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Finland vs. the United States: Similarities and Differences in Kindergarten

Rebecca L. Ulrich

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Finland vs. the United States: Similarities and Differences in Kindergarten

by

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A Thesis
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Abstract

Understanding successful educational systems and the qualities they incorporate is imperative in the quest for student achievement. Finland is known worldwide for their success in the classroom and its educators do a great job preparing young students for primary education in their Kindergarten classrooms. Kindergarten is a very important grade for young students. It prepares them for grades to come and introduces them to a school setting. By using qualitative research methods and comparing and contrasting of published data, Finland's kindergarten system and three kindergarten teachers who represent the typical kindergarten milieu in Lamar County, Mississippi will be analyzed through six topics: the length of the school year; student to teacher ratio; teaching methods; curricula; socioeconomic status of the students; and frequency of testing. Triangulation of data will be used in order to identify and analyze successful qualities of the studied kindergarten teachers, in addition to generalized information about classrooms in Lamar County and similarly researched information of Finland. Finland and Lamar County's educational systems will be viewed and compared in terms of the six topics in order to recognize similarities and differences between the two with a proposed outcome of constructive advice for even greater achievement and educational success in Lamar County. Additionally, the six topics with results of this study will become foundations of further research in the components of successful kindergarten schooling.

Key Words: Kindergarten teachers, Mississippi educational system, Finland educational system, qualitative research

Dedication

All of the educators who wish to change the world: Thank you for your service to the teaching field and your continuous work to enrich the lives of the children and adults in your life. Your work is appreciated by so many and valued for a lifetime.

Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by thanking Dr. Stacy Reeves. She has not only been a fantastic guiding force in this research project, she has taught me more than I could have ever imagined. She has communicated to me that I need to be an educator on the cutting edge of research and best practices; she has pushed me to form this thesis into something bigger than I could have ever imagined. I will forever be grateful for the help and knowledge I have received from Dr. Reeves and the wonderful friendship that has ensued.

I also want to acknowledge my mother. Without her guidance, I would have never been introduced to the teaching field. She has shown me what it means to touch the lives of those young and old. She has shown me how to be compassionate towards all and love unconditionally, and she has helped me find the path to changing the world, one child at a time.

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Introduction

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” (Mandela, 2003, p. 14) This quote by Nelson Mandela grasps and concisely delivers the importance of education in our world. Children begin attending school in the United States between ages five and six, sometimes earlier, and hopefully, once begun, the learning never stops. According to the Early Head Start National Resource Center (2015), children begin preparing for elementary school from ages zero to three. Resnick (2009) states that Kindergarten is the grade in which students “develop and refine their abilities to think creatively and work collaboratively, precisely the abilities most needed to achieve success and satisfaction in the 21st century” (para. 4).

Kindergarten is a very important grade level, and a vital one, in laying foundations of learning. In this grade, students learn how to work with others and how to move about a classroom in ways deemed proper and correct by educators. Students explore and experiment with the learning processes necessary for internal and external development of life-long social and community abilities, as well as build the foundational knowledge of specific subject areas including language arts, reading and writing, mathematics, science, social studies, and numerous other essential areas. It is pivotal that researchers know as much as possible about Kindergarten in order to prepare students for a lifetime of learning.

Focusing on Kindergarten Teachers Here and Far Away

This study involves interviews with three Kindergarten teachers from Lamar County, a public school district located in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, approximately 75 miles from the Gulf of Mexico and 90 miles from New Orleans, Louisiana. Information

from the Mississippi Department of Education (2015) and Children First Annual Report from the Lamar County Schools' website (2013) has been collected and sifted for knowledge in order to better analyze kindergarten classrooms throughout the state. A deep and thorough investigation of Finland's public school kindergarten classrooms has been conducted using multiple resources such as research journals, books, multiple categories of electronic media, and other sources.

During the research phase of data collection on Finland's kindergarten classrooms and Lamar County's kindergarten classrooms, I focused on the following components in both settings: a) the length of the school year, b) student to teacher ratio, c) teaching methods, d) teacher training, e) curricula, f) socioeconomic status of the students, and, g) frequency of testing. Focusing on components a) through g), I highlighted many similarities and differences between the two systems. By investigating this research between the Kindergarten classrooms in both locations, I have developed a better understanding about the similarities and differences between kindergarten classrooms in Lamar County and kindergarten classrooms in Finland. Both have so much to offer students, yet operate in their own unique ways. Lastly, I have proposed conclusions that may offer kindergarten teachers in Lamar County additional theories of successful learning to supplement their classroom teaching.

Selecting the Locations for Research

Finland has consistently been in the forefront of the news for its unparalleled success in education. It is a unique educational system that allows teachers to simply teach and trusts them as professionals (Hancock, 2011). Finland is one of the most well-known educational systems in the world and is often thought of as a powerhouse in

education. It has received high rankings in international tests, as well as high graduation rates that rank it very highly in the world of education.

Lamar County in Hattiesburg, Mississippi is also known for its high-quality education system (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Lamar County is one of the best districts in southern Mississippi. Lamar County is an accredited school and achieved an A rating for the 2013 Accountability Label (Lamar County School District Student/Parent Handbook & Student Code of Ethics, 2015). Both Lamar County and Finland have superior educational systems and the research will highlight that fact.

