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The Quest for Alternatives to U.S. Education Reform:

A Brief History of American Education and a Contemporary Comparison to International Education Policies

William Dyke

ENGL 788

Professor Christina Ortmeier-Hooper

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I would like to thank my family; for putting up with me when no one else would; for always being there; for accepting my quirks and qualms without judgment or reproach; and lastly, but perhaps most importantly, for feeding me and putting a roof over my head.

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It was a brisk October night in the Netherlands. Two Dutch men and I enjoyed an Indonesian dish at their flat outside the city. We discussed similarities and differences between our cultures. Topics such as health-care and education were points of interest. I learned that the Dutch can attend school for free. One of the young men was currently pursuing his masters in political science. All school, I was told, is free for citizens of the Netherlands.

While public education has a strong tradition throughout American culture, it does not extend to the institution of higher education, or, post-secondary. I thought of all the money I have spent on tuition, books, and other material necessary for academic success in America. I felt outraged, cheated, lied to. This is not an uncommon feeling while traveling outside of the states; premonitions of a global conscience.

My youthful perception of American education as supreme continued to deteriorate in my mind. The ideas which had been planted in my head as a child that America was the ultimate symbol of socioeconomic equality, were disappearing from my mind the more I compared us with the outside world. These experiences were the seeds of this project and it is from these moments of disillusionment that our discussion begins.

Thesis Statement

This paper will show that school systems in America have traditionally reflected the country's social and economic anxieties. This is evident historically from the agrarian schools of the 18th century to the establishment of public schools that emerged throughout the Industrial revolution. In order to prove this claim, I will present a brief history of schools and educational policy in early and post WWII America. Next I will examine the problems created by reforms such as No Child Left Behind and the

Race To The Top Initiative. Finally I will look to the promising examples of Finland and Singapore in order to suggest alternative to contemporary educational reforms in America. Ultimately, the facts and opinions presented will form an argument for the implementation of educational policy less concerned with student achievement than building quality, well-cared-for school systems.

JOHN DEWEY EXPLAINS THE INHERENT CONNECTION BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION

In hopes of understanding education better, I began to conduct research in the many philosophical books on education from the University of New Hampshire's library. Of the many that I read, a few philosophers contributed significantly to my understanding of education. The particular one presented here, the late John Dewey, has been chosen because of his work's concise description of the inherent connection between democracy and education.

Education and democracy have traditionally been linked to one another. Authors such from Plato to Jefferson understood this. American philosopher John Dewey wrote on the importance of schools to society in America through his book, *The School and Society* (1907). Dewey's philosophy is mentioned here because it answered some initial questions I had, such as, why do Americans care so much about their institutions of public education?

In America, Dewey argued, school's relationship to the larger society was and is more important than in other countries. In support of this relationship, Dewey wrote that “the devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact” explaining that “a government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated” (Dewey, 95). Dewey also noted that “a society to which stratification into separate classes would be fatal, must see to it that intellectual opportunities are accessible to all on equable and easy terms” and that in contrast a “society marked off into classes need be especially attentive only to the education of its ruling elements” (96). Certainly this undeniable maxim propels the magnitude of importance for public education in democracy as opposed to, say, a more repressive government.

Furthermore, Dewey suggested that popular education favored two essential elements to a democratic society; “varied points of shared common interest” and “freer interaction between social groups” (95). These ideals, Dewey noted, creates a need for America to have a “deliberate and systematic education” (95). These quotes described how education fosters equality in democratic countries. (Or perhaps, it is better said, that education *should* foster equality in a democratic nation-as we will come to see later).

Dewey envisioned education as the process of constantly recycling life, or, in his words, the transferal of “ideas and practices” that reweave “the social fabric” (Dewey, 4). Moreover he suggested that “the gap between the capacities of the young and the concerns of adults widens” as civilization advances (8). The process taken up by the child to close this gap, then, is educational. Dewey's notion of a gap between adult and child is not brilliant. It is, however, important to remember because it describes the general outcome of education. That knowledge inevitably progresses and those born into society must undergo the educative processes in order to bridge the gap.

EARLY SYSTEMS OF EDUCATION IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA (1774-1830)

As stated in the first section of the paper, schools have traditionally reflected the social and economic aims of community leaders. The following text illustrates how socioeconomic anxieties in the beginning of American history were funneled into educational reform policies. The beginning of American history has been spliced between the Antebellum, 1774-1830, and the Industrial Revolution, from 1830-1900.

The Agricultural Economy and Manifest Destiny: Antebellum America (1774-1830)

In the beginning of American history, colonies depended exclusively on trade to provide for their families. Ronald Seavoy suggests in his book, *An Economic History of the United States* (2006), that American exports primarily consisted of “agricultural, forestry, or fishery commodities” (Seavoy

57). While the method of production was slavery and indentured servitude in Southern colonies, and yeoman in the Northern ones, both factions relied on their exports for profit (57). This, however, was occurring all under the sovereignty of the English monarchy.

After America successfully revolted from English rule, and before its Civil War, the country underwent massive expansion. Sometimes referred to as Manifest Destiny, American policy looked to create a continental nation. This was illustrated in the sale of Louisiana, by France, to America in May of 1803. Since famously coined “The Louisiana Purchase”, the deal nearly doubled the size of American territory. In 1812, America annexed Spanish presence in West Florida. During the Mexican American War from 1846 to 1848, America annexed the present states of New Mexico, Arizona, California, and all land unclaimed to the North (Seavoy 90). America purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867. Hawaii and Puerto Rico were annexed into America in 1898. This rapid expansion that has characterized American Manifest Destiny illustrates the nation’s incredible growth throughout the period.

