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Mind the Gap: Examining the Gap between the United States Education System and the Top Education Systems in the World

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“Mind the Gap: Examining the Gap between the United States
Education System and the Top Education Systems in the
World”**

written by

Kaitlyn Clark

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Dr. Kathy Collins, thesis director

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**Mind the Gap: Examining the Gap Between the United States Education System and
the Top Education Systems in the World**

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Mind the Gap: Examining the Gap Between the United States Education System and the Top Education Systems in the World.

Improving our education system is a hot topic right now in the political and educational worlds. As a country, we are always striving for the best educational experience for our students, but we are still faced with many challenges. According to the 2014 Pearson Index of Cognitive Skills and Educational Attainment the United States is ranked as number fourteen in the world. While we have risen from number seventeen since 2012, we are still not even in the top ten. In 2012, Finland had the top education system in the world and in 2014, South Korea had number one.

Table 1

Country A to Z	Overall Index rank and score 2014	Overall Index rank and score 2012
 South Korea	▲ 1 Rank 1 1.30	Rank 2 1.23
 Finland	▼ -4 Rank 5 0.92	Rank 1 1.26
 United States	▲ 3 Rank 14 0.39	Rank 17 0.35

Pearson. (2014, January). Index of Cognitive Skills and Educational Attainment.

In this paper, I am going to explore what it is about these two education systems that made them the best and compare these two education systems to the United States education system. I will look at factors such as cultural perspectives of education, government influence on education, extracurricular emphasis, school organization and curriculums, teacher training, and importance in the society and other factors that influence how an education system works. My goal of this project

is to find the gaps between the United States education system and the top education systems in the world and suggest some ways that we could eliminate those gaps to have the most effective education system in the world.

Why Finland and South Korea?

I chose Finland and South Korea because they have both been number one on the Pearson Index of Cognitive Skills and Educational Attainment. I also chose these two in order to gain knowledge through analyzing their different perspectives since South Korea is an Asian country and Finland is European. Choi (2014) discusses the education system models for both South Korea and Finland, stating that the South Korean model is one of “grit and hard, hard, hard, work” while the Finnish model is one of “extracurricular choice, and intrinsic motivation” (p. 1). Both countries have a different approach to education, and their cultures are different from each other. It is good to examine ideas from different perspectives to in order to learn and understand the entire concepts, therefore in order to really “mind the gap” between the US and the top systems, I will be able to look at the different educational philosophies from these countries and determine how to implement the best strategies from each system into our own in order to improve our students learning environments and experiences.

Exploring Factors that Influence Education Systems

There are many factors that influence how education systems work. I chose five specific factors that I thought would be beneficial to research and compare across the United States, South Korea and Finland. The factors that will be discussed are cultural perspectives of education, government influence on education,

extracurricular emphasis, school organization and curriculums, and teacher training and importance in society.

Cultural Perspectives of Education

What a country's culture believes about education is a major factor of what is important in its education system. Choi (2014) talks about the culture in South Korea by stating, "Today, many in the Confucian countries still respect the kind of educational achievement that is promoted by an exam culture. Among these countries, South Korea stands apart as the most extreme, and arguably, most successful" (p. 1). South Korea's cultural perspective of education is one that places an extremely high value on being the best, brightest, and smartest. Students in South Korea start very young doing homework and studying. They have very rigorous exams that are required for students to get into high school and college.

Lepi (2014) talks about the education systems of many top Asian countries when she says "All these countries' education systems prize effort above inherited 'smartness', have clear learning outcomes and goalposts, and have a strong culture of accountability and engagement among a broad community of stakeholders" (p. 1). In addition, Murray (2014) depicts the culture of South Korea surrounding the exams, stating,

This exam is so important to the nation as a whole that on the day of the test, the stock market opens late, airplanes are banned from landing or taking off, and rush hour is rescheduled, all to make sure students arrive to the test on time and are not distracted. One Korean mother describes this cultural

commitment to education by saying, 'Korea has few natural resources, we don't even have much land, the only resource we have is people'. (p. 1)

Finland has a very different culture from South Korea. Choi (2014) states, "Finnish culture values intrinsic motivation and the pursuit of personal interest" (p. 1). Choi (2014) also says, "It's a low-stress culture, and it values a wide variety of learning experiences" (p. 1). The Finnish culture seems to be much less extreme from the South Korean culture. Sahlberg (2015) writes,

Being a relatively small nation situated between much larger powers of the East and the West has taught Finns to accept existing realities and take chances with available opportunities. Diplomacy, cooperation, problem solving, and seeking consensus have thus become hallmarks of contemporary Finnish Culture. (p. 17)

