play a role in promoting happiness by fostering cross-cultural understanding, professional growth, and innovative teaching practices. Educators participating in such programs would have the opportunity to learn from each other's educational systems, exchange ideas on promoting student well-being, and develop strategies to create more supportive and engaging learning environments.

Research suggests that professional development opportunities for educators can have a positive impact on job satisfaction and overall well-being (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2009). By engaging in international exchanges and gaining exposure to diverse teaching approaches, educators can enhance their skills, gain new perspectives, and feel more fulfilled in their profession.

Further, educators who are satisfied and motivated are likely to create a positive classroom atmosphere, which can contribute to students' well-being and academic success (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). This can generate a ripple effect of happier and more engaged educators which can lead to a happier and more flourishing society.

International teacher exchange programs have the potential to contribute to increased happiness and well-being by enhancing educator satisfaction, promoting cross-cultural understanding, and fostering innovative teaching practices that prioritize student well-being.

## *Content & Pedagogy*

The pedagogical areas that are aimed to be impacted through this system are going to be numerous and diverse. Of course, it will be important to examine the overview of the system that the participants will be placed into. Without taking time to understand the climate of the system, one may approach from a stance of ignorance that could hinder the overall experience and the takeaways from their time spent abroad. The expectation is that participating teachers are going to spend time analyzing the teaching methods, curriculum and assessment, teacher training and professional development, cultural context, professional networking and collaboration, and trends and innovations.

Participating educators should start their exploration by learning about the progression of schools in the country they are visiting. For example, in the United States, some students attend pre-K. After that, students attend Kindergarten, move to first grade, and then progress through twelfth, and from there, many of them go to college, which is four years in many cases.

Arguably, one of the most vital takeaways from this program will be the teaching methods that are successful or not so successful in each residing country. A light study for prior exposure will prove helpful before fully diving into the practice for the visiting educators. In this case, the American teachers would do well by looking into student-centered approaches and emphasizing inquiry-based learning and collaboration before visiting Finland. These are relevant topics in Finnish education and having some experience with them going in could prove helpful. Aside from this, it could be helpful if the prospective teachers study the interactions between Finnish educators and their implementation of different technologies in the classroom.

Past methods, another important topic to consider would be the curriculum sets and assessments relevant to the country they will be visiting. For example, in Finland, there is a



National Core Curriculum for Basic Education. In this core curricular set, they emphasize holistic development and interdisciplinary learning. In addition, there is an emphasis on lifelong learning skills. Furthermore, considering and learning about the principles of assessment is an important piece to all of this. Questions that ought to be answered are, how are students usually graded? What role does formative assessment play in the Finnish model? What is the level of emphasis on standardized testing?

Another essential topic to be included in this process is the level of training that educators receive or are required to have to be teachers in the country that the exchange teachers are visiting. In the United States, some requirements vary from state to state, but on a general level, one must complete a teacher preparation program at a four-year university, go through the proper field experiences and student teaching, and then pass certification testing. In Finland, one stark difference is that all teacher candidates must have a master's degree to get a job in the field. Past preparatory training, it also must be investigated to find out what types of professional development teachers must go through. Questions to be answered would include, what opportunities are available for Finnish teachers in terms of professional development? Is there a requirement or reward system for continuous learning of Finnish educators? What topics do Finnish teachers like to learn about in their professional development?

Another essential endeavor in an exchange program of this nature is an exploration of the cultural and social context of the country that the teachers will be visiting. Prospective exchange teachers ought to dive into the culture, values, and social norms that may influence education. Ideas that could be examples of this are emphasis on equity and equality and overall trust in educators. From a social perspective, it will be important to note the language differences

between the teachers' home country and the other that they will be traveling to. In this case, both places do speak English though not both as the primary language of the countries.

Furthermore, conversations regarding the trends and innovations in the countries that teachers will travel to are important to have. In order to prepare for what might be faced in these international places, teachers will want to study updated current trends in education such as initiatives related to sustainability education, inclusive practices, and digitalization of education and its resources. One way to ensure that this is achieved is to require prospective exchange teachers to read the news of the country that they will be traveling to for a month prior to their actual date of travel.

Finally, actual networking and collaboration with professionals in the lands they will be traveling to will be pivotal to the success of the program. When exchange educators have the chance to meet and speak with professionals overseas prior to their travels, it will help them feel more a part of the culture and less alone when they do make it to their destination.

### ***Organization***

It is likely that in order to effectively manage this international operation, one liaison per district shall be appointed. This could be an educator who serves as an instructional coach, a department leader, a counselor, an administrator, or someone who is hired and receives a yearly supplemental stipend to service this program. This is going to be an important piece to the puzzle because there will need to be a point person so to speak. This will be someone to call with questions, someone to keep in contact with the international counterparts, and someone to organize the meetings and data collected. This person will obviously have had to embark on the experience themselves. It is also likely that this person will make a trip themselves to visit the

exchange teachers in their host country once or twice throughout their time there to conduct evaluations, provide support, make sure things are running smoothly, and/or to collect data.

As the curator of the program, I would venture to say that it is possible that this person would have so much to manage that having this be their contracted position would likely be wise. I challenge you to consider that, in a district with ten or more schools, it is possible that two or more teachers from each school each year may be embarking on this journey. For one contracted educator who has not only this, but a full class load to manage, I believe it to be too much. Therefore, it is my recommendation that one contracted educator be given the program liaison position as their full-time position. This would not only give them time and space they need to support their colleagues, but it would also open up room for them to authentically and critically evaluate collected data and responses to develop professional development for their district as time goes on.

This program would be voluntary for educational staff at any grade-level and required for staff who apply to be departmental heads within the district. The point of making it a requirement for department heads is that they are aiming to obtain leadership positions and so more importantly ought to have diverse perspectives and the ability to share to others that which they have experienced in their time abroad. International perspectives gained through this experience are more easily shared on a smaller scale within departments during PLC times and in-service days.

There would have to be a cap each year for how many teachers can engage in this experience for the fact that it would be a substantial financial investment for the hosting districts. Additionally, committing too many teachers a year could be detrimental to the culture and development of the home districts. The exchange program would come at no cost for teachers

involved. The department heads who would be required to engage in this experience would receive their full salary for the time that they are overseas in this program. Those who volunteer to engage otherwise would be paid two-thirds of their salary during their time in the program. This allows the district to recoup some of the costs involved in sending their teachers abroad for exchange while still compensating the teachers for their time and studies.

The time commitment would require eight semi-weekly meetings leading up to the embarkment on their exploration for introductions of structure, standards, assignments, etc. It will be important to have structures and standards in place for these educators so as not to have them waste their time abroad or focus on things which may prove irrelevant upon their return. In these meetings, their journaling will be introduced and emphasized as a means to more deeply engage with the experience and to provide data and response to the district and the program at large.

In these meetings materials will be presented that are assigned to be studied leading up to the experience. For example, teachers would be assigned a book study on “Finnish Lessons” by Pasi Sahlberg. This is a relevant piece of literature which sheds light on the educational landscape in Finland. This will serve as an opportunity for teachers to see what they ought to expect before being thrown into the proverbial fire. In addition, the group will cover international news for their host country for the month leading up to their trip so that they can be made aware of current events and the landscape of society before they hit the ground.

The time spent abroad would amount to one semester. This is so the teachers have enough time to learn and find their place and then also have an opportunity to excel once they have done so.

### ***Detailed Program (including pre-materials)***

The concept of an international teacher exchange program can be viewed as something of an extended opportunity for equity training. By taking part in the process that sends teachers overseas and replaces them with an international counterpart those teachers as well as their school communities are becoming subjects in an active research and growth process completed through genuine experimentation.

Creating this international teacher exchange program between the United States and Finland involves several key details and steps to ensure its success. While it will absolutely be the case that problems and deeper considerations will arise once it is actually put into practice, the following will pose many of the fine details that can be foreseen from the onset.