Also in this period, both Northern and Southern states in America relied upon agriculture as the centerpiece of their economy. Presidents like Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe were in office collectively from 1801 to 1825. Importantly all were from the South and all favored an agrarian model of commerce (Seavoy 91). The agricultural tradition of the former colonies and subsequent acquisition of extremely fertile land led to a strong reliance on farming to provide for families.

As many who read this will know, slavery was the essential political topic of the times. Generally speaking, the Northern states did not support slavery while the Southern states did. This is most often justified through the interpretation that the northern states did not have an economic tie to slavery as the southern states did. In the South, slaves worked plantations and effectively provided free labor. The use of slaves was extremely profitable. These undercurrents begin to illustrate the division of ideals within the country. Accordingly school systems in both the North and the South were strikingly different.

The social and economic forces of this period were diverse and obscure. Not yet into the Industrial Revolution, the American economy was questioning itself. This was particularly true in the North, where farming was less likely to be relied upon.

Education in the Antebellum America

By the end of the 18th century and into the 19th century enrollment in public school houses grew steadily. Carl Kaestle suggests that in his book, *Pillars of The Republic: Common Schools and American Society* (1983), prominent religious groups such as Calvinists and Protestants “stressed Bible reading and early education as preparation for salvation” (Kaestle 3). Moreover, the colonials' inherent ties to England resulted in a high literacy rate among the colonists (3). However, there was little organization at any level for elementary school systems. Primarily systems of education were created through parental direction and local, district based, institutions. Apprenticeships were used readily as a form of education. Moreover differences between the North and the South were as prevalent as the differences between rural and urban education. These geographical differences were reflected in the school systems. In this way, it can be said that schoolhouses reflected the social and economic disorganization of Antebellum America.

Reform-minded individuals looked to the schools to “alleviate a host of worrisome problems and secure the nation's destiny” (Kaestle 75). These problems were of the rapid expansion of the countryside, the influx of non-American citizens, and the hammering out of what it meant, exactly, to be an American citizen. These same socioeconomic anxieties influenced the school systems to be allocators of both the religious and class.

Education available to rural students seemed more concerned with student's religious prescriptions than class affiliation. These schools were very unorganized and provided a scarce amount of formal education to students (Kaestle 14). Primarily these schools were district based and run by their distinctive township (13). Notoriously these schools were implemented same puritan tradition of the early northern colonialists. Physical punishment was often dealt to students who could not comply

with the instructor. This early religious orientation of the schools in rural American communities illustrates the lack of governmental presence and the early American's fear of spiritual damnation.

Urban schools in the Antebellum period more reflected a person's societal class. Systems of education used by those above the middle and upper class were pay schools (Kaestle 30). This meant that children were charged tuition. Also there were dame schools. Dame schools were similar to pay schools in that they charged a small tuition. However "dame schools" were taught solely by women and most often out of their homes (30). These students were mostly small children whom needed basic care and training (30). These two types of institutions served as the beginnings of formal private schools in America. These same pay schools illustrate how Americans used schools as a tool to specify one's class.

Those who could not afford to pay for this type of education were left with the options of an apprenticeship or charity school. Different religious sects operated charity schools. These schools "offered a curriculum of rudimentary intellectual skills, strongly laced with religious exercises and the memorization of scripture" (Kaestle 31). As such these charity schools sought to improve the moral character of children and simultaneously promote their teachings. This again exhibits early attempts of reform minded individuals to use the schools in order to fight social problems. Moreover it seems appropriate to suggest that, like the pay schools, the charity schools were used as a tool in which to specify a person's class.

The reader should now have a better idea of what I mean when I suggest that schools in America have reflected the contemporary socioeconomic anxieties of Americans. The next period to be discussed, The American Industrial Revolution, provides further evidence to this claim. Once again, the important connection here is between socioeconomic influences and education.

FROM THE FARM TO THE CITY: THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION (1830- 1900)

Robert Heilbroner and Aaron Singer describe in their book, *The Economic Transformation of America* (1977) that at the end of the 19th century there was a tremendous shift from a rural, agriculturally based economy, to that of the industrialized (Heilbroner and Singer 1977). Industries which produced extremely costly goods to transport such as cotton, flour-milling, small-arms, and iron making quickly realized that products were more profitable if made domestically (84). Indeed Lawrence Cremin wrote in his book, *The Transformation of the School* (1961), that describes the economic forces in America at the time of the Industrial Revolution in the following quote:

the period of industrial preparation comes to fruition somewhere around the middle years of the nineteenth century. A transportation network had by then been solidly laid into place. A labor supply, willing to perform the monotonous tasks of machine tending, had been discovered. A technology capable of producing an industrial apparatus was well advanced. A new basis for material life was emerging from the quickened means of transportation and the increasingly complex, interconnected, power-driven means of production. Matching was the expansion of economic life, evidenced not only in the ever more ramified networks of trade that bound the states to one another, but also in the rise of market relations between worker and employer. (Cremin 119)

Americans who traditionally had resided in the rural areas of the country were encouraged to leave for the city, tempted by higher paying salaries. Cremin also wrote that:

In the cities of the 1890's a new generation of Americans was coming into abrasive contact with the ills of industrial civilization. They swarmed in droves into New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit, seeking jobs, wealth, excitement, a better life. What they found too often was the hard grinding misery of the tenement, in which hopes corroded and dreams turned rapidly to nightmares. (Cremin 58)

The grim conditions noted by the author here demonstrate the social condition brought about by the Industrial Revolution in America.