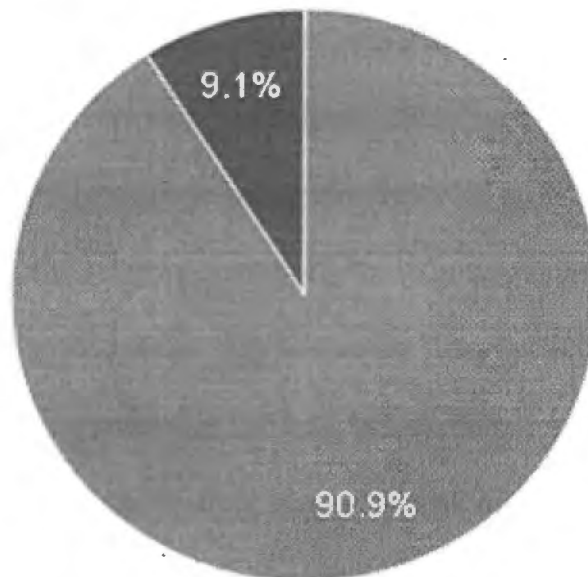
The Finnish culture is more relaxed and easy going than the Korean culture. This explains why their education system has a lot of free choice for the students. I believe one can learn a great deal about a country by studying the culture of the people who live there.

For my directed study for the Carl Goodson Honors Program, I wanted to understand how students from different cultures' view education. I surveyed students of different nationalities about their primary school experience and the importance of education to them. My survey was not very large, but it was a learning experience for me in conducting the survey. The students who participated in my study were from the United States, Indonesia, Zimbabwe, and Germany. One of the participants was from the United States, but experienced the majority of their

primary schooling in the Ukraine. I asked what age the survey participants began their school experiences. One participant answered seven years old. Two participants answered six years old. Five participants answered five years old. Three participants answered four years old. I also asked the participants if they liked school as a primary/elementary student and ten out of the eleven participants said yes. Table 2 is a representation of this data. The blue is the yes answers and the red is the no.

Table 2

Count of Did you like school as an elementary/primary student?



I

then

asked the participants about how important getting an education was to them. All of the participants rated getting an education as very important. For this question, I gave the participants a range to choose from. One was not important at all and five was extremely important. The participants average answer was 4.6. I also asked the participants if they thought their country viewed education as important and the

results were varied. From my survey, I learned that students from many different places including the United States do think education is important but believe that their country doesn't think it is as important. A copy of the survey is available in Appendix A.

Government Influence on Education

Next, I explored the different levels of government the majority of education decisions are made from within each of the three countries. In the United States, the majority of funding and decisions about education come from the state and local levels. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2012),

Education is primarily a State and local responsibility in the United States. It is States and communities, as well as public and private organizations of all kinds, that establish schools and colleges, develop curricula, and determine requirements for enrollment and graduation. (p. 1)

In South Korea, the schools are run by the Ministry of Education, which is a division of the Korean government. The Center on International Education Benchmarking, henceforth known as CIEB, (2015 c) describes the Korean government's role in education when it states, "The structure of education governance is very similar to other Korean government operations, with major initiatives produced and funded by a central office and carried out by lower, regional offshoots of the central office" (p. 1). This basically means that the central government makes the majority of the education system decisions and then the regional areas are in charge of carrying out those decisions.

Much like South Korea, Finland also has a ministry of education who is responsible for making decisions about education within the country. The CIEB (2015 a) describes the Finnish ministry of education by saying, "The Ministry of Education and Culture oversees all publicly funded education, including the development of the national core curriculum through The Finnish National Board of Education and the accreditation of teacher training programs" (p. 1). In regards to education funding in Finland, the previous article (2015 a) also explains "Funding responsibilities are divided between the federal and municipal governments with the federal government assuming about 57% of the financial burden of schools and municipal authorities assuming the remaining 43%" (p. 1). The United States government involvement in education is almost the opposite of South Korea and Finland. The majority of education decisions in the United States are made at state and local levels because decisions about education are considered a state's right. Finland and South Korea both have government agencies that make decisions and implement them nationwide.

Extracurricular Emphasis

Another factor that is important to consider when looking at a country's education system is the extracurricular emphasis, or what the students do when they are not in school. There is not a lot of information on the extracurricular activities of students in South Korea. I believe that this is because of the test culture of South Korea. Most of the information about South Korean students discusses how much extra time they spend in school or studying for exams. It seems that students in South Korea spend their time outside of school doing more schoolwork and

preparing for the exams. The CIEB (2015 b) discusses the Instructional Systems of South Korea, "Some estimates put the average total amount of time spent in school or studying as high as fourteen hours a day, five days a week" (p.1).