### ***Where to Begin***

This program is one that would likely be started at a district level. By beginning at this level, it has enough power to make reasonable change for a large group of professionals but is not so large as to overextend its abilities. Another consideration could be to start it at the state level so as to acquire different types of funding for its upstart, but that remains to be explored. The program would be put in place as an ongoing opportunity for research and development of methods for an initial target of ten years. This length of time would provide enough chance for the program to establish itself within the district and define goals and initiatives of the experiences. Furthermore, it would allow enough time for extended research to be conducted and analyzed to increase the validity and legitimacy of the findings.

### ***Establishing Communication***

One of the first necessary steps for this program to take flight would be to establish partnerships with schools or educational institutions in Finland to facilitate the exchange

program. This would probably come directly on the heels of hiring a liaison for the program. This way, the liaison can explore potential pathways and institutions to collaborate with. Without a cooperating school, the program will not be possible, so before bringing in any other teachers, this must be managed.

### ***Who Manages the Program?***

In year one, liaisons of the program will be hired to oversee and manage the exchange program. The liaisons of the program would embark on their own exchanges to experience deeply that which their subordinates will eventually encounter. It is imperative that they spend at least half of a year in the host country learning about the culture, school system, location, and more. By the end of their time, the liaisons would ideally be able to be a citizen of the country with all that they understand and have experienced. The program liaison's responsibilities include making international connections with schools in Finland, coordinating logistics, fielding applications, conducting training and pre-departure meetings, and collecting and analyzing data for program evaluation and improvement. They may also develop collaborative projects or activities that participating teachers can engage in during their exchange to promote cross-cultural learning and professional development.

The obligation on the liaisons of the program would be a five-year contract and commitment to the role. The thought process behind this would be to minimize turnover and increase the impact of the program as a whole. With the same person in the role of program coordinator for a period of five years or more, they will be able to identify trends and patterns in the findings, struggles, and successes of the program. These liaisons must demonstrate a sense of commitment to the cause and a desire to travel as well as a passion for the betterment of educators.

### ***Teachers Wanted!***

In terms of participants for the program, initially, target department heads or educational leaders for the opening experience to establish connections and lay the groundwork for the program. Later, open the program to other teachers who apply and meet the eligibility criteria, such as experience level, subject expertise, and commitment to the program's goals.

It would be imperative to create an application process for interested teachers, including submission requirements, specific deadlines, and selection criteria. (See Appendix A for an example application with selection criteria) It is expected that this program would grow in popularity and attract the attention of enough teachers that applications would be necessary. A selected committee would review the applications and select participants based on their qualifications, readiness for international collaboration, and alignment with the program's goals. This committee would include the program liaison, administrators, and any other instructional coaches, counselors, or decision makers deemed fit to weigh in.

In terms of experience level sought after, the program would be set up to look for teachers who have obtained tenure, been in their position for at least three years, and have a master's degree. In the early years of the program, it will be wise to minimize the number of participants in order to make sure that the program can properly have its feet set underneath it before it outgrows the level at which it can support itself. So, for example, in year one, aside from the liaisons, the program would likely only send two-four teachers abroad. This will prove more than enough to manage, while also providing enough opportunity for experience and data collection. By year five it is anticipated that the program would be able to support anywhere from fifteen-twenty teacher exchanges due to the experience level of the person in charge and the predictability of the system after a few years.

In terms of compensation, it would work something like the following: Any teachers required to engage in the program such as liaisons, or department heads would receive full contracted educator salary for the duration of their experience. Any teachers who apply into the program out of their own interest and are accepted into the program would receive two-thirds of their contracted salary, plus housing, and a small per diem for meals while abroad.

The program would send the selected teachers to Finland for a whole semester. To be engaged abroad for a number of months offers enough time to get settled into the role, learn about the norms and standards, and then creatively make space for themselves as educators in a foreign land.

### ***Preparing for Launch***

During the semester leading up to their trip, participants would spend time with the program coordinators to generate questions and goals that may help create progress in their home country. The participants will spend time studying aspects of the culture of their host country via book studies, documentaries, reading their local news, and even meeting locals via video chat. Additionally, participants would be provided information on cultural differences, educational practices in Finland, expectations during the exchange, and support resources available to participants. There would even be language training available to be taken advantage of if participants so choose to prepare in this way.

This would be done partially independently and partially in training sessions and meetings held by the program liaison. By doing this, the educators are able to dip their toes in so to speak. As in, they are able to get an idea of what is going on before being flown across the globe and thrown into a foreign experience.



## ***Data Collection***

Prior to the training and travel, liaisons would take opportunities to collect initial information and data that can later be compared with the data collected during and after the experience is completed from the participants. The methods would include surveys, interviews, and even focus groups to gather insights on various aspects of the program's impact. For example, with one of the intended outcomes being an increased level of societal happiness, the liaison can conduct pre-program surveys to assess participants' current levels of job satisfaction, well-being, and overall happiness. (See an example in Appendix B) Systems of data collection and progress monitoring are vital to the success of the exchange program. Without the know-how on what information to collect and report on, much stands to be lost in translation as the experience continues to develop. Sure, enough would be remembered by the educator so that they can share and grow, but intentional analysis is important to make sure that impact is maximized.

When the educators do eventually make their way across the map, they will have tasks to be completed weekly while there. Firstly, they will be teaching. So, they must engage with the teaching and learning journeys they embark on. In addition to the practice of teaching students, the educators will be responsible for taking notes and journaling their experiences. Some of the topics which they may journal about can be found attached in the Appendix. (Appendix C) This will serve as a way to collect data and feedback from participants throughout the exchange program. Each week the educators will also have Zoom meetings with their coordinators and international counterparts to ask questions, share experiences, and keep them updated as to the progress of their classes.

The collected data will be analyzed to evaluate the impact of the program, identify areas for improvement, and gather insights to share with staff in the participating districts for purposes of professional development. The program liaisons and participants will eventually share the findings, best practices, and lessons learned from the exchange program with the staff in their district. Community conversations could be held as a way to bring together people voluntarily and informally prior to formal training. The intended outcomes of this type of professional development would be to foster a culture of growth and reflection as well as collaboration and cross-cultural communication.

I find it important to note that defined outcomes and goals for the program are important, though flexible and subject to change. Without goals, calls of discretion, judgment, or even human error might take over. If given the opportunity, those engaged in the exchange, could generate their own norms and priorities and though some of them may be more impactful than those defined through the program, there may be many others which miss the mark of the system as it is set up.

## **Semester 0: Prep and proposal**

### ***Proposal***

Firstly, this program would have to be presented to and approved by various decision-makers within the system to implement it. On a district-level scale, it would likely have to go through the school board, upper-level administration, and then building-level admin as well. While the goal, of course, would be for the program to become a district-wide offering, for the sake of managing it well, it would have to be started at a building level, which is why building-level administrators would be involved in approval.

Likely this proposal process would be presented by an administrator, a teacher interested in becoming the liaison, a school counselor, or even a passionate community member. Depending on who brings this forward for approval is what determines the next step in this process. After initial approval is obtained, a liaison must be named. If the proposer is interested in being the liaison, then this portion of the process becomes slightly more simplified.

After initial approval is obtained, the opening of information and applications would have to happen for the program's overseer, or the liaison, if you will. This process would be very important in the first run because, really you have one shot to get the selection right in a pilot program such as this. If the wrong professional is selected to become the program liaison, the whole program could be grounded before it takes off. As previously stated, the hiring committee would seek a five-year commitment from the right candidate. If they cannot commit to that length of time, then they are not the right person for the job. The longevity of the program is at stake here, along with all of the potential benefits that it could bring to the district. The first hire IS THE MOST IMPORTANT HIRE. It is recommended that you make this an internal hire.