Hyde Bailey, a student at Cornell's Agricultural School, described the inherent strife of the agricultural work force; "the farmer's burden is heavy", and "with no prospect of change in condition. Life is short and uncertain. Why spend it performing a painful task, which is at the same time a thankless one?" (Cremin 75). This begins to paint an accurate portrait of how the American economy's bread and butter went from an agricultural orientation to an urban one. Accordingly rural schools decayed and urban ones flourished.

An indispensable piece of knowledge to understanding the social landscape of America during the Industrial Revolution is the massive influx of immigrants to fill labor positions in the country's rapidly emerging factories. As social repression was occurring throughout Europe, America offered a haven complete with well-paying factory jobs, available to any whom could work (Bankston and Caldas 43). By the end of the 19th century a study by Congress concluded that 58% of the workers in "construction work, railroads, textiles, coal mining, and meatpacking" were immigrants (43). Accordingly schools were also involved in the Americanization of these groups.

State of the Schools (1830-1900)

In the years from 1830 to 1900 the schools of America's youth served as appendages of those concerned with the country's economic and social status. The hardship of tenement life could also be seen in the same neighborhood's schools. Many reform minded individuals sought to use schools as tools through which alleviation could be brought. In this way the main socioeconomic issues of the period were manifested into the schools.

The rise in mandatory attendance laws reflects the rapid growth of school systems throughout America in this period. These laws made it mandatory for white children to attend school. In 1852 Massachusetts passed the first state-wide compulsory-attendance law, and in 1918 Mississippi became the last of the American states to pass a similar one.

Social reformer and prominent journalist Jacob Riis asked that "Do you see how the whole battle with the slum is fought out in and around the public school?" (Cremin 85). His friend and

contemporary, Reverend Rainsford, stated furthermore that “the one way to bring better times, better civilization, better men, better women is education” (85). Cremin wrote that in “the universities there was growing agreement among liberal social scientists that popular schooling held the key to rational social progress (85). Such words again verify how community leaders in America sought to use schools to alleviate societal problems.

Authors Carl Bankston and Stephen Caldas write in their book, *Public Education America's Civil Religion* (2009), that public schools served as tools to Americanize immigrants. This stemmed, of course, from the massive influx of immigrants into the country. Caldas and Bankston also present an account of an immigrant in the country, where “in the school, the cult of George Washington was woven into the curriculum” (Caldas and Bankston 46). Documents from the late 19th century and early 20th century period of schools were all focused on “how foreigners in American society could be reconstructed to fit into American ideas of what that society should be” (45). This accordingly illustrates another manner in which schools were used to solve social problems. The following paragraphs will identify individuals who further perpetuate this claim.

Jane Adams, an American social worker, advocated for the use of schools to remedy societal ills. In order to overcome these ills, “industry, she concluded, would have to be seized upon and conquered by the educators” (62). Adams sought to teach the art of labor (63). Adams is considered a founder of the progressive movement, a group of reform minded individuals whom sought to improve society through schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Calvin M. Woodward, a Harvard educated New Englander, criticized the pupils in the schools of his time as being overly educated with cultural knowledge rather than technical (Cremin 26). Cremin described him as “an outspoken critic of the public schools, charging them with adherence to outmoded ideals of gentlemanliness and culture” (26). Woodward himself, wrote in 1873 that there is a growing demand “not only for men of knowledge, but for men of skill, in every department of human activity” (26). The “old style of education”, Woodward wrote, “oftener *unfits* than *fits* a man for earning his

living” (27). Such thinking paired with context displays the push for schools to mirror the needs of the economy.

The next section will analyze educational reforms made roughly throughout the second half of the twentieth century. This period has been chosen because it provides further examples of American leaders attempting to use schools to influence society and the economy. This, as the reader will soon understand more thoroughly, illustrates a problematic trend throughout American history.

SCHOOLS IN THE RISE OF GLOBAL MARKETS (1950-1990)

In the aftermath of WWII, the American economy shifted from production to consumption. This shift mirrored the rise of the global trade. Americans were in more of a position to consume with an extremely healthy economy. (Think of China today). Accordingly, Americans stopped focusing on the production and manufacturing of goods to focus on the new, service based economy.

In 1954, the USSR successfully launched the first artificial space satellite, Sputnik, into orbit. This sparked a wave of paranoia throughout America. Many saw the event as symbolic for the United States losing a technological arms race with their Cold War enemy. President Ronald Reagan played into the Sputnik paranoia to generate votes in his presidential campaign; he stressed the imperative to adapt in order to keep up with the Russians. Because of Sputnik Americans believed that their post-WWII economic momentum was in danger of ending. Similar to reforms made in early American schools the policies that were implemented from the 1950s to the 1980s reflected little of actual pedagogical input, but rather sought to solve the socioeconomic problems outside of the schools. In this way policy was misguided again.

Globalization and the Civil Rights Movement in the 60's

In the book, *The Economic Transformation of America* (2001), Heilbroner and Singer suggest that throughout the 1970's global trade increased seven fold (Heilbroner and Singer 336). In the 1950's industries such as the steel, automotive, and land moving equipment lost their competitive advantage

due to the influx of imported goods, such as steel and automobiles (Seavoy 301, 309). These changes and others like them contributed to a massive shift in the American economy from a system built around manufacturing to one built around the provision of services and production of technology in the second half of the 20th century.