Gathering Data

Scholarly articles and journals are the basis for my data gathering and research on Finland. Unfortunately, I could not travel to Finland for data gathering, research, or interviews; therefore, I relied on the written work of others as my research foundation. Because the educational system in Finland is well known, finding resources on the subject of its educational system has been quite easy; for example, I used the resources of Uusiautti, Paksuniemi, and Maatta (2013) in the article *At the Roots of Finnish Elementary Education-How Were Children Raised in the First Finnish Elementary Schools?*; Sirkka Ahonen (2002) in the article *From an Industrial to a Post-Industrial Society: Changing Concepts of Equality in Education*; and Jenni Salminen and colleagues (2012) in the article *Observed Classroom Quality Profiles of Kindergarten Classrooms in Finland*. Close examinations were necessary to interpret the documents correctly and to present accurate findings (Creswell & Shope, 2002). Additional research on the educational history of Finland was also needed. The country of Finland is rich in

history, and it is important to understand the journey that brought Finland to this point in its well-deserved recognition of its superior public education systems.

To conduct research in Lamar County, I obtained permission from all of the necessary leaders at both The University of Southern Mississippi and Lamar County, and also, at my target school. Three Lamar County kindergarten teachers were selected to participate in my research based on information from the Lead Teacher of the Primary school. These teachers were selected for their excellence in teaching in their kindergarten classrooms. All three agreed to be interviewed for this research. Through interviews, I gathered information about how different teachers in Lamar County conduct teaching, implement curricula, and utilize methodology; I analyzed and coded this during data analysis. I also gathered documents and conducted a literature review of important research for further insights and analyses of all of these topics.

With this study, I have highlighted many of the similarities and differences between the two systems. A thorough literature review was completed and analyzed in order to gain insights on Finland's education system. The information from the articles, journals, and books on Finland helped to develop concepts and theories in comparison to and in likeness with Lamar County's kindergartens. Lamar County's data gathering and data analysis was based on a literature review of the research, document collection, and interviews. Document collection was used to gather data on length of the school year, student to teacher ratio, socioeconomic status of the students, frequency of testing, and other vital elements. Last, interviews with teachers have taken place, after consent was given, which furnished rich data.

All of the data gathering and analysis in Lamar County and further comparisons with the data from Finland helped me to determine commonalities and differences between the two. By researching two superior educational systems, Lamar County and Finland, the similarities and differences between the two became evident and the results may enable educators to make changes that will benefit kindergarten classrooms in Lamar County and other similar areas.

Literature Review

The Past and the Present Educational System in Finland

Finland has one of the highest ranked public education systems in the world (Sahlberg, 2011). It is globally recognized for the achievements of its teachers, students, and schools. Based on the reviews of several reference sources, I found important ideals and concepts that contribute to Finland's success in education. The following literature review will describe such concepts.

The journal article titled, *At the Roots of Finnish Elementary Education-How Were Children Raised in the First Finnish Elementary Schools?* by Satu Uusiautti, Merja Paksuniemi, and Kaarina Maatta (2013), is about the historical background of the Finnish education system. Before the Finnish educational system can be understood, especially its kindergarten classrooms, it is vital to understand the rich history of Finland.

Finland's education system has not always been successful, but it underwent major reform in the 18th century, and today, it is continually evolving to meet the needs of all students. In the early part of the 18th century, educational reformers set their goals on having "socially acceptable citizens" when the students completed their schooling (Uusiautti & Maatta, 2013, p. 172). The public schools at the time were run entirely by the Christian Church, and therefore, the church had a major impact on what the children were taught. According to Uusiautti and Maatta, "the education provided by the church was based on the teaching of reading skills and learning the catechism and dogma of Christianity" (2013, p. 172). Educational reform was necessary to keep up with the evolving needs of the students and was fathered by Uno Cygnaeus. Uno Cygnaeus was assigned the position of public school reformer by the Finnish government and was

familiar with the Finnish system, according to Thomas A. Hippaka in the article titled *Indomitable Finland* (1940). Cygnaeus received much of his education from his father, and he later completed school at the University of Helsinki, and shortly thereafter, after becoming a bishop. It is said that he “knew the Finnish people and their problems, and he knew, too, that without an educated citizenry, Finland would never become a great nation” (Hippaka, 1940, p. 92). This was a very important start to the Finnish education system in place today, and in 1866, compulsory, standardized education began in Finland (Uusiautti & Maatta, 2013).

School districts appeared, and schools began dappling the countryside as compulsory education became a social norm in Finland in the late 19th century, around 1860. Public schools and liberal educational methods ushered in a new culture, one that diverted greatly from the church-centered schools of the late 18th century. Finland’s public schools drastically changed the entrenched, church-based school system. By creating school districts and mandating that schools be established to create learning opportunities, student attendance rates sky rocketed, and on April 15, 1921, compulsory education took effect for all students ages seven to thirteen (Uusiautti & Maatta, 2013).

Hippaka (1940) discussed how Finland’s economic and political system has changed drastically over the years and how this has changed the society as a whole. The author examined major reforms in the education system, such as whether to make education compulsory or not, and whether it be through the church or government. In the education system’s beginnings, it was noted as early as 1723 by a decree that stated either parents were to educate children or they were to be sent somewhere to be educated. Since 1723, there have been massive reforms which led the country to its superior public

education system. Some of these reforms include moving responsibility from the parents to the government when providing education; exploring the possibilities of separating children based on grade level; and starting to work towards compulsory education. With the new educational reforms, teachers became caught up in the mix as mandatory compulsory education became the norm. Also, teachers had many more responsibilities placed on them inside and outside of their classrooms.