However, an external hire could also prove worthy if the candidate has extensive travel experience alongside teacher training and other applicable skills and qualifications.

When the hire is made, the liaison will have to transition from their previous role to their new position within the organization. If you made an internal hire, you would likely want to have them onboard the new hire for their previous position before making a complete transition to their role as the ITEP Liaison. This would make the most sense as they are coming in with experience in the role within the district, so you may as well leverage that to make all transitions smooth.

Once transitions are made, the liaison will want to spend some time acclimating to the new role within the district. Meetings with their supervisors will be essential to ensure that everyone is on the same page regarding when, how, where, and with whom all of the travel and training experiences will be conducted.

They will also use many of the onboarding resources and study themselves to become familiar with the country with which they are going to work so closely. Some materials will be provided, and some will be left open to be retrieved by the liaison. The goal is to start developing their own program's objectives for the coming years.

### ***Price Tag***

Jessie J said, "It ain't about the money." In a lot of ways, she is right, but in this part of the process, she is not. Funding would have to be allocated for the program liaison, which would be an entirely new position. That means that an entire extra salary must be slated from the school board. The skill level, responsibility, and experience of this position would have to put the starting salary somewhere north of \$80,000, at least.

In addition to the liaison's cost, travel expenses would need to be managed on the part of the district involved. The proposal ought to include the cost of flights for participants to travel back and forth between the United States and Finland. When writing this, round-trip tickets may seemingly be acquired for just under \$700 not including fees or extra bags. A fair estimate for the cost of travel for an individual would be about \$1,200 at this time. This does not include any lodging or meals. In year one, really only a maximum of two round trips to Finland ought to be necessary. One trip would be to visit prospective cooperating schools and one would be for the actual exchange program if it was ready to be embarked upon at this time.

Additional funding requested would go towards resource gathering. Things like books and language programs may be necessary to adequately prepare for an experience like this. These costs may be menial; however, they are important to include in the request for funding so as to avoid out-of-pocket costs when possible.

Next, funding would have to be pledged for teachers to be paid their yearly salary to go teach overseas. The one benefit here is that an exchange would be organized and so a highly qualified teacher from Finland would be coming back to the United States to stand in for those who make the trip abroad. So, it is not necessary to pay a full salary for a teacher to be away AND for another teacher to be their substitute for the semester. This should come at no EXTRA cost to the district for this reason. It would still be worth talking about in the initial process of gaining approval and acquiring funding. This would be for the participants who are required to participate in the program. These participants would be those applying to be department heads. Depending on how much funding is available/offered, the costs of travel and lodging for this group of individuals would either be on them to manage themselves or on the district to provide

funding. When it comes to the volunteer participants, the district would actually save money because they are only paid two-thirds of their yearly salary.

If you are trying to maximize the funds given, you may also ask for a per diem for food, funds for transportation while in Finland, lodging, visas, and even leisure activities. It is likely that the supporting district would not supply the amount of funding necessary for all of that, but it never hurts to ask for more than you think you will get. You may also create a marketing budget to propose to the district in an effort to create growth and momentum for the program.

## **Semester 1: Establishing Contact**

In the first semester of the first year of the program, the educator in charge of overseeing the system should spend time doing a few specific things. First, is reaching out to Finnish schools to establish connections for exchange. The liaison will have to plan to contact schools overseas, which will extend the process. They will have to communicate to successfully pitch the idea of a teacher exchange to foreign nationals. The initial contact will naturally be uncomfortable and unsuccessful before they find common ground and come to an agreement. In a peaceful place like Finland, this agreement may not be the most difficult experience, though it would involve cold calling and deep research which will take time.

A concern of mine would be how to go about connecting with schools in Finland to initiate this type of program. Social media and the internet are sure to be a huge resource here. As the leader and liaison of the program, creating social media accounts to share the progress could not only prove helpful in marketing, but also as a way to track data and maintain organization.

It would likely be in the best interest of the program liaison to create a survey that could be sent out to schools and even individual teachers in Finland to gauge interest and open up conversation. This is something that the program leader could send out via mail and/or email or even direct message via the social media accounts. You can find an example of a potential survey to be sent out in the appendix (Appendix D.) It might take half a year to even find a cooperating teacher to bring to the United States. This process is not to be rushed as quality is to be emphasized over quantity of participants in this program.

The second focus for this semester would be for the liaison to spend time developing their research questions and possible objectives of the program. This leader will be preparing for

a trip in the not-so-distant future to another country to learn about their successes and challenges in the educational atmosphere. It will be vitally important that they start to develop the questions to be answered and the research to be conducted.

This person might even want to re-familiarize themselves with the scientific method and ways to generate deep and researchable questions or wonderings. Though this program is not specifically designed for science teachers, this process of answering research questions is something that can still be applied. The scientific method is a problem-solving-approach that can be used to explore the questions and wonders that the program may ignite. You can see an example of this process in context in (Appendix E and F.)

They will want to make sure that they tailor these wonders to the audience that they will be impacting as well as the cultural location where they will be studying. It would not make any sense to generate a research question about Spanish speakers in Finland for the program because that is a small subset of the potential data to be explored and this program is aimed at providing all teachers insight into the innovations of a foreign lands education system.

More effective questions would be posed around teaching methodologies, equity and inclusion, and curriculum and assessment just to name a few. Over the course of time, this program is intended to address a multitude of issues in each of these categories, and others. This is the step in the process where the liaison may start to develop a timeline for explorations into these different areas as they look to build on the findings of the participants year after year.



## **Semester 2: Logistic Considerations**

Semester two still should not send anyone overseas, although at this point the program ought to be getting closer to doing so. In this semester the liaison should have connected already with some school officials in Finland and should be narrowing down their options as to where they will travel in the next semester and what they will be teaching.

In order to make sure that they are ready for that, the liaison will want to take this semester to make sure that their visas are in order and that they have obtained all of the right certifications and clearance to spend an extended period of time teaching in Finland. For example, the US Department of State website instructs, “If you plan to stay in the Schengen area longer than three months, contact the embassy of the country where you plan to spend the majority of your time and apply for a visa” (paragraph 8). This will likely be a new experience for most of the participants in the program and so for the liaison, they will want to spend some intentional time learning the laws surrounding the type of travel they will be conducting to mitigate any potential challenges or setbacks when the time comes.

One experience that I had when traveling abroad for a college course always stands out to me in this area. There were about twelve of us, students, and three professors. We were traveling to Costa Rica to conduct a study on their sustainability and culture concentrating on the production of coffee. When our flight landed in Costa Rica and we were going through their customs to get into the country, one of my classmates was stopped and sent back to the United States. As you can imagine, he had to pay for his own return flight. This happened because his passport was valid for less than six months after our date of entry into the country. I had never experienced or considered anything like this before, and so from that point forward, I was very

careful to make sure that I checked on any international travel laws that may be unique to the situation I would be in.

The financial side of this would have to be considered at this point as well. The cost of these ought to be covered by the district or grantor of the funds. However, that will be dependent on the amount of initial funding received from the program. The goal would be that for at least the liaison, there are little-to-no out of pocket expenses.

On top of visas and certifications, the leader of this program is going to need to secure housing for their trip. This is their responsibility whether the district provides funds for them to use or not. They must logistically find a place to stay for the duration of their trip and provide proof that they do have somewhere to stay. It remains to be negotiated between the liaison and the cooperating schools abroad whether they would have a volunteer to host them on their stay. More likely, a temporary housing arrangement would have to be made. Whether the district buys a property in Finland, or the visiting educators just rent, or even stay an extended time in a hotel, is something that would vary from one program to another and would be figured out at this point in the process by the program organizer.