American industries which prospered in the new global economy produced high-end technological goods; including minicomputers, personal computers, and other Internet compatible items (Seavoy 311-313). The rise technology and fall of raw materials embodies the transformation of the American economy in this period. Moreover, this illustrates how Americans were slowly changing their minds concerning the condition of the labor force and human rights.

The Civil Rights Movement in America took place primarily throughout the sixties. In the landmark court case, *Brown Vs. The Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court declared racially segregated schools unconstitutional, opening up the path for full racial integration in America. What happened next is history. The change in economy, cold war paranoia, and Civil Rights Movement all contributed to the socioeconomic currents of America in the sixties.

Schools through 1950 to 1970

Educational policy throughout the 60's reflected the same socioeconomic fears which Ronald Reagan played into in order to win his presidential campaign. These fears were that American children were not learning enough math and science in school. This notion was primarily due to the Sputnik incident of 1954. Moreover segregation in America was quickly deteriorating. For many the manner in which to enact social change was through the schools.

In Joel Spring's book, *The Sorting Machine: National Educational Policy Since 1945*, he highlights one community leader, Vice-Admiral Hyman Rickover, as a reformer who attempted to use schools in order to alter American military deficiencies. Rickover is quoted as having said, "if our people are not properly educated in accordance with terrific requirements of this rapidly spiraling scientific and industrial civilization, we are bound to go down. The Russians apparently have

recognized this” (Spring 32). Spring writes that “For Rickover the real military race was the race between educational systems to supply adequately trained engineers and scientists who could reduce the lead time” (34).¹

The National Defense Education Act of 1958 also used paranoia from the Sputnik incident to suggest a return to the sciences. The NDE Act increased funding over four years in public school's science programs, averaging, over a span of four years, roughly 200 million dollars a year. To Spring, “the NDEA symbolized the triumph of the arguments of scientific establishment” (Spring 96). Certainly it reflects how reform minded individuals again tried to use the school system to solve social and economic problems.

Another organization, The Council for Basic Education, argued for a return to the liberal arts in curriculum. The Council for Basic Education criticized the contemporary body of educators as being unqualified and incompetent (Spring 30). It also sought to create a uniform body of curriculum for all students (30). Unlike Admiral Rickover, The Council for Basic Education focused on changing the infrastructure rather than content of Public Education in America. However, similar to Rickover, these attempts at reform implemented events such as the Sputnik incident to justify a return to math, science, English, and foreign languages.

A Nation at Risk (1984)

The document, *A Nation at Risk*, was funded by the government and created by the National Commission on Excellence in Education where in one educational researcher, Paul Hurd, suggested that “[w]e are raising a new generation of Americans that is scientifically and technologically illiterate” in 1983 (*A Nation At Risk* 10). Most of the document is based on the core idea that the “average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is now lower than 26 years ago when

¹ Lead time refers to the amount of time a military has as a sole practitioner of a certain military advancement.

Sputnik was launched.” *A Nation at Risk* represents educational policy maker's continual use of socioeconomic occurrences to make policy.

In particular the publication concluded that “declines in educational performance are in large part the result of disturbing inadequacies in the way the educational process itself is often conducted” (*A Nation at Risk* 18). In response to the inadequacies the committee saw in 1983 compilers of the report suggested radical changes to educational infrastructure, in the form of higher expectations, modified curriculum, additional time spent in practice, and incentives for higher quality teachers (24, 27, 29, 30). While the document had good intentions it was largely ignored by policy makers. In this way it serves as an example of how community leaders have not heeded the advice of educators when making educational policy.

American schools in the 1970's were still enduring the aftershock of an enormously tumultuous decade in America. The Civil Rights Movement remained in the forefront of all Americans minds. Schools became the battleground for desegregation, hosting numerous riots after courts ordered “forced bussing” to take place. Moreover documents such as *A Nation at Risk* perpetuated fears initially brought about by the Sputnik incident of 1954. David Gordon writes in the textbook, *A Nation Reformed?* (2003), that one response to the “rising tide of mediocrity”, felt by the nation and outlined by the report was the Excellence Movement, which focused on raising student achievement standards (Gordon 8). This was in direct correlation to Cold War paranoia.

The Restructuring Movement was composed differently yet made for the same reasons as the Excellence Movement, arguing for structural changes in the school, this movement held the ideology that change could not come from within. However, Gordon writes, “neither the excellence nor the restructuring movement produced the results their proponents desired” (Gordon 9). Indeed the two often seemed to work against each other in contradictory fashion. These two policies illustrate how reform minded individuals again tried to use educational policy to fix socioeconomic problems.

Another movement which gained popularity was the Standards Movement. Often referred to as the “third wave” of reform, the Standards Movement combined elements from both the excellence and the restructuring movements (Gordon 10). This meant it implemented content standards in order to assess and modify state performance (10-11). Research on the movement is inconclusive (11). However, from such conclusions it seemed obvious that it was, in the least, not successful.

Interestingly, Gordon writes that these movements focused on “educational quality as opposed to access to educational services” and “they have used the rhetoric of accountability which has become the strongest leitmotif over the last twenty years; and they have vastly increased the volume of reform activity and the number and diversity of players.” (Gordon 12). These qualities which Gordon outlines convey how reformers have tried to use education as a manner in which to fix socioeconomic problems. The following section will present three different interpretations of how these reforms have managed since they were put into motion.