In Finland, the students spend much less time in school. Students are encouraged to pursue their interests with their education. Sahlberg (2015) writes,

People sometimes incorrectly assume that equity in education means all students should be taught the same curriculum, or should achieve the same learning outcomes in school" [...] " In Finland, equity means having a socially fair and inclusive education system that provides everyone with the opportunity to fulfill their intentions and dreams through education. (p. 61-62)

In Finland, the extracurricular emphasis is defined by the freedom of choice that students have within their educational paths. South Korea and Finland have different approaches to extracurricular emphasis. South Korean students spend their extra time doing more schoolwork and studying, while in Finland the students are encouraged to pursue their interest and tie them into their educational paths.

School Curriculums

School curriculums are a very important factor in examining education systems. In South Korea, the Ministry of Education (MOE) is in charge of the curriculum. The Ministry of Education's most current curriculum defines what an educated person in South Korea should look like when it states,

- ① A person who seeks individuality as the basis for the growth of the whole personality

- ② A person who exhibits a capacity for fundamental creativity
- ③ A person who pioneers a career path within the wide spectrum of culture
- ④ A person who creates new value on the basis of understanding the national culture
- ⑤ A person who contributes to the development of the community on the basis of democratic civil consciousness. (MOE, 2004, p. 1)

In South Korea schooling begins at age six with primary school and students are at least required to attend school through age 15. At the end of junior high, they take an exam to determine which high schools they get into. Figure 1 in Appendix B shows an overview of the South Korean education system and path.

Finland has a national core curriculum that focuses on languages and a few core subjects such as math, sciences, physical education, religion or ethics, and art. The system allows for student choices in other subject areas. An excerpt from Finland's national curriculum (2004) states,

Basic education must provide an opportunity for diversified growth, learning, and the development of a healthy sense of self-esteem, so that the pupils can obtain knowledge and skills they need in life, become capable of further study, and, as involve citizens, develop a democratic society. Basic education must also support each pupil's linguistic and cultural identity and the development of his or her mother tongue. A further objective is to awaken a desire for lifelong learning. (p. 12)

The CIEB (2015 a) says, "The curriculum outlines how teachers should focus on developing their students' creativity, management and innovation skills; with

teachers grasping these goals and selecting their own teaching materials and lesson plans, they have been successful in achieving the government's goals" (p. 1). The Finnish education system is free to all students starting at birth, but students are not required to attend school until age 7. After age 16, the students decide how they would like to proceed with their educational path. Figure 2 in Appendix C depicts the path of education for a Finnish student. It is interesting that both South Korea and Finland have the option for regular secondary schooling with the path continuing toward upper level degrees or vocational secondary schooling when students reach their upper teenage years.

Teacher Training and Importance in Society

Another factor to analyze when comparing education systems is teachers, their preparation, and their value within the country or culture. This is one factor that South Korea and Finland seem to have in common. In both countries, teachers are regarded very highly and teaching is one of the highest viewed professions. The CIEB (2015 d) talks about teaching in South Korea by declaring, "Teaching is a highly respected profession in South Korea, and among the most popular career choices for young South Koreans. This is largely due to competitive pay, job stability, and good working conditions" (p. 1). Teachers in Korea seem to have a lot of ways to improve professionally. According to the South Korean Ministry of Education (2010), teachers who do not pass teacher evaluations receive training tailored to their needs while teachers who perform well on evaluations are given time to research and upgrade their expertise (p. 1).

Like South Korea, teaching in Finland is a very sought after career. Teachers in Finland are treated much like any other professional in the country. Sahlberg (2015) writes “Teachers at all levels of schooling expect that they will be given the full range of professional autonomy they need to practice what they have been educated to do: to plan, teach, diagnose, execute, and evaluate” (p. 105). In Finland, it is not only the culture of respect towards teachers that makes teaching so highly sought after. Finland has very high standards for its teachers, which makes teaching very prestigious. Both South Korea and Finland place high value on the teaching profession. They also provide plenty of professional development and support for the teachers within their countries.

Where are the Gaps? What Can We Do About Them?

South Korea and Finland are two very different countries with very different approaches to education, but both are very successful. One difference between the US education system and the systems of South Korea and Finland is the way that educational decisions are made and passed around. The United States has many stakeholders that input their opinions into educational decisions in many different areas. A lot of educational decisions in the United States are made district by district, this causes the United States education system to be varied across the country. South Korea and Finland both have groups that make decisions about education that are carried out evenly across the nation. Another factor that is somewhat similar about Finland and South Korea but different in the United States is extracurricular activities. Both Finland and South Korea allow students a lot of freedom to choose their curriculum and educational path once they reach the

secondary level. The United States has a pretty straightforward path for most students all the way through. It would be interesting to see what would happen in the United States if we were to take this approach to education. I think a major gap factor between the United States and the top performing countries is the way that teachers are viewed and valued by each country. Both South Korea and Finland hold the profession of teaching in the highest regard. They also provide a lot of support and opportunities for teachers to grow in professionalism and experience. I believe that one place that the US could start with closing the gap is by supporting and growing the teachers that we have.