This would also be the time to host a lot of meetings with building-level administrators during the semester. They will need to be informed of what is going on. Questions to be covered would include, when will visiting teachers be coming to our school? By whom and how would they be vetted to ensure the standard that is expected? What are the intended goals for the program? What responsibilities will the administration have in maintaining and supporting the program? What can they expect of the program liaison in the foreseeable future? Some admins will want to play a more active role in seeing the program through its life cycle, while others will want to be more hands-off due to the intense workload they already upkeep. For the sake of

transparency keeping that line of communication open is important regardless. This program would be operating within the structure of a functional school and so conversations need to be had on different occasions to make sure that we are considering their concerns and vice versa.

### **Semester 3: Liaison Travel**

Finally, this is the semester where the first international trip will take place. The liaison will have set all of their proverbial ducks in a row and will be preparing to travel at the beginning of the semester. What can be expected is that they will have an adjustment period where they will arrive and shadow around the school they will be working with for a week or so at least. They will have the opportunity to meet with the international administration and teachers in the school as well as the kids. This semester should almost be treated as something of a student teaching experience for the American Liaison. With this being the first semester of the program crossing national boundaries, there will be no Finnish nationals crossing over to the American schools yet. The American Liaison will meet with the Finnish Liaison and get to spend time learning about the system and engaging with it with the aid of their counterpart.

Eventually, when enough observation has been done and the American Liaison feels comfortable, they will start to engage with a classroom in support of the normal classroom teacher. They will progressively take on a little more responsibility until they are teaching the classes themselves. They will be overseen by the Finnish program leader who will not micromanage but will guide the American Liaison to think like a Finn.

All the while that this educational practice is taking place, the liaisons will be taking notes and journaling their experiences for the purposes of data collection. The American liaison should, at this point, have research questions in place and so should have specific things to journal about. The prompts should be set in place from before the trip to ensure that the intended information is extracted from the experience. There ought to be enough room left for creativity so as not to create a situation where the participants are led to conclude something that is not really there or to solidify a confirmation bias in the research.

Seeing as though it is the first semester, it would be fair to say that the program leader would likely come up with new ideas for research and exploration while in the midst of everything. Room should be left at this point for their wonders and concerns. It is assumed that at this stage they would also evaluate the research questions that they have already created to see if they remain relevant or if they need to be reconsidered.

This semester will likely be one of the busiest so far and for the entirety of the program. This is because the liaison is actually in the classroom in addition to being in a foreign country where they are responsible for the entire well-being of the launch of the ITEP. Grace should be given by their Finnish school and by their home district so that they may operate as the professionals that they are trusted to be.

While they are going through their experience, they ought to be compiling resources that they can bring back with them to the States for training and onboarding purposes. They will also likely collect things to be used for research purposes of their own. This is important because in just a couple semesters they will be responsible for preparing participants to make the same journey and giving them all of the tools and information that they need to thrive in a foreign land. As a mini side note: The liaison might want to get a couple little souvenirs to bring back to their office to make it more of an authentic space. If they bring a few little trinkets, they can become conversation pieces that could encourage others to see the value in what they are doing. Also, bringing something for your principal at home might go a long way towards keeping them in your corner.

## **Semester 4: Finnish Visit**

Once the American Liaison returns home, the real fun begins. The weeks that follow will be an opportunity for them to debrief with their friends and family on everything that they went through in Finland. This will be the time to solidify what they have learned and emphasize the points that they want to take away from their time abroad. They ought to formalize their feedback from the experience and turn it into quantitative and qualitative data that can be categorized and compared with participants yet to come.

This is also the time to ask themselves about everything that went wrong and everything that generally needs to be improved upon. They also will want to solidify all of the points that did go well. They ought to make sure that all of the successes of the program are documented and ready to be replicated in semesters to follow.

During/after an extended analysis of the experience, the liaison will want to prepare to host the Finnish liaison in this semester. Their counterparts will be coming over to basically replicate the experience that they just had in Finland. So, the American liaison will have to prepare to be a guide, an educator, a historian, a friend, and an ally, among other things. It will be important that they are attentive and kind, as I am sure they would have hoped their guide would have been during their time in Finland.

While the visiting educator is in the United States the American Liaison should be preparing to field applicants in the coming months to be overseen in their program. This is the perfect time to make sure that they have an application created and ready to be filled out with all of the information they will need to conduct their search. It may be wise to send the application through to administrators and other trusted advisors so that they can check for any potential holes in the process in the beginning portion of the semester.

Once the application is secured and approved through the appropriate channels, it should be released to the teachers in the school/district for initial applications. The liaison will first want to release this for department heads to fill out as they are the first target for the program. A deadline should be defined for the sanity of the liaison. For that matter the liaison should define an entire timeline for their selection process so that they can keep themselves accountable and make sure that the program is progressing in the way that it needs to in order to meet its goals.

After the applications are returned and the deadline for this has passed, it is time to screen the applicants and decide on first participants for the semester to come. This is something the liaison may want to request help for to ensure a fair and unbiased selection process. They may ask an administrator, instructional coach, upper-level administrator, or any other trusted advisor. Whoever it may be, help is recommended.

After these pieces are managed, it becomes time for the American liaison to generate the meetings and training sessions for the participants to attend prior to their trips overseas. It is recommended that they have at least six meetings leading up to the trip. Once every two weeks, at minimum. If I were personally managing the system I would probably have about ten meetings.

In the meetings, the group would go over resources compiled by the program leader, answer questions and concerns of participants, and practice some nuanced language from Finland so the participants can be prepared moving into their experience. A recommendation for the participants to cover in their meeting is a light book study on Pasi Sahlberg's "Finnish Lessons." This book is vitally important in the pursuit of understanding the educational landscape of Finland. It is also recommended that Dan Rather's report on Finland is viewed by the group. As previously mentioned, current events and news stories over the course of a couple

months are good to study to gain a better understanding of what is happening currently in the country they will be visiting.



## **Semester 5: The First True Exchange**

Semester 5 sees the first true teacher exchange. With all of the build-up to this point, it is sure to feel like an overdue event. All of the teacher applications will have been collected, organized, and analyzed. Participants will have been selected, trained, and briefed on assignments. Travel arrangements will have been made. Excitement and nerves ought to be mounting as the day of travel draws nearer.

This first semester ought to see mainly department heads taking the trip. The thought process behind this first set of selection being so is that the department heads will bring the tales of their travels back to their home schools and cooperating teachers within the department. It also stands as a program for leaders in the community and the department heads ought to be exactly that.

Logistics will have already been set in place. They will have their boarding passes, visas, housing, and teaching assignments. Any last-minute questions will be answered as the teachers find their ways to the gates of travel. Once they make this trip, the future of education in their communities will be changed forever.

The educators participating in the exchange program will begin their experiences by meeting with their host school officials including the officials to become familiar with the community and their overall environment. The meeting actually should be more of a shadow day. It ought to be a day where the teachers get a physical tour of their school grounds as well as the classroom that they will be teaching from. They will also have time to be introduced to the learning management systems and resources needed to conduct their actual teaching processes. It will also be important that they are presented with the supports in place to help them during their experience.

Throughout the course of the trip, the coordinating teacher will obviously be teaching in their exchange classroom. They will also have scheduled times to meet with their home liaison to manage questions and concerns that arise throughout the months of their visit. It will also be imperative that the teachers maintain their journaling and notetaking processes to ensure maximum benefit to the cooperating districts upon their return.

Speaking of their return, at the end of the semester, the teachers will return to their home schools and have exit interviews with their program liaisons. They will go through a process of debriefing to help their leaders unpack the experience and learn from their time abroad. They will go through their short-term and long-term takeaways. Time will be spent with the liaison mapping out some potential actionable steps that can be taken to improve upon the participants practices.