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN REFORM MOVEMENT IN EDUCATION AND HOW THEY HAVE FARED THROUGHOUT THE GREAT RECESSION

In order to discuss the contemporary state of education in relation to social and economic anxieties it would seem pertinent to outline what is now being referred to by many as the 21st century’s first “Great Recession”. Similar to the previous two sections these factors will be summarized. From these summaries the reader will then be presented with the two major reforms of the past decade, those being *No Child Left Behind* and the *Race To The Top Initiative*. Finally three different interpretations of how American education compares internationally will be presented. These results can tell us an amazing amount about the success of reforms made in the past. Consider the social and economic climate of America since the 1990’s.

In the collapse of the economic expansion which occurred throughout 1990s America along with the many of the world's former economic powers have plunged into a deep economic recession. While there has been much speculation, analysis, and general pointing of fingers, the main cause of the economic recession is widely agreed upon in America. That is, banks became subprime lenders to subprime loaners and, because people were getting loans too easily, they could not pay these same loans back. This eventually destroyed the housing market. People's homes were foreclosed on because they could not keep up with their mortgages. And when the banks couldn't sell the houses for what they were originally priced, house prices dropped immensely in value. It was because the housing market collapsed that banks were no longer able to provide businesses with loans in the same manner as before. Currently businesses, people, and the government are all in the process of rebuilding credibility.

However the housing bubble was not the first market to decrease rapidly in value, it was merely the last of many, and perhaps, as it is a keystone of any economy, it was symbolic. Author, Davide Gualerzi suggests in his essay Long-term depression and new markets: economists and the 2008 recession that the technology market crash preceded the housing market crash (Gualerzi 189). Throughout the 1990's the dot.com buzz crazed a nation of entrepreneurs, ready to make their millions through the Internet. This, however, was short lived, as somewhere around the turn of the millennial the tech market dropped in value significant due to over-saturation (187). While new technology was capable of creating value, it was also extremely hard to retain control of.

Economic issues then are a major concern today in America. There is a lack of money and a lot of people that want it. Because Americans have been socialized to believe they deserve the best because they are the best this has created a lot of depression. Why can't I have a Mercedes? Why can't I go to Florida in the winter? Why can't I go to college? These are primary social and economic issues we face. Many American community leaders have suggested that we will find the answers to these questions in our schools.

No Child Left Behind (2001) and Race to the Top Initiative

Recent reforms enacted on the American school system continue to try and remedy socioeconomic problems through schools. As the reader knows from the three previous sections this is the American tradition. In consideration of the previous decade's two major educational reforms the reader will recognize that not much has changed.

NCLB, or the No Child Left Behind act of 2001, was created in response to a growing concern of American student deficiencies in math and reading. The law itself forces students, in grades three through eight, to take standardized tests in reading in math. From these scores schools are judged if they meet AYP, an acronym for adequate yearly progress. If the students are not deemed to have met the criteria sufficient for AYP then the schools is deemed a failure.

If a school is deemed a failure then there are a few possible consequences. First is that students may be moved to other schools. Second, the school could undergo significant restructuring. The third option is a mix of the two. Those that do well are considered successes. They receive honors and are awarded accordingly.

NCLB is part of the US government's attempts to "close the achievement gap" and provide the best overall quality in education (Zhao 6). However it actually bases its judgment only on the two subjects of math and reading. In 2005, NCLB incorporated science as a component of the test (5). Therefore NCLB is really meant to improve the overall student reading, math, and recently, scientific abilities, rather than the overall educative experience of the student.

A key aspect of NCLB has been its rigorous curriculum standards (Zhao 5). These standards are developed at the state level and judged by the Department of Education. Some states even have created textbooks to teach the material mandated by the Department of Education. NCLB has also implemented a strict accountability program at the state and federal levels. "States and schools have developed elaborate systems to collect, analyze, and support data required by NCLB to show Adequate Yearly Progress" (6). Furthermore data on student performance in relation to Adequate Yearly Progress

has to be published in report cards and local newspapers. Such is deemed an increase in teaching accountability by NCLB.

This educational policy has two meanings. The first is that differences in academic performance between students in the United States should be minimized. Primarily this has been referred to as a problem of minority performance versus majority performance. The second meaning of “closing the achievement gap” comes from the American government’s desire to minimize academic performance between the United States and other countries. This concern has been highlighted by surveys conducted by multiple institutions such as, TIMSS, PISA, and PIRLS.

The goal of NCLB is that students will meet proficiency, as judged by state created programs under federal supervision, in 2014. NCLB has been, for the most part, a failure. In 2011 the Center on Education Policy “found that 48 percent of the nation’s public schools failed to meet NCLB goals” (Resnick 1). In 2010 the same center found only 39 percent met NCLB goals. In 2006 only 29 percent met the same goals. Clearly the percentage of schools who cannot make Adequate Yearly Progress is rising. The numbers are going the wrong way; up, instead of down.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated that “No Child Left Behind is broken” (Resnick 2). Moreover the Department of Education has been noted for giving more and more waivers to schools that do not meet the goals of NCLB (2). These schools can manipulate their data in order to make the impression that they are doing much better than the original scores would suggest. This is but one example of how NCLB isn’t working. Moreover there is not an agreed upon manner in which to gauge progress. The fact that states are allowed to create standardized tests makes analyzing national progress impossible. This is an extremely important detail of why NCLB is not working.

Race to the Top is a 4.35 billion dollar competitive grant program implemented by the Obama administration in July of 2009. The Obama administration sought and seeks to “kick-start key education reforms in states and districts and create the conditions for greater educational innovation” (Boser 1). The goals of the Race to the Top initiative are as follows: 1) adopt more rigorous standards

and assessments; 2) recruit, evaluate, and retain highly effective teachers and principals; 3) reverse performance of low performing schools; and 4) build data systems that measure student success. States compete through these four criteria for federal funding in their schools.