Conclusion

The United States has a different approach regarding how to provide every citizen with a free education. When compared to other countries' educational approaches, there are many gaps and differences. This study's main goal was to analyze areas that legislatures, educators, and citizens could work on and improve to provide the best education possible. We can learn from and follow the models that have benefited other countries and adopt some of their techniques into our own in order to strive to be the best of the best.

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Appendix A

Survey: Cultural Views on Education

What is your country of birth?

At what age did your school experience begin?

In what country did you experience most of your primary schooling?

What breaks or holidays did you have in your elementary/primary schooling?

Did you like school as an elementary/primary student?

In your opinion, how important is getting an education?

Not important 1 2 3 4 5 Extremely Important

How would you rate your country's view of education?

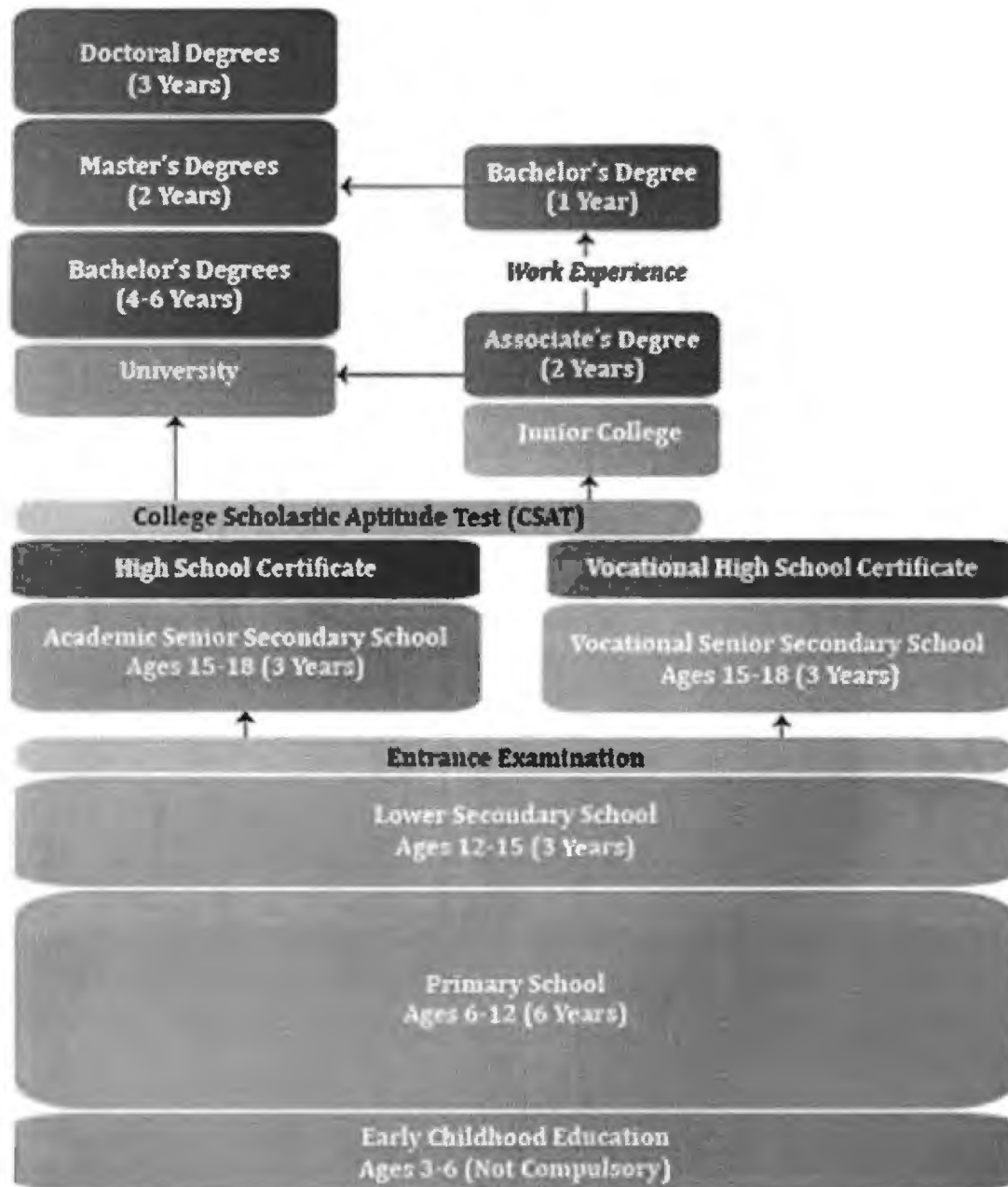
Not important 1 2 3 4 5 Extremely Important

How has your country's view of education changed since you were in elementary/primary school?

Appendix B

Figure 1

South Korea's Education System at a Glance



Appendix C

Figure 2

Finland's Education System at a Glance