In another important journal article, *From an Industrial to a Post-industrial Society: Changing Concepts of Equality in Education*, Ahonen (2002) discusses the many changes made as Finland began shifting from farming towards an industrial society. Prior to Finland's industrialization, the country was mainly agrarian with most families living in the countryside. This change had a major effect on public education as families moved from small rural villages into cities. Many country school houses were shut down and reformation was imminent. A large divide formed among various government factions as to whether schools could continue to be common and free for all. These major reforms took place in the 1960s and continue to effect the Finnish education system.

Ahonen's (2002) research provides insight into the development of the current Finnish public education system. Ahonen helps to build a timeline and a better understanding of the complex processes which led Finland to its high performing public education system. The concepts these first realigned schools wanted to develop in children was linked to "modernization, prompted by industrialization and nation-building" (Ahonen, 2002, p. 173). There was a want and a need for a common school that would be available for adolescents. School reform was a necessity in the 1960s;

additionally, educational leaders in Finland realized that this was not enough, which led to the necessity of high quality teacher training and preparation.

Cygnæus's reforms in 1866 came about through an official governmental decree. Cygnæus designed the government's decree for schools, and he included the mandate that students would be educated for a total of six years; students would be between the ages of eight and fourteen years old; and each class would have a maximum of 40 students. The very first schools would not allow boys and girls to be educated together; however, that would change in 1889 (Uusiautti & Maatta, 2013). This foundation of Finland's education system allowed students to receive a semi-structured basic education. The initial, foundational school system met the needs of most children until after the Second World War (Uusiautti & Maatta, 2013).

After the Second World War, Finland's demographics changed drastically. From 1950-1970, one third of the population moved to urban areas; because of this massive migration citizens, and society as a whole, needed to train and prepare for work in urban environments as opposed to their former agrarian environments (Ahonen, 2002).

In 1963, Finnish parliament began the arduous task of initiating comprehensive educational reform. In 1967, a law was enacted for these needs, and the new reforms were accepted solidly by all. The new comprehensive system included several mandates, the first of which being nine years of free education for all citizens of Finland. The second mandate was that the system would be regulated by the Finnish government. The next mandate was that Finnish teachers would be highly trained. These changes helped transition the country to a post-war era, but they were not sufficient, and additional reform became necessary as the world entered the 21st century (Ahonen, 2002).

Beginning in the 1980s, an economic boom changed class systems in Finland. New economic opportunities gave rise to a larger middle class. The prior comprehensive structured reform that began in the 1960s was not keeping up with the individualistic needs of a changing society (Ahonen, 2002). On top of that, further changes and restructuring would be needed to keep up with the new demands in the world of technology. Logically, Finland redefined what it means to have educational uniformity, and it began to look at the importance of teacher training and students' needs (Ahonen, 2002).

Salminen, et al. (2012) supply a great overview of the kindergarten classrooms of Finland, emphasizing how teachers and students contribute to Finland's successful public school system. Kindergarten in Finland is 100% optional, yet 98% of the eligible kindergarten population attends. The number of highly qualified kindergarten teachers may be a big factor as to why so many children and their guardians take advantage of this opportunity (Taylor, 2012). According to Salminen and colleagues (2012), the public places a great value on, and has a high respect for, kindergarten aged children attending school. They view the rewards gained from these experiences to be essential for all future learning.

As Salminen, et al. (2012) show, establishing fundamental qualities that kindergarten classrooms have is essential because students will use these skills to move on to other grades. Kindergarten prepares young students for future learning, and it teaches them not only the basics of knowledge, but also, how to be an excellent student. As a landmark grade, kindergarten students become accustomed to school and the basis for all learning to follow is developed. Kindergarteners are learning to be people outside

of the home, and they are creating an identity for themselves. Due to the nature of this study, I will be unable to travel and observe a Finland classroom, therefore the article *Observed Classroom Quality Profiles of Kindergarten Classrooms in Finland* will be a basis of information on Kindergarten classrooms in this study (Salminen, et al., 2012).

Kindergarten, according to Ojala and Talts (2007), is defined as “a school or class for young children between four and six years to prepare them for primary education” (p. 206). The focus of kindergarten is to introduce students to a classroom setting while helping them master skills such as “social, emotional, and motor development; academic pre-skills; the prevention of learning difficulties; an appreciation of ethics, art, and culture; the development of cultural identity; personal health; and safety habits” (Ojala & Talts, 2007, p. 206). Kindergarten teachers face a great task. They prepare students for the world outside of the home as well as combat learning difficulties, foster an appreciation for the arts, and help students develop as citizens (Ojala & Talts, 2007; Bracey, 1996). This job requires extreme devotion and a curriculum that helps students develop without overwhelming the children. According to Salminen, et al. (2012), teachers in Finland encourage play that helps students develop the five pillars of reading instruction, which include phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction.

A vital necessity to understanding the Finnish education system within kindergarten classrooms is teacher training programs. The teacher training programs are the basis of all education in Finland, and they contribute directly to the successes of Finland’s public education system. The article titled *Significant Trends in the Development of Finnish Teacher Education Programs (1860-2010)* by Uusiautti and

Maatta (2013), gives a vast overview of how far the programs have come and how rigorous they have become. Teacher training programs in Finland are extremely selective, with only 1 out of 10 applicants being accepted. The programs are five years long and the final result is a Master's degree. Teachers must complete extensive amounts of training, as well as contributing to the successful education system, by conducting research and completing a Masters' thesis. Current teacher training programs have come a long way since 1860. Many of the earliest programs were not as concerned as today's programs regarding methods and research-based evidence. In the beginning of Finland's public education system, emphasis was based on modeling and shaping successful individuals who will participate in society and in the church. As the educational system reformed, the teacher training program also reformed.