Forty states and the District of Columbia participated in the first phase of RTT. Delaware and Tennessee were deemed the “winners” by the Department of Education and accordingly received grant money in March of 2010 (Boser 1). In August of 2010, the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Rhode Island received grant money to participate in RTT (1). These states used their grant money for a number of projects, mostly in accordance with RTT initiatives. Maryland instituted new teacher training programs in accordance with newly established core standards. Hawaii's implementation of grant money has been deemed “unsatisfactory” by the Department of Education. Such is the nature of the RTT.

The Center for American Progress's report “Race to the Top: What Have We Learned From The States So Far” released a state-by-state evaluation of RTT in March of 2012. The study seeks to evaluate states by “benchmarking their success against a set of key indicators” (Boser 3). While not an incredibly in-depth study, it helps us to understand what is happening contemporarily because it was created so recently. The fact that it is not an incredibly in-depth study actually aids us in this way. Here is what the study tells us. RTT has advanced Common Core standards and teacher evaluations. All of the states that participate in RTT have implemented a new teacher-evaluation system. This has also led to principal-evaluation systems (3). These new evaluation programs are a fundamental component of the change RTT has brought to state educational systems.

Not surprisingly, many teachers unions and other groups have fought against the new evaluations. For example, in the State of New York, “more than 1,000 principals have signed a petition protesting the new teacher evaluation system”, and furthermore many districts have not been able to resolve the issue, including New York City (Boser 3). This illustrates how many educational professionals do not support strict, standardized assessments. Furthermore many states will not

accomplish the goals that they have set, in accordance with the goals of the federal RTT. For example, Tennessee has promised that one hundred percent of its students will be proficient in math and reading by 2014. Hawaii has publicly stated that it will destroy the “achievement gap” by 2018 (3). If these goals seem lofty to the reader, you are not alone.

PISA, TIMMS, and PRILS

Americans have long kept watchful eyes on their schoolhouses. Throughout the majority of American history this has remained a domestic affair. (Of course this is with the exception of the Prussian common school in the 19th century). However recent developments in educational research now allow many country’s students to be compared and contrasted. This has been accomplished by the means of regulated, standardized tests. Identically-aged students from each country take the test, and the results are compared.

The OECD (Organization for Economic and Co-operation and Development) has created its PISA report (Program for International Student Assessment) every three years since 1997. An official statement from the organization's website states that “[PISA] aims to evaluate education systems worldwide every three years by assessing 15-year-olds' competencies in the key subjects: reading, mathematics and science (“Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.”). Accordingly PISA results help to define the quality of a country's educational system in comparison to other countries. More importantly these results have guided those interested to educational reforms of merit.

The results of PISA reports in the past decade have startled Americans. The National Center for Education Statistics (2013) suggests in an analysis of PISA's 2003 report that; “[i]n 2003, U.S. performance in mathematics literacy and problem solving was lower than the average performance for most OECD countries” notably (“A Summary of Findings from PISA 2006.”). Moreover the site explains that; “[i]n both 2000 and 2003, about two-thirds of the other participating OECD countries outperformed the United States in these content areas” (“A Summary of Findings from PISA 2006.”). In 2003, the average PISA score was 494 out of 700 in reading literacy and 500 out of 700 in science

literacy ("A Summary of Findings from PISA 2006."). The US scored 495 in reading literacy and 491 in science literacy respectively. The mediocrity of American scores does indeed suggest that public education in America is mediocre.

In contrast, I learned that the Netherlands has been consistently ranked 9th out of the 30 or so countries that are documented in the PISA reports. America has averaged a rank of 17th, a little below the median. In a method similar to a criminal investigation these facts verified my premonitions so long ago with my Dutch companions in the Northern Europe.

In the book *Catching Up or Leading the Way* (2009), Yong Zhao writes that in 1995 American students only outperformed two countries in the TIMSS math assessment (Zhao 8). TIMSS (Trends in Mathematics and Science Study) is another test, similar to PISA, used to internationally gauge educational systems. American students were outscored by 11 of the 21 countries in the TIMSS scientific assessment. In the TIMSS advanced math assessment, American students fell short of 11 out of the 15 countries which participated (8). These results further illustrate the reason for concern. The PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy) has also been used in a manner similar to PISA and TIMSS. Between 2001 and 2006 American students showed no improvement in reading abilities through PIRLS (8). U.S. Students placed 18th out of 40 countries on the 2006 girls assessment (8). U.S. test scores, clearly, are mediocre at best in relation to top performing countries.

The results of these tests have created an outcry by those with their ears to the grounds of public education in America. People want to know why children are not doing as well as their parents believe they can. Importantly these tests display the poignant discrepancy between the majority's comparatively quality performance on the tests, and the minority's sub-par results. This has been labeled the achievement gap by many. In order to improve American education the phrase, "close the achievement gap", has consequently been used.

While it is clear that minorities are receiving the shorter end of the stick in America, it is not clear why that is. That is one major problem, of the many problems, institutions such as the Department

of Education Faces today. In order to raise student achievement on assessments such as PISA, TIMMS, and PIRLS, the Department of Education has enacted two major reforms: respectfully labeled No Child Left Behind of 2001 and the Race to the Top Initiative of 2009.

WHAT FINLAND AND SINGAPORE MIGHT TEACH US: SOME PROMISING EXAMPLES FOR U.S. EDUCATIONAL POLICY?