The big thing to remember here is that the experience does not end when the teachers return. All that they have gone through, all that they have learned, much of it will stick with the educators for the duration of their career and beyond. The hope is that they share the lessons with their counterparts, families, and friends.

### ***Implementation (frame factors)***

The implementation of this program would have to come in waves. This would not be able to happen in a day or in a week. We are not talking about a unit to employ in a business course, or a book study to be done in an English class. This is an international, multi-discipline, extended, professional development program. Not only would this program have to be approved at various levels and have a point person selected to take ownership over it, but it would have to secure funding to run.

Once approvals, leadership, and funding are secured, the next consideration is the structure. The leader of the program would need to have an office of sorts for themselves, but they would also need to have a place to host meetings, interviews, training, and to conduct their research. This could likely be a converted classroom, or a hole-in-the-wall closet with an extra desk, but they would need to be given a space to work.

Once this is taken care of, the establishing of connections, compilation of resources, and outlining of training can begin. It would be something of a concern of mine how one would go about connecting with schools in Finland to initiate this type of program. Social media and the internet are a huge resource here. It would likely be in their best interest to create a survey that could be sent out to schools and even individual teachers in Finland to gauge interest and open up conversation. It might take half a year to even find a cooperating teacher to bring to the United States.

In the meantime, training could be being organized. The leader of the program ought to be selecting print materials, multimedia components, and developing workshops to prepare their participants for a semester abroad. They ought to start to get these in order for when they acquire

their first cooperating international school so that they can be prepared for onboarding when the time comes.

In order to make this more easily understandable and replicable, I will pose an example progression in the following section. This example progression is compiled with the idea in mind that approvals have been given and funding has been organized for the endeavors of the program.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Assessment and Evaluation**

#### ***Approach to Assessment and Evaluation***

Evaluation will be crucial for the implementation of this program. The program itself will require a reasonable financial investment and in order to evaluate the validity, assessment practices must be set in and reviewed year after year. The primary goal of the assessments will be to gauge the improvement of individual educators involved in the exchange and their impact on students. The secondary goal and long-term intention of the program will be to collect data and responses to draw evidence-based conclusions that can be used to develop professional development opportunities throughout a district.

#### ***Evaluating Students***

One way that this is intended to be evaluated is through comparative surveys of students who have had teachers who have been participants of the program as well as students of teachers who have not. This can be done easily without revealing the intention to the students by giving the surveys to all students in a specific subject.

So, say for example, the head of the English department goes on the exchange and there are two other English teachers in the school who did not. Upon their return, and with time given for the impact to be felt by the students, the students in all English classes could be surveyed to get a consistent and reliable set of responses.

It is expected that there will be some natural variance in this type of testing based upon the baseline skills and abilities of the educators and the interest and effort of the student, but over time, the hope is that the difference becomes evident.

The type of information to be collected on these surveys will be reflective of the goals of the program. For example, teachers who engage in the ITEP will likely learn equitable practices while they are in Finland. For this reason, on the student survey, there will be questions to gauge the prevalence of equitable practices in the classroom.

These surveys will be quantitative and numbers-based for ease of calculation and analysis of information. Doing it this way will also cut down on the level of subjectivity to written responses. You will not be able to cut out all subjectivity due to the opinion-based nature and obvious human error that will show through. The expectation is that it is as consistent and valid as possible and that trends over time will even out the rest.

### ***Evaluating Teachers***

Teachers engaging in the International Teacher Exchange Program will be subject to surveys and evaluations throughout their time in the program and beyond. It will be important to capitalize on their experience because this is where the primary data and responses will be most relevant.

Similarly to how surveys will be used with students in the schools, they will be used with participating teachers. Surveys will be set in place prior to any training or meetings that the participants engage in. These will serve as baseline representations of values, beliefs, abilities, and tendencies with the expectation that progress will be seen in future surveys. During and/or after the training sessions and meetings that will be held for the participants, they will be surveyed again to track the level of development through only these measures. It is expected that there will be some level of growth, although the bulk of what is anticipated will be coming after their trip to their international schools. After the trips that teachers take, they will receive another

survey, the same as the first, to track how their responses change. Further than just responses, the information being looked at will be value, belief, perceived ability, and tendency based.

The surveys will not end upon the immediate return of the educators involved, as it is expected that their conduct will be impacted on a long-term basis. For the next few years, given that the program is still in good standing with the district, the liaison will request the past participants to continue to evaluate themselves to see how their progress holds up.

These surveys will be both quantitative and qualitative. The qualitative nature of these responses will be important for purposes of feedback collection and improvement of the program over time.

In addition to the pre- and post-surveys for the participants, the liaison will conduct in-person interviews. If the initial screening interviews for participants are organized well enough, these can be recorded and used for data collection purposes. As in, they can stand in as the pre-experience interview. Once the participants have traveled and returned, they will participate in a post-experience interview conducted by the liaison. This oral interview will be used to learn more about the perceived growth of the individual as well as the potential areas of improvement for the system of education and the system of teacher exchange independently.

This post-interview will be something of an exit interview that is intended to last more than a few minutes. Things that will be discussed include the successes and challenges of the individual and the overall experience.

### ***Evaluating the Program***

All the while, the liaison will be in charge of communicating with the stakeholders of the program. They will also be in charge of assessing and analyzing results from those involved and the system itself. A lot of this will be through the management of collected data. It is

recommended that the liaison sets up a digital and/or physical filing system to manage all of the data that will be collected for years to come. This will be necessary to remain in control of things without becoming overwhelmed or falling behind schedule.

If this suggestion were to be further explained, I would recommend that a set of Google folders be organized and shared with the major stakeholders in the program. These would include any relevant building or district-level administrative personnel, international counterparts, administrative assistants or partners, and of course the liaisons themselves.

Within the folders, there will be sets of resources that can be used for evaluations. These would include the surveys and sets of interview questions, just for starters. These types of resources ought to have their own folder within the larger folder. Many of the types of resources one would expect to find in this folder are the same that are shown in the appendix.

Also, there ought to be a folder with data collection sheets. This is where the numbers and yearly analysis will be organized. On these sheets, there should be charts and graphs that represent the quantitative data collected for quick viewing. This will need to be updated from semester to semester with time taken in the middle to conclude the research when at recurring intervals (every month, semester, year, etc.)

These summative assessments will help the program organizer to conclude their research. By providing numerical data and evidence to answer the questions they laid out at the beginning of the program, these sheets of collected data will make way for norms and patterns to be identified over time.

The liaison will want to keep a log of all participants and their responses individually and collectively for future reference. It may be wise to redact any personal information before



moving these logs to long-term storage. This will ensure anonymity and minimization of potential biases based on personal relationships.

While much of the assessment done with the participating educators and their experiences will be aimed to be summative in nature, most of the evaluations completed on the program itself will be formative. This can be represented by the surveys and interviews which aim to open dialogue and start conversation rather than evaluate specific data points. The chief aim for these formative assessments will be to improve the program for each semester by identifying areas where improvement is needed to maintain a strong output.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

What good would this program be if it did not have ambitions for the future? One of the first ambitions is for the program to grow. After the groundwork is laid and there are established relationships across borders, it ought to be a priority of the organizer to expand the reach of the ITEP. From sending more educators abroad to venturing to different cooperating institutions, to even fostering relationships in different countries, this program has great potential to spread its wings once it learns to fly.

The first few semesters really should only see two to three educators at a time traveling abroad. After this is managed and the liaison understands more deeply their roles and responsibilities, as well as the overall demands of the job, the number of participants should increase. This could mean more participants at the same school, or even from other schools in the district. This program was designed with high school teachers in mind, but it would likely work just as well if not better with primary-level educators making the trips abroad.

Not only should the number of people expand, but the geographical borders as well. This is set to start in one international institution with only a couple of cooperating educators from

that school. As time goes on, there should be more schools connected with and impacted within the host country. More than that, there should be more countries in which teachers are sent to. Finland is an incredible place to learn about effective educational practices, but what about other places like Estonia, Singapore, or even neighbors to the North, Canada?