Sahlberg (2013) reports on the vast amount of trust and authority that are given to teachers in Finland. Teachers are seen as powerful leaders in the educational field. The duties of teachers in Finland, compared and contrasted to the duties of teachers in the United States are very different. Teachers in Finland are given vast amounts of freedom to teach and mold their students, and they help guide students through learning in active ways in order to give students independence in their knowledge acquisition. Teachers in Finland are held in high professional regard along with lawyers, doctors, and scientists

Sahlberg (2011) discusses why it is so important for all aspects of the Finn's society to work together. Finland has developed a system that works with the business sector, political sector, and professional sector in order to provide an educational system that is parallel to what is expected of students once they finish compulsory education. Additionally, Finland chooses to opt out of many standardized tests because testing is

seen as unnecessary rather than a means to an end. Tests that are given relate to what is needed by the business, political, and professional entities (Sahlberg, 2011).

In *What We Can Learn from Finland's Successful School Reform*, Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) reviews the extensive educational reform which Finland has undergone. Due to these educational changes, Finland set themselves apart from other nations around the world. A huge factor in the Finnish system's success is from aligning education to the needs of business and other professions, and politics, and making sure that students are focusing with those ends in mind (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Teachers are given autonomy so that they can create meaningful equality in the educational system. The immigrant population in Finland has been on the rise, yet Finland is still able to achieve success in their classrooms. Darling-Hammond attributes Finnish success to the country's teacher education programs stating, "the notion of caring for students educationally and personally is a central principle in the schools" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 18). The reform that the Finnish educational system underwent set them apart from other nations. They essentially built themselves up from the ground and achieved greatness by focusing on the needs of Finland's society.

Final Literature Methods

The literature found on Finland's and the United States' public education systems, in particular kindergarten, assisted the researcher in providing schema and current information regarding both education systems. The literature based on Finland was vital for the Finnish side of the research due to the researcher not having access to in-person observations and interviews of Finnish Kindergarten classrooms. The main concept tying

literature on Finland's kindergartens together is that of important aspects of Finland's success in public education, particularly research emphasizing Kindergarten classrooms.

The literature based on the United States is smaller in quantity, yet shares importance in that it gives the researcher background information to scrutinize, and concepts to discuss, with the teachers in Lamar County. Essential points which tie this literature together is the United States' educational history and reform (Cohen, Moffitt, & Goldin, 2007). The literature based on both countries will be analyzed and will aid in providing support for the researcher's interviews with three Lamar County kindergarten teachers. This literature review will provide the researcher with ways to compare and contrast the Finnish public kindergartens with the Lamar County public kindergarten system.

Methodology and Design

I began with a thorough literature review of the Finnish educational system, in particular, the public kindergarten classes. The main focus is to find out the length of the school year, student to teacher ratio, teaching methods used, teacher training, curriculums used, socioeconomic status of the students, and frequency of testing. The purpose of the literature review is to gather information on the Finnish public education system and paint the picture in order to compare and contrast the Lamar County public schools. It is important to understand key aspects of both kindergarten systems in order to understand how each works. In reviewing, surveying, and summarizing Finland's kindergarten educational system, I built a level of personal schema necessary to adequately compare it to the kind of system in Lamar County kindergarten classrooms.

My goal then became researching the Lamar County educational system and presenting the commonalities and differences between the two, and additionally, I will propose relational statements which may be helpful for teachers and others who work with young children in the Lamar County schools. The researcher will interview three kindergarten teachers, and I will ask each kindergarten teacher a series of prepared questions. The interview should take approximately 45 to 60 minutes to complete. After conducting the interview, the researcher will gather data in a variety of formats and kinds.

I will be data gathering for several pieces of information: the students to teacher ratio, teaching methods used, the teachers training, curriculums used, socioeconomic status of the students, frequency of testing, and I will find out the length of the school year. To do so, notes will be taken and organized on a sheet in order to be understood in the future. Notes will be transcribed into data for research and findings will be recorded.

The researcher is looking for trends in data that are similar and different between Lamar County public schools and the Finnish education system. This data combined with interviews will become the research which will be triangulated, compared and contrasted, and discussed with suggestions on ways to improve the current educational kindergarten system, particularly in the local, researched school. Also, generalizations may be made for other kindergarten systems to help them better prepare students regarding educational foundations which lead to their educational futures.

Finnish Kindergarten Qualities

Frequency of Testing

Standardized testing in Finland is minimal. Since educational reform in the 1980s and 1990s, autonomy was given to schools and much of the testing was abolished. Prior to 1980, Finland had accountability measures that were comparable to No Child Left Behind (Baker, 2006; Ripley, 2013). However, it was realized that highly qualified teachers were necessary to reform education. The country began to create rigorous programs for teachers to prepare candidates extensively to teach in a classroom. It is important to note what happened next. The Finnish government, after having reformed teaching training, realized there was no need for the accountability system in place. The teachers were given autonomy to teach and run their classrooms based upon the needs of the students rather than the government (Ripley, 2013). This, in turn, changed the outcome of testing for this country. It is important to note that students are still assessed in Finland. They are given classroom assessments as well as a comprehensive evaluation after each semester (Sahlberg, 2011). As far as standardized testing is concerned in Finland, the students take the PISA test every few years and a select group of students are tested each year to ensure that schools are accomplishing success.