A popular way to dissect contemporary education is to compare the United States to top PISA performers. In particular, author Anu Partanen suggests that Finland “has ranked at or near the top in all three competencies on every survey since 2000, neck and neck with superachievers such as South Korea and Singapore” (Partanen 1). Finland's reign of dominance throughout the PISA survey has given the country an unexpectedly high amount of clout when it comes to discussing the proper way to reform education.

Upon the realization of Finland's success with its educational system the inquisitive person asks, how do Finland's students score so well on PISA? While there is constant debate concerning why Finland has done so well on these tests, there are some unique characteristics which indisputably contribute to whatever it is that is making the Finnish system both successful and different.

Before presenting the major points of the Finnish educational system a disclaimer should be made regarding fundamental differences between American and Finland, such as population and geography. Finland would be considered a relatively small state in America. Its population is a million less people than Massachusetts and five times that of New Hampshire. Certainly there is a different composition of ethnicity composing its citizens as well. Therefore the Finnish system cannot be compared identically to the American system. However, the areas where Finland has found success point to philosophical concepts that the U.S. system could use to make improvements. Many would argue that comparisons to the Finnish system are useless because of the differences in demographics.

However, that is short sighted. The Finnish system should be used as a sample case, similar to how a scientist would draw conclusions from an isolated experiment, or the manner in which a motorcycle driver would correct his or her technique after experiencing a near-death situation.

In general, the Finnish system of education is an oddball. In comparison to most other countries, Finnish schools assign less work outside of school and encourage students to engage in creative play (Partanen 2). These unique ideals begin to paint the picture of the Finnish system, one entirely at odds with traditional conceptions of education.

In this same line of thinking Finns abhor competition in both life and their educational system. Finnish author and director of the Finnish Ministry of Education's Center for International Mobility, Pasi Sahlberg, states that “nothing make Finns more uncomfortable” than competition (Partanen 3). Everyone in Finland receives an equal educational experience. Notably, Sahlberg further states, “the main driver of education policy is not competition between teachers and between schools, but cooperation” (3). Finnish officials are concerned with an equity of opportunities rather than excellence.

In a similar fashion, the Finnish system of education has a fluid and flexible grading structure along with a lack of standardized tests. Partanen writes that the only exception to the absence of standardized tests is “the National Matriculation Exam, which everyone takes at the end of voluntary upper-secondary school, roughly the equivalent of American high school” (Partanen 3). This contrasts the recent trend in past decades of reformers that standardized tests help students here in America.

According to Sahlberg a fundamental aspect of the Finnish systems success lies in its proper treatment of educators. Unlike in many of the world's systems of education, in Finland's system, “all teachers and administrators are given prestige, decent pay, and a lot of responsibility” (Partanen 2). Moreover, a Master's degree is required to enter the profession and the programs which train teachers are some of the most selective higher education schools in Finland (2). These tactics have undeniably raised the caliber of educators entering and working in Finnish schools.

Finally there are no private schools in Finland. This is very important to understand. *There are*

no private schools in Finland. There are no private universities in Finland. While there is a minute number of “independent schools” throughout the country, even they are publicly financed (Partanen 2). None of these institutions are allowed to charge tuition to students (2). This means that practically all Finnish students, from preschool to doctoral programs, are enrolled in the public education system.

In summation, the Finnish system of education is extremely open and fluid as compared to most others around the world. Whereas here, in America, we rush to gauge our students learning progress, implementing as many standardized tests as possible, in Finland the system does not rely standardized tests. It relies on the people in the system. Education in Finland, perhaps most poignant to understand, is truly public. The Finnish example provides an immense amount of insight into our educational system. Perhaps, as the author tells us, “[t]o possess some of the best schools in the world might still not be good enough if there are children being left behind” (Partanen 5). This proves that “it is possible to achieve excellence by focusing not on competition, but on cooperation, and not on choice, but on equity” (5). In this way many have come to decry the U.S. System as perpetuating socioeconomic class differences.

Singapore is another top performer among PISA participants. Unlike Finland, Singapore is located in Asia and has only been around for half a century, since 1965. Interesting the goal of Singapore's educational system is strikingly different than that of Finland's, regardless of their proximity in the PISA rankings. That is, to supply the necessary and qualified human capital to their economy through a system of education. From their success, Singapore has gained a significant competitive advantage over other countries. While there are many opinions as to why Singapore's system of education is so successful, the following are taken from the OECD's primary analysis of Singapore's system.

Similar to the disclaimer made about Finland, Singapore is obviously an extremely different country than America in the many ways. Interestingly, Finland has only roughly 200,000 more people than Singapore, illustrating that the two countries have similar populations. I will use the Singapore

example in the same manner which we highlighted Finland's educational success; in order to draw ideas, not conclusions, for the improvement of education in America.

Beginning in the mid 1990's Singapore made an effort to become a player in the global knowledge economy (*Singapore: Rapid Improvement...* 160). This was done, as has consistently been the trend in Singapore, through educational reform. An interesting fact to illustrate this point is that Singapore's government has invested an immense amount of money, (second only to military defense), in education. In 2010 education accounted for 3.6% of the GDP and approximately 20% of the total government expenditure (165). Such fiscal policy indicates the seriousness with which Singapore views its educational structure.

Singapore's educational system has maintained a clear vision, shared by leader and officials, which has contributed to the success of its system. The reforms enacted by such officials have always been made in response to economic considerations first. Two movements that reflected this commitment were called "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" and "Teach Less, Learn More". I will discuss the two in the pages ahead.

"Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" was enacted in 1997 in order to foster Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's belief that "A nation's wealth in the 21st century will depend on the capacity of its people to learn" (*Singapore: Rapid Improvement...* 162). This movement provided numerous changes to the educational system in order to tailor the educational process to the student and accordingly create more flexibility and choice for its students. Future teachers were provided with more incentive to continue on their career paths and preform at the highest levels. Greater emphasis was put on project work and creative thinking. Schools were differentiated by subject matter and students were allowed to choose which they wanted to attend (163). Such was the opening up of the Singapore educational system.

"Teach Less, Learn More" was enacted in 2004 by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. The objective of this program was to create more room for student-lead projects for those capable

(*Singapore: Rapid Improvement...* 163). This was sought through the promotion of:

less dependence on rote learning, repetitive tests and instruction, and more on engaged learning, discovery through experiences, differentiated teaching, learning of lifelong skills, and the building of character through innovative and effective teaching approaches and strategies. (163)

Such a description illustrates the increased use of creative, self-directed learning initiatives in Singapore's educational system.

Important to understand also is Singapore's educational system's commitment to equity and meritocracy. Similar to the system in Finland, academic underachievers are identified early on, normally by the start of first grade (*Singapore: Rapid Improvement...* 167). Certainly, the OECD report notes that a fundamental aspect to the Singapore system's success is “the value, attention and resources it devotes to lower level achievers, not just high achievers” (17). This promotes equity among students. Furthermore a meritocracy is promoted through “subject matter banding”. Subject matter banding allows students to progress through their studies at their own pace and interest level (167). The equity of educational opportunities and use of meritocracy are fundamental attributes to the Singapore system.

In Summation, Singapore has implemented policies with a philosophy similar to Finland's. Schools in Singapore place the child at the center of education, rather than their test scores. Interestingly, Singapore has bought into the idea that if a student is interested in what he or she is learning then that same person will learn more efficiently. This has relied on the ability of both teacher and student to alter the curriculum in accordance with these values. Teachers, similar to Finland, are some of the highest academic achievers. Unlike in the U.S., there is high respect for educators in both Singapore's and Finland's schools. Contradictory to American policy creativity and collaboration are priorities rather than subject matter and test scores.

CONCLUDING THE JOURNEY: FROM BUDAPEST, TO BOSTON, THEN BEIJING

I am concerned for the future of education in America. In comparison to the Finnish and Singaporean systems of education America has developed a strikingly stifling system. Therefore, it seems pertinent to use the successes found in both countries to aid in the development of newer, more flexible educational policy. I do not pretend to have a crystal ball. However, I will not shy away from the clearly presented facts regarding the state of education in America. In the following section I will use the merits highlighted in both Singapore and Finland in order to suggest possible educational reforms. I have included those which seem most promising.

Suggestions for Reform

Considering that schools who have done well on the PISA, PRILS, and TIMMS, have also implemented more open-ended, creative policy, suggests that America should do the same. This, it is no coincidence, runs in contradiction to policies such as NCLB and RTT. More over these countries also use teachers in a much different manner than here in America. They are given respect and character-building responsibility. Barriers to education, such as class and economic status, cannot be accepted in America for both our founding father's philosophies and, perhaps more importantly, the fact that equality in education promotes an overall higher bar of achievement. The following are suggestions to how American education can promote increased flexibility and less discrepancies between student achievements in schools.

Generally speaking, we need to reduce the amount of standardized testing that is taking place. The rigid confines such practice creates stifles teacher's ability to teach. Moreover testing and gauging student performance around the country does not do anything except for tell us who is learning more than others. It does not improve our schools. Therefore, policies such as NCLB and RTT, need to be rethought because they are based around the annual testing of students. We need to switch the focus from results to process in our schools.

One manner in which we can eliminate socioeconomic barriers to education, and thus encourage the development of competitive knowledge, is to implement MOOCs (Massive Online

Enrollment Courses). Like many Americans, I have signed up for a few MOOCs. The first one I signed up for was to learn the computer program Python. The second one was to trace the origin of the Greek hero archetype through the ages. I dropped out of both within the week. I simply don't have time for additional homework. Going to and paying for college are time consuming. However, MOOCs could virtually eliminate tuition and housing fees traditionally inherent in higher education.

According to Li Yuan and Stephen Powell in their study, *MOOCs and Open Education: Implications for Higher Education* "The promise of MOOCs is that they will provide free to access, cutting edge courses that could drive down the cost of university-level education and potentially disrupt the existing models of higher education" (Yuan and Powell 6). MOOCs have two distinctive features, the first being "Open access - anyone can participate in an online course for free" and two, "Scalability - courses are designed to support an indefinite number of participants" (7). These two features provide anyone with Internet access and disposable time to access educative experiences previously reserved for only those whom could pay the bill.

The promise of MOOCs is astounding however there is little research on their effectiveness as they are so contemporary. My own experiences with them haven't been the most positive. These virtual academies are far from perfect. Could the current MOOCs merely be stepping stones to a much more robust system?

Perhaps the strongest argument against the potential of MOOCs is that they fail to accommodate the traditional student to student, and student to teacher interactions inherent in modern American schools. Certainly the nature of web-based education does not encourage dialogue between students and teachers yet. When I dropped from my MOOC courses, for example, I did not have a teacher to answer to, or peers to tell. However, I think that those who argue this point fail to understand the capabilities of technology. One needs to only look at such programs as Skype or Google Hangouts