In addition to growing the program outwards, it might not hurt to explore an extended exchange. That is to say, maybe a longer duration of the trip could be explored for potential effectiveness. Would educators experience more success and growth if they were overseas say, for the whole year? Would they only need one month of teaching abroad? The duration of the program itself ought to be studied to make sure that resources and more importantly, time is being used effectively.

Aside from growing the program, something should be done with the data collected. It is one thing to collect figures and analyze them for informational purposes. It is an entirely different thing to put those numbers to work by aiming to teach and impact a larger community. Based on the conclusions drawn, the successes and challenges observed, the liaison should organize opportunities for professional development among the teachers in their districts. The organization is only as strong as its ability to impact the larger community. When the coordinator gets themselves set and some experience under their belt, it ought to be one of their responsibilities to share the knowledge and teach the teachers how to implement it into their classrooms. More than that, they ought to teach them how to deconstruct much of the antiquated or ineffective practices that currently occupy their toolkit.

Eventually, a presentation will be necessary to be made to the school board. Seeing as though they are the ones who will need to approve the program in the first place, it is important that they are updated on the progress their approval leads to. This could be something of an

opportunity for participating educators to organize themselves and their lessons to share. It could also be an opportunity for the liaison to present materials with the learning occurring and the strides made towards creating a more innovative and equitable learning experience for the students that the board oversees.

This type of presentation can be multifaceted in terms of its intended benefit. First, the sharing could lead to further support of upper administration and the board. This support could be by position, by votes of confidence, or even by further funding allocations in years to come. If the board recognizes that their initial resources were being used wisely and that there is room for growth, there might be additional funding available that can be requested in conjunction with the presentation of materials.

Aside from the potential for more funding and continued support, there might be opportunity for larger systemic changes to be made. For example, the board might recognize the more effectively organized Finnish school schedule and at some point, vow to try it out in the local district that they serve. There could also be an alteration in the class requirements, styles of learning, purchasing of resources, or so many other things, strictly because they had the chance to see what their allowance has done to positively impact their community.

Finally, and importantly, this program could potentially extend to offer American students the opportunity to learn abroad for a semester or a year at a time. There is a lot of value to traveling abroad at a young age. In many cases, these opportunities are hard to come by. In my personal experience I have come across a number of exchange students to the United States from foreign countries, but not many times have I seen American students with the opportunity to venture abroad for their own extended learning adventure.

Ultimately, this innovative program is only one of the infinite ways that education can be organized for transformation. If we are to see positive growth for the future generations, we must take up arms, we must unite in the struggle! It is time to be the change we wish to see in the world. None of us are exempt from this responsibility because none of us are exempt from its consequences. I will stand as your ally in the fight against oppression and miseducation. I only ask that you stand beside me the same. I leave you with this, unless you are aiming to liberate your mind and challenge all that which you have been presented as truth, are you truly living?

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## APPENDIX

# Appendix A - Application for Participation in the Program

## International Teacher Exchange Program Application Form

### Selection Criteria:

Our international teacher exchange program seeks to select educators who demonstrate:

- Strong commitment to student-centered learning and innovative teaching practices.
- Experience in cross-cultural collaboration and appreciation for diversity.
- Leadership qualities, including collaboration, communication, and mentorship skills.
- Evidence of ongoing professional development and a growth mindset.
- Alignment with the program's goals of promoting well-being, happiness, and positive impact on student learning and communities.
- Ability to contribute positively to the exchange experience and engage in meaningful cross-cultural dialogue and learning.
- Recommendations from professional references highlighting the candidate's teaching excellence, professionalism, and suitability for the program.

### Personal Information:

Full Name:

Contact Information -

Email Address:

Phone Number :

School Name:

Current Position and Years of Teaching Experience:

Educational Background (Degree, Major, Institution):

### Professional Experience:

- 1 ) Describe your teaching experience, including grade levels taught, subjects, and any specialized roles or responsibilities (e.g., department head, curriculum development, leadership positions).
- 2 ) Have you participated in any previous international professional development programs or exchanges? If yes, please provide details of your experiences.

### Motivation and Goals:

- 3 ) Why are you interested in participating in the international teacher exchange program?
- 4 ) What specific goals or outcomes do you hope to achieve through this experience?
- 5 ) How do you envision applying your learning from the exchange program to benefit your students, school, and yourself as a professional?

### Cross-Cultural Understanding:

- 6 ) Describe your experiences working in culturally diverse settings.
- 7 ) How do you believe cultural diversity contributes to the learning environment and student outcomes?

### Teaching Philosophy and Methodologies:

- 8 ) Briefly outline your teaching philosophy.
- 9 ) How do you incorporate the following in your classroom:
  - Innovative Teaching Methods
  - Technology:
  - Student Engagement Strategies:

### Professional Development and Growth:

- 10 ) What professional development opportunities have you pursued in the past to enhance your teaching skills and knowledge?

11 ) How do you prioritize professional growth and continuous learning in your teaching practice?

Collaboration and Leadership:

12 ) Describe your experience collaborating with colleagues, leading professional learning communities, or mentoring other educators.

13 ) How do you envision collaborating with educators from the host country during the exchange program?

Well-Being and Happiness:

14 ) Reflect on your overall well-being and job satisfaction. What factors contribute to your sense of fulfillment as an educator?

15 ) How do you believe participating in an international exchange program can impact educator well-being and happiness?

Additional Information:

16 ) Please provide any additional information, skills, or qualifications that you believe would be relevant to your application.

References:

17 ) Provide contact information for two professional references who can speak to your teaching experience, professional character, and suitability for the exchange program.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship to contact: \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you known this person? \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship to contact: \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you known this person? \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**Declaration:**

I certify that the information provided in this application is true and accurate to the best of my knowledge. I understand that participation in the international teacher exchange program is contingent upon meeting eligibility criteria and selection by the program committee.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B - International Teacher Exchange Program Happiness Survey

### Before the Program:

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with your current job as an educator?
2. How often do you experience positive emotions, such as joy, excitement, or contentment, in your daily work? (1- not at all, 3- some of the time, 5-all the time)
3. To what extent do you feel a sense of purpose and fulfillment in your role as an educator? (1 (not-at-all) - 10 (every day, all the time) )
4. How would you rate your overall well-being and happiness in your life outside of work? ( 1 (non-existent) - 10 (perfect) )

### During the Program:

1. Has your experience in the exchange program influenced your overall level of job satisfaction and happiness?
2. What aspects of the exchange program have contributed positively and/or negatively to your well-being and sense of fulfillment?
3. Have you noticed any changes in your daily experiences of positive emotions since participating in the exchange program?
4. How would you describe your level of engagement and enthusiasm for teaching during the exchange program compared to before?

### After the Program:

1. Reflecting on your overall experience in the exchange program, how satisfied are you with the outcomes and learning opportunities? (1- highly dissatisfied, 3- somewhat dissatisfied, 5-neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 7-slightly satisfied, 10- highly satisfied)
2. To what extent do you believe the exchange program has positively impacted your well-being and happiness as an educator? (1-significantly negatively impacted 3-slightly

negatively impacted, 5-no impact, 7-slightly positively impacted, 10-significantly positively impacted)

3. Have you developed new skills or perspectives during the program that have enhanced your job satisfaction and sense of purpose? If so, please share.
4. How likely are you to recommend participation in similar international exchange programs to other educators based on your experience? (1- not at all, 3-somewhat likely, 5-highly likely)

### Additional Questions:

1. What specific aspects of the program or activities have contributed most to your happiness and well-being?
2. In what ways do you plan to integrate lessons learned from the exchange program to promote a positive classroom environment and student well-being?
3. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience and its impact on your happiness as an educator?

# Appendix C - Journaling Prompts for Participants

## Reflective Practice:

- How has your experience in the international teacher exchange program impacted your teaching philosophy and approach?
- What new insights or perspectives have you gained from interacting with educators from a different cultural background?
- How can you apply lessons learned from the exchange program to enhance student engagement and learning in your classroom?

## Cross-Cultural Learning:

- What cultural differences or similarities have you observed between the education systems in your home country and your host country?
- How has exposure to diverse teaching practices influenced your understanding of effective pedagogy and student-centered learning?
- In what ways can you adapt or integrate elements from the host country's education system into your own teaching practices?

## Professional Growth and Development:

- Describe a specific challenge or opportunity you encountered or are encountering during the exchange program and how you addressed or are addressing it.
- How has participating in the exchange program contributed to your professional growth, skills development, and career aspirations?
- What strategies or resources have you found most valuable in enhancing your teaching effectiveness and student outcomes?

## Impact on Well-Being and Happiness:

- Reflect on your overall well-being and job satisfaction in the host country. Have there been any noticeable changes?
- How do you perceive the connection between the exchange program and educator well-being?



- In what ways can educators foster a positive classroom atmosphere and promote student well-being based on your experiences in the exchange program?

## Future Plans and Collaborations:

- Are there opportunities for continued collaboration or partnerships with educators from the host country or other participants in the exchange program?
- What recommendations or advice would you offer to educators considering participation in similar international exchange programs in the future?
- What pieces of information are vital to the success of someone considering entering this program?
- What is one must-change and one must-keep for the next time this exchange program is run.

# Appendix D - ITEP Interest Gauging Survey

## International Teacher Exchange Program Interest Survey

Dear [School Principal or Teacher],

I am excited to introduce you to the International Teacher Exchange Program (ITEP), an initiative aimed at fostering cross-cultural collaboration, professional development, and global education partnerships between educators in the United States and Finland. As the leader of the program in the United States, I am reaching out to gauge your interest in participating and collaborating with us.

Attached you will find various resources to help you better understand the scope and sequence of the program.

Please take a few moments to complete this survey to help us understand your interest and potential involvement in the ITEP. Your feedback is valuable and will guide us in shaping the program to meet the needs and interests of educators like you.

### 1. School Information:

- School Name:
- Location (City, Country):
- School Type (Public, Private, International):
- Number of Teachers:
- Grade Levels (Check all that apply):
  - Primary/Elementary (Grades 1-6)
  - Lower Secondary (Grades 7-9)
  - Upper Secondary (Grades 10-12)
  - Vocational Education
  - Other (Please specify):

## 2. Interest in the International Teacher Exchange Program (ITEP):

- Are you interested in participating in the ITEP as a school?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Maybe
- If yes, what aspects of the ITEP are most appealing to you and your school?  
(Select all that apply):
  - Collaborative projects with educators from the United States
  - Professional development opportunities for Finnish teachers
  - Cultural exchange and learning experiences
  - Building international partnerships and networks
  - Other (Please specify):

## 3. Educator Participation:

- Are any teachers in your school interested in participating in the ITEP as individual educators?
  - Yes
  - No
- If yes, please provide the following details for interested educators:
  - Name(s) of interested educator(s):
  - Teaching Subject(s) and Grade Level(s):
  - Email Address(es):
  - Brief statement of interest in the ITEP:

## 4. Collaboration Preferences:

- What types of collaboration or activities would your school and educators be interested in during the ITEP? (Check all that apply):
  - Classroom observations and co-teaching experiences
  - Joint curriculum development projects
  - Professional learning communities and workshops

- Cultural exchange events and activities
- Other (Please specify):

5. Availability and Timeline:

- When would your school and educators be available to participate in the ITEP?  
(Select all that apply):
  - Academic Year 20XX-20XX (\_\_\_\_\_)
  - Semester 1 (Month/Year) (\_\_\_\_\_)
  - Semester 2 (Month/Year) (\_\_\_\_\_)
  - Summer Term (Month/Year) (\_\_\_\_\_)
  - Other (Please specify):

6. Additional Comments or Questions:

- Please use this space to share any additional comments, questions, or specific preferences related to the ITEP that you would like us to consider:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your interest and input are instrumental in shaping the success of the International Teacher Exchange Program. I look forward to the possibility of collaborating with you and your school to create meaningful cross-cultural experiences for educators and students alike.

Best regards,

[Your Name]

[Program Leader, International Teacher Exchange Program]

[Contact Information]

# Appendix E - Research Questions and the Scientific Method

## Potential Research Questions

- 1) How does participation in an international teacher exchange program impact educators' pedagogical approaches, as measured by pre- and post-program surveys and classroom observation data?
- 2) What are the effects of cross-cultural collaboration on educators' perceptions of diversity, inclusion, and cultural competence, as assessed through qualitative interviews and surveys before and after the exchange program?
- 3) How does engagement in collaborative projects with educators from different cultural backgrounds influence student learning outcomes and academic achievement, using quantitative measures such as student performance data and test scores?
- 4) What are the challenges and opportunities faced by educators during cross-border professional development experiences, and how do they navigate these challenges, as explored through qualitative analysis of participant reflections and narratives?
- 5) What strategies do educators employ to integrate global perspectives, cultural awareness, and international best practices into their teaching after participating in the exchange program, as assessed through lesson plan analysis and classroom observations?
- 6) How does the exchange program contribute to the development of a collaborative professional learning community among participating educators, measured through network analysis, social network surveys, and collaboration metrics?
- 7) What are the long-term impacts of the exchange program on educator job satisfaction, well-being, and retention within their respective schools or institutions, using longitudinal surveys and follow-up interviews over multiple years?
- 8) How do educators' experiences in the exchange program influence their attitudes towards innovation, risk-taking, and continuous professional growth, measured through quantitative surveys and qualitative analysis of personal narratives?
- 9) What are the perceptions of students, parents, and school administrators regarding the benefits and outcomes of educators' participation in the international exchange program, assessed through surveys, focus groups, and stakeholder interviews?
- 10) How can the lessons learned and best practices identified during the exchange program be disseminated and implemented to enhance education on a broader scale, using action research methodologies and implementation studies?

## Appendix F - The Scientific Method in Action, in Context

### Research Question:

How does participation in an international teacher exchange program impact educators' pedagogical approaches, as measured by pre- and post-program surveys and classroom observation data?

### Scientific Method Outline:

#### Formulate a Hypothesis:

Educators who participate in an international teacher exchange program will demonstrate significant increases in their teaching methodologies and pedagogical approaches with regard to student-centered practices compared to their pre-program conducts.

#### Design the Study:

- Design a longitudinal study that includes pre-program assessments and post-program evaluations of educators' teaching methodologies and pedagogical approaches.
- Develop surveys to collect self-reported data from educators regarding their teaching practices, beliefs, and strategies.
- Implement classroom observation protocols to gather objective data on educators' instructional methods, classroom management techniques, and student engagement levels.

#### Select Participants:

- Determine the sample of educators who will participate in the international teacher exchange program.
- Ensure diversity in participant backgrounds, teaching levels, and subject areas to capture a comprehensive view of the impact.

#### Collect Pre-Program Data:

- Administer pre-program surveys to participants to assess their current teaching methodologies, pedagogical approaches, beliefs about education, and perceived strengths and areas for improvement.

- Conduct baseline classroom observations to document educators' instructional practices, classroom environment, student interactions, and assessment methods.

#### Implement the Exchange Program:

- Facilitate the international teacher exchange program, allowing participants to engage in observations and teaching experiences in different cultural contexts, and attend professional development workshops.