Length of the School Year

The length of the school year can vary from students attending school year-round, two semesters with a long summer break, or broken into six week sections. The latter has been adopted by Finland, according to Di'Orio (n.d.); each school year lasts for 190 days. Each Finnish student must complete and pass courses segmented into six-week time units in order to advance to the next courses (Di'Orio, n.d.). Finland recognized that the length

of the school year was important because it provided the framework for dividing curriculum up into manageable pieces with opportunities for review, re-teaching, and enrichment.

Student to Teacher Ratio

The average class size in Finland is an average of 20 or fewer students, according to Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2012). Understanding the student to teacher ratio gives insight into the responsibilities held by the teachers and the amount of focus that is put into each student. Smaller class size allows for more student to teacher contact, thus allowing more direct instruction. Typically, a Finnish classroom does not include the use of instructional aids or assistants and all instruction is delivered by the classroom teacher.

Socioeconomic Status of the Students

One major difference between the Finnish school system and other developed nations is the low level of child poverty. Finland has approximately less than 5% nationwide child poverty levels (Ripley, 2013). This is important because 95% of Finnish students have their basic needs met, meaning that they can focus on learning and their education, not where their next meal is going to come from.

Teaching Methods

Teaching methods in Finland encountered a metamorphosis. Prior to the 1980s and 1990s, teachers were very oppressed and could only teach based on curriculum created by the centralized government and were required to report exactly what they were teaching in a journal (Ripley, 2013). Following the reforms of the teacher training programs, the strict laws were done away with because teachers were highly trained and

had the ability to create innovative and successful lesson plans. Teachers gained autonomy in their classrooms and schools and were encouraged to experiment with educational endeavors. According to Sahlberg (2013), teachers are allowed to develop their own teaching methods and are given much autonomy in their own classrooms. One can deduce that Finnish teachers use both learner centered approaches and teacher centered approaches.

Finnish Teacher Training

Teacher training and preparation have long been studied and are highly related to students' achievement in the classroom setting (Harris & Sass, 2010). It wasn't until the 1960s that Finland began to offer "university-level teacher training" (Harris & Sass, 2010, p. 800). This was the beginning of their rigorous program that is looked upon with envy throughout the world. The program has continuously grown in popularity and now only 10% of applicants are accepted to teacher training in a university setting (Uusiautti & Maatta, 2013). Although their education system has come very far, some of the first teacher training programs laid the foundation for the university-level programs that are still in place today. Finland focuses on many ideals that are simple and can be dated back to the 19th century. As they reformed education, they held tight to some of the original ideals and laid the foundation for their nationally ranked education system of the 21st century (Sahlberg & Hargreaves, 2011).

Teacher training programs rely heavily on elementary schools, which helps teachers in training to learn about all the things they will be facing when they become a teacher. Teachers in Finland essentially get several years of student teaching before going into the classroom. In the early 19th century, the first teacher-training program was

introduced just three years before the first elementary school was opened. It can be taken from this that careful planning went into the implementation of the first elementary schools. Finland recognized the need for teachers, excellent ones at that, and began their teacher training programs to create the best teachers for Finland's students (Sahlberg & Hargreaves, 2011). Teaching is a coveted profession in Finland, and is comparable to doctors and lawyers. Teachers are treated with respect and are held to very high standards to meet the high expectations given to the profession. The value bestowed on them is created by a society of peers who understand the need for continuous growth as a teacher and they are a community of learners that grow with the support of one another (Sahlberg, 2011). Through reform and many years of steady progress, the Finland education system has blossomed into arguably one of the best education system in the world.

Finland has reformed their school by taking the time to correct the flaws in a systematic fashion. It wasn't until the mid-twentieth century that Finland began to step on the scene of exemplary education. They were not an overnight success nor did they abandon their reform in the early years. It has been a slow and steady progression towards what they wished to become. Finland began by focusing on their teachers and their education. Finland began to move towards a high stakes graduate program that is state funded and required for all teachers. Teachers are pushed through a rigorous graduate program that develops their teaching skills as well as research skills. "Teachers' preparation includes both extensive coursework on how to teach—with a strong emphasis on using research based on state-of-the-art practice-- and at least a full year of clinical experience in a school associated with the university" (Buchberger & Buchberger, 2004,

p.10). Teachers are required to be experts in their field and understand the needs of all types of learners and how to address those. Finnish teachers learn the true meaning of becoming a lifelong learner as someone who continues to pursue an education throughout one's life.

Because Finnish teachers are mentored to become lifelong learners, they are able to teach students in the same practices. Instead of constantly worrying about test scores and how students will perform on achievement tests, Finnish teachers are there as mentors, allowing students to set their own goals and fosters their independence. "The cultivation of independence and active learning allows students to develop metacognitive skills that help them to frame, tackle, and solve problems; evaluate and improve their own work; and guide their learning processes in productive ways" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, para. 24). The Finnish education system is less interested in how students perform on standardized tests and more interested in how students learn how to learn and how they continue to do so. Finland focuses on fostering independence in their students to ensure their full potential is met, even when students complete their compulsory education (Sahlberg & Hargreaves, 2011).

Finland is chasing success and becoming one of the best education systems in the world. The evidence as to how and why is all around us. Finland never rushed the system of reform and they figured out the key to all education: teachers. They realized that to foster education in their students, they must educate teachers in ways that challenges them and create environments in which teachers are constantly researching cutting edge educational practices. Teachers are held in high regard and are treated with such respect. The Finland education system treats teachers with the same respect as

doctors and lawyers. They are empowered as teachers and learners themselves and therefore set positive examples for their students.

Lamar County Kindergarten Qualities

Frequency of Testing

As kindergarten students in the Lamar County School District, the STAR Early Literacy testing is implemented. The STAR Early Literacy program is distributed by Renaissance Learning and according to their website (2015), the program is a short computer based test that takes approximately 10 minutes for a child to complete (Renaissance Learning, 2015). After interviewing three Kindergarten teachers who work with the program in their own Kindergarten classrooms, it can be discerned that it is a helpful way to diagnose incoming students' abilities and benchmark their learning along the way. According to one Lamar County kindergarten teacher, the STAR Early Literacy test "gives a realistic view of [students] abilities." She also went on to say that it was a great way to track her students' progress throughout the year (Interview, Kindergarten Teacher #3, 2015).

Kindergarten students are exempt from most standardized testing. They are given the STAR Early Literacy test three times per year. However, common assessments are given weekly to ensure that kindergarten students are making progress with each skill taught.

Length of the School Year

According to the Lamar County School District Handbook (2014), there are 180 school days on the school calendar that students are required to attend. However, students occasionally miss school but are still required to attend at least 168 out of the 180 school days. There are grounds for excused absences, including doctors' appointments, illness, or injury or death in the immediate family.

Student to Teacher Ratio

According to Kindergarten Teacher #3 from Lamar County, the national cap for students in a classroom is 28. For the entire Lamar County School District, the student to teacher ratio is 16:1 (Lamar County School District: Student-Teacher Ratio, 2015). However, in kindergarten at one Lamar County school, there are 363 students and 17 teachers, making the student to teacher ratio 21:1 (Oak Grove Primary Enrollment Report, 2015). The class sizes are larger but it is important to take into account that many of the kindergarten teachers have assistants, one per teacher, in their classrooms.

Socioeconomic Status of Students

The economic status of a child can greatly affect his/her performance in the classroom and in a social setting, according to Eric Jensen, a leading scholar in childhood poverty studies (Jensen, 2009). Because of this, understanding the statistics that accompany children and their families' economic status are imperative when looking at the classroom as a whole, especially in kindergarten. According to the Southern Rural Development Center (2010), data from the 2009 report indicated that Lamar County had a 19.5% child poverty rate.

Teaching Methods

The teaching method of any one teacher varies based on personal and professional beliefs. One important factor that guides teaching methods is the amount of autonomy given to educators in their own classrooms. According Kindergarten Teacher #1, Kindergarten Teacher #2, and Kindergarten Teacher #3, kindergarten teachers in Lamar County are given autonomy to conduct their classes in ways that they feel benefit the students the most. When asked "Do you use a learner centered approach or a teacher

centered approach, or both?” two out of the three teachers interviewed responded with both. According to Kindergarten Teacher #3, she usually uses a more teacher centered approach because she wants to make sure at that age that the students are grasping the concepts she is teaching; however, she is trying to switch to using a more learner centered approach for the majority of her teaching because she knows that the students are able to grasp concepts better when they discover them on their own (Interview, Kindergarten Teacher #3).

United States Teacher Training

Teacher training in the United States consists of an individual solely deciding he or she wants to become a teacher and enrolling in education classes. Each of the three teachers applied to the college of their choice and, once accepted, decided on their major of education. Once they decided on teaching, they simply enrolled in the required classes and experienced a semester of student teaching in their final term before graduation from the university. Two of the three teachers that were interviewed earned their Master's degree in elementary education. When asked if they felt prepared to teach when they left the teacher education program, all three answered that they had the knowledge base to teach, but nothing can prepare a teacher to be completely in charge of a room full of students during their first year (Interview, Kindergarten Teachers 1, 2, & 3).

Conclusions

Finland and Lamar County share many excellent qualities that ensure that their students are receiving the best education possible. Although differences can be noted, most of the qualities observed share some similarity or do not vary much. The excellence of both the Finnish kindergarten system and the Lamar County kindergarten system adopt qualities that ensure success. An important place to begin is the frequency of testing, something that is a hot topic in the United States. Most automatically assume that all students in the United States are over-tested and are given many different standardized tests and Finnish students are never tested at all. This is a misconception. According to the data I retrieved based on Finnish kindergarten programs and Lamar County kindergarten programs, both escape standardized testing; however, students are still regularly assessed to ensure progress is being made. In Lamar County, kindergarteners are given the STAR Early Literacy test three different times, once being as early as possible to see where their literacy abilities fall.

The length of the school year also yielded similar findings for both Lamar County and Finland. The Finnish school year usually consists of two semesters with a long summer break in between. Although there are other ways the school year can be broken down, for example, year-round schooling, most Finnish education programs have adopted the two semester system. According to Di'Orio (n. d.), the school year last for approximately 190 days. This is very similar to Lamar County kindergarten programs. There are 180 school days on the calendar; however, students are only required to attend 168 of those days.

The student to teacher ratio for both Lamar County and Finland gives insight into the instructional time that can be spent on individual students, if there is any time at all. Smaller class sizes allow for more individualized learning and it is interesting to note that both Lamar County kindergartens and Finnish kindergartens have similar class sizes. According to the Mississippi Department of Education (2015), the student to teacher ratio in kindergarten is 21:1 for one primary school. An exact student to teacher ratio could not be found for Finland kindergarten classrooms, but the average class size in Finland is 20 or fewer students. These two numbers are very similar and it is important to note that most Finnish kindergarten classrooms do not have assistants while some Lamar County kindergartens do.