#### Collect Post-Program Data:

- Administer post-program surveys to participants upon their return to assess changes in their teaching methodologies, pedagogical approaches, attitudes towards diversity and inclusion, and reflections on the exchange experience.
- Conduct follow-up classroom observations to compare post-program instructional practices with pre-program practices, focusing on changes in teaching strategies, student engagement, and assessment methods.

#### Analyze Data:

- Use statistical analysis techniques to compare pre- and post-program survey data, looking for significant differences in educators' self-reported changes.
- Analyze classroom observation data using qualitative coding methods to identify themes, patterns, and shifts in teaching practices before and after the exchange program.


#### Draw Conclusions:

- Evaluate the findings to determine whether participation in the international teacher exchange program led to noticeable impacts on educators' teaching methodologies and pedagogical approaches with regards to student-centered approaches.
- Consider factors such as cultural influences, collaboration experiences, professional development opportunities, and personal reflections in interpreting the results.

#### Communicate Results:

- Present the study findings through research reports, presentations, and publications to share insights with the educational community.
- Discuss implications for educator professional development, cross-cultural collaboration, and the design of future international exchange programs.

## Appendix G - Marketing Materials for the Program

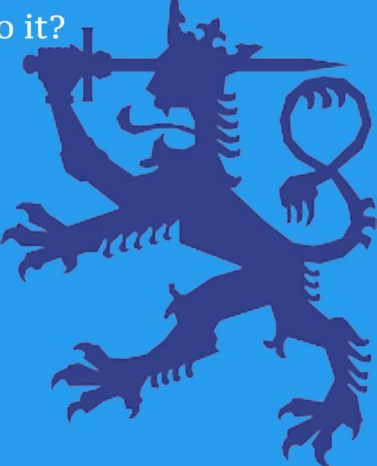



# Hey Teachers!

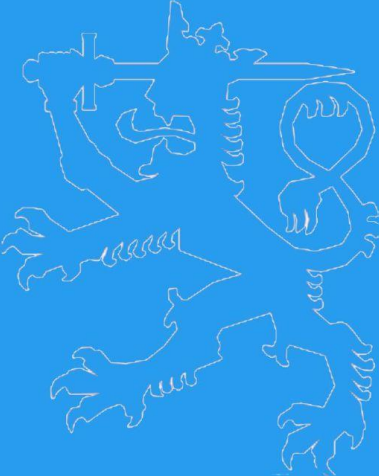
...Do you have your passport?

...Interested in teaching abroad?

...Wanna get paid to do it?




See Mr. Marano for information on how to apply for the Teacher Exchange Program to Finland this coming FALL!



**Requirements:**

- Must be a tenured teacher
- Must be willing to travel abroad for a full semester
- Must be willing to participate in a research study
- Must be willing to take language courses prior to trip



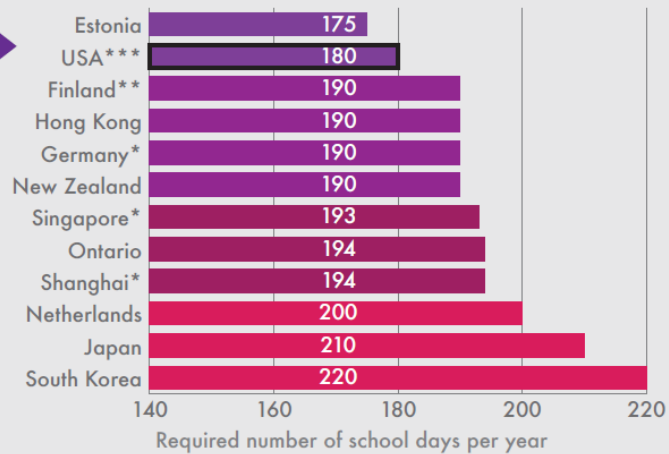


# Appendix H - Figures from National Center on Education and Economy

## How Much Time Do Students Spend in School in Top-Performing School Systems and the U.S.?

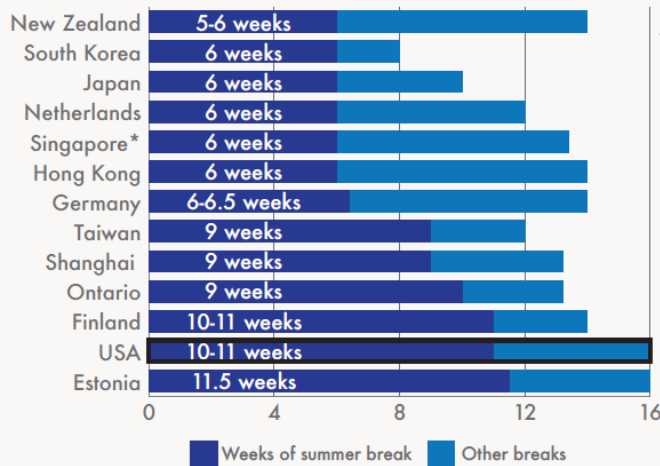
### How Many Days Per Year Are Students in School?

The best education systems in the world require students to be in school between 175 and 220 days, or 35 to 45 weeks. This variation suggests that total number of school days per year is not a determining factor in student performance.



\* These are the actual number of school days scheduled for 2017-18, rather than a national requirement.  
 \*\* Finland sets a maximum of 190 school days per year, most schools are in session for fewer days than this.  
 \*\*\* Requirements vary by state in the U.S., but most states require 180 days.

### How Many Weeks Off?



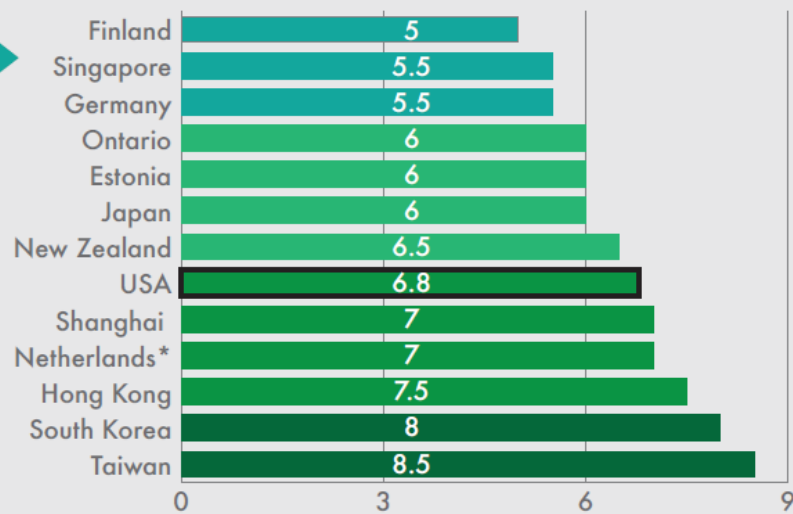
Summer breaks also vary widely across top-performing education systems. Almost half allow between 9 and 11 weeks for summer vacation, while just more than half allow only about 6 weeks for summer break.

Many systems with shorter summer vacations also allow students several smaller breaks throughout the school year, so that total time off is similar to those countries with longer summer breaks.

\* Singapore's longest break is winter break at 6 weeks.

## How Long Is the Average School Day?

Even the average length of the school day in top performing systems differs greatly by country. Students in Finland, for example, have only about 5 hours per day in school and little homework outside of school. But students in many Asian nations are in school for longer days, and many then attend private "cram schools" for hours per day outside of regular school time.



Hours in the Average Lower Secondary School Day

\* Local schools in the Netherlands determine the length of their school day, so this varies widely.

There is no consistent pattern for number of days of school per year, length of school breaks, or even length of an average school day among top-performing education systems.

This suggests that when it comes to student performance, **more important than the amount of time students spend in class is how that time is spent.**

Read more about how schools are organized in these top-performing education systems on CIEB's website.

[www.ncee.org/cieb](http://www.ncee.org/cieb)