Socioeconomic status of students is an important factor when it comes to students' educations. If the basic needs of a child are not met, it is very difficult for him/her to prosper in the classroom environment. This is even more so in kindergarten because it is the foundation for all other learning. In the Finnish school system, there is less than 5% national child poverty (Ripley, 2013). This is vastly different from Lamar County's 19.5% child poverty rate from 2009 (Southern Rural Poverty Center, 2010). This major difference is one that can affect a child's learning ability and can affect a school's excellence rating. With that being said, it is very important to note the high poverty rate in Lamar County compared to their students' success. Regardless of the poverty rate, Lamar County schools are very successful and this all begins in the kindergarten classroom.

Teaching methods are subject to the individual teacher; however, one can recognize if the method is learner-centered or teacher-centered. The Lamar County

kindergarten teachers interviewed either used a learner-centered approach or were working towards a learner-centered approach. However, Lamar County kindergarten teachers have autonomy in their classrooms to teach in the best way suitable for their students. The same applies for Finnish kindergarten teachers. After the 1990s, Finnish teachers were given autonomy after the teacher training programs were revamped (Ripley, 2013).

Finnish teacher training is much more selective and extensive compared to that of United States teachers. All Finnish teachers are required to have a Master's Degree and are paid and regarded as highly as doctors and lawyers. The same cannot be said for Lamar County kindergarten teachers. This proved to be the biggest difference from Finland to Lamar County, and it can affect the way students learn.

The similarities and differences vary in their impact on the education of the student body from Lamar County kindergarten classrooms to Finnish kindergarten classrooms. Based on the evidence from this study, one cannot divulge the right or wrong way to shape a kindergarten classroom. Both Lamar County and Finland have adopted very similar ways of assessment, teaching methods, they have similar school year lengths, and similar student to teacher ratios; yet many important components that effect young students are different between the two. It can be said that at least one of these differences cannot be changed. As far as the amount and rigor of teacher training that is something that is always becoming more arduous but an entire culture change would have to occur for teachers to be as esteemed as doctors and lawyers in Lamar County.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that could be addressed if the study is continued or replicated. I was the only researcher conducting teacher interviews at Lamar County schools. With one or more researchers contributing, the results could yield different findings if data were collected from multiple participants and other researched sources. Another limitation was the inability to arrange teacher observations. If it could have been arranged, observations of kindergarten teachers would have provided different data. Another setback is the inability to travel to Finland. With proper funding of the research project, observation in Finland kindergarten classrooms could produce research to parallel what is observed in Lamar County kindergarten classrooms. It would also be possible to use more and different research styles, with Finland and Lamar County as well, which would modify the research findings.

This study is also exclusive for the Lamar County schools and the interviewees answers apply only to the three kindergarten teachers in the study. However, this study is a foundational platform, and the study can be expanded and data can be extrapolated for the rest of Lamar County and possibly other parts of Southern Mississippi.

Future Directions

This study is one that can be of assistance when trying to improve Finland's and United States' kindergarten classrooms. The researcher considered the similarities and differences between the kindergarten classrooms in two different countries, and concluded that the researched kindergarten classrooms were seen as successful under the limited conditions of this study. During this study, the researcher used a literature review in order to gain information based on the Finnish educational system, and interviews and document collection were used to gain information based on kindergarten classrooms in Lamar County. The study can be furthered in the future in several ways. To begin, the researcher can travel to Finland and spend some time observing kindergarten classrooms in that country. It will be important to observe in many different parts of the country as well as interviewing many teachers in order to gain a wide and varied perspective. The researcher can also create questionnaires for all of the Lamar County kindergarten classroom teachers, and thereafter, develop further implications of the study using the questionnaires.

The researcher can also widen the area in which teachers in the local schools are interviewed. For this undergraduate thesis, the researcher interviewed three Lamar County kindergarten teachers in order to gain insights on local kindergarten practices. In the future, it would be beneficial to widen the search with observations and to visit kindergarten classrooms in many different areas of Mississippi, and in other states, in order to gain greater knowledge for the comparison and contrast of Finland and the United States. By doing so, the study will gain in its depth and have a wider range of applications.

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Appendix A

Lamar County Kindergarten Teacher Interview Questions

1.
 - A. Why did you become a teacher?
 - B. What were some aspects that drew you to the profession?
 - C. Describe the process you went through when applying and being accepted to the teacher education program in college.
 - D. How many years have you been a teacher?
 - E. Have you taught Kindergarten before? For how long?
 - F. Do you have any other degrees, certificates, or licensures?

2.
 - A. Did you feel prepared to teach when you left your teacher education program in college?
 - B. Why not?
 - C. Describe what you did to prepare yourself.
 - D. If you did feel prepared out of college, explain the things you felt your program did which helped in preparing you.

3.
 - A. What standardized tests are given in your classroom?
 - B. How do you feel about the standardized testing in Lamar County?
 - C. How often do you give standardized tests in your classroom?
 - D. What measurement assessments do you give to measure the students' growth through the Kindergarten year?

4.
 - A. Do you feel like you are given autonomy in your own classroom when it comes to your students' needs?
 - B. Would you give me some examples?
 - C. If you aren't, why?

5.
 - A. Briefly describe your teaching method.
 - B. Do you use a learner centered approach or a teacher centered approach, or both?
 - C. Would you list some examples from your teaching experience?

6.
 - A. What kind of curricula do you use in your classroom?
 - B. Do you have the ability to change or manipulate the curricula to fit the needs of your students?
 - C. Do you develop your own?
 - D. Could you show me some of it?

7.
 - A. Do you plan lessons or any curriculum with other teachers?
 - B. If yes, what is it? Can you give me an example?
 - C. Why do you work together?
 - D. If you don't, is there a reason you don't work with the other Kindergarten teachers?

8.
 - A. Do you feel that you are helping students prepare for a future, rather than just for the next grade level?
 - B. If yes, please explain how you prepare students for their future.
 - C. If no, please explain how you prepare for the next grade level and why.

Appendix B

Authorization to Participate in a Research Project Conducted in Affiliation with
The University of Southern Mississippi

Title of Project: Finland vs. The United States: Similarities and Differences in Kindergarten

Researcher: Rebecca Ulrich

USM Advisor: Stacy Reeves, Ph.D.

Informed Consent Letter

The purpose of this letter is to inform the participants about the study, to emphasize the importance of their protection, and to document willingness to participate.

Purpose- The primary purpose of this study is to recognize similarities and differences between Finland and Lamar County Kindergarten classrooms. A specific number of Lamar County Kindergarten teachers have been selected to be interviewed and research is being gathered about Finland's Kindergarten system. Once the study is complete, an undergraduate thesis will be submitted to the Honors College and all participants may view the completed work.

Description of Study- Interviews and document collection will be used to collect data. Interview questions have been prepared and three Kindergarten teachers who volunteer to participate in the study will be asked a series of questions in regards to the study. Participants will total three teachers in Kindergarten.

This research project has gained approval by USM's Institutional Review Board, and it has gained permission from school administrators. This explanatory letter is provided before the interview, and as a possible participant, the choice to voluntarily participate comes with complete confidentiality and this document outlining basic procedures. Participation in this project is completely voluntary, and participants in the study will be in no way coerced into completing any aspect of this research; at any time, participants may withdraw without penalty and may decide to not participate.

The researcher will ask each Kindergarten teacher a series of prepared questions. The interview should take approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete. Once completed, the data collection will be transcribed into conclusions to be presented in an Honors College undergraduate thesis.

Confidentiality- All information provided in the interview will be kept private and confidential. When not being used for data analysis, all data will be placed in sealed envelopes and locked in a drawer or locked in the USM Advisor's office. Upon completion of the study and all presentations, manuscript publications, and other professional dissemination, all data will be destroyed. All information obtained during the course of this study will remain completely confidential. All personally identifying information will be changed before any public viewing of the data to protect all participants.

Benefits- The researcher is interested in gaining information about Lamar County Kindergartens' best practices in order to recognize the similarities and differences between Lamar County Kindergartens and Finland Kindergarten classrooms. The researcher is interested in looking at several components of each Kindergarten system, including the length of the school year, student to teacher ratio, teaching methods, curricula, socioeconomic status of the students, and frequency of standardized testing. Finland is often thought to be a powerhouse of educational practices. The researcher is interested in recognizing the similarities and the differences between their educational practices in the Kindergarten classrooms in Finland and in Lamar County Kindergarten classrooms in order to draw comparisons for best practices among Kindergarten classrooms while reporting on practices that are helping them to succeed.

Additionally, results will be compiled and an undergraduate thesis will be submitted to the Honors College. Kindergarten teachers may benefit by evaluating their approaches and attitudes in regards to their practices and curricula; moreover, others in Kindergarten settings may be able to use this data as a basis for further research on best practices for young children and their ideal learning situations. Results of this project will be integrated into a report for possible professional publications, presentations, and for recognition through the Honors College.

Risks- There are no major risks associated with participation in this project. The participants do not face any major social, financial, psychological, or physical risks because data is confidential and personally identifying factors will be changed/modified for purposes of confidentiality. Participants will be allowed to discontinue participation at any point if desired without penalty or prejudice. Participants can elect not to answer any specific questions. No compensation is provided for participation in this research.

Questions concerning the research should be directed to Rebecca Ulrich at (903) 421-2970 or by email at Rebecca.ulrich@eagles.usm.edu or Stacy Reeves at Stacy.Reeves@usm.edu <mailto:stacy.reeves@usm.edu>. *This project and this consent form have been reviewed by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research subject should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, (601) 266-6820.*

Participant's Assurance- Whereas no assurance can be made concerning results that may be obtained, since results from investigational studies cannot be predicted, the researcher will take every precaution consistent with the best scientific practice including modifying identifying personal data before any oral presentations or written documents are produced for confidentiality. In selecting to participate, all interview information will be treated with confidentiality and with sound procedures protecting the gathered data. Reading this document and signing, the signee agrees to participate.

Signature- My signature indicates that I understand the above statements, and I agree to participate in the study. This certifies that I am a licensed teacher in a Kindergarten classroom, and therefore, fit the criteria of this study.

Name of Participant Printed

Date

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Signature of USM Advisor

Date

Appendix C



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001

Phone: 601.266.5997 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board

NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.
Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 15050602

PROJECT TITLE: Finland vs The United States: Similarities and Differences in Kindergarten

PROJECT TYPE: New Project

RESEARCHER(S): Rebecca Ulrich

COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education and Psychology

DEPARTMENT: Curriculum, Instruction and Special Education

FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 07/02/2015 to 07/01/2016

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.

Institutional Review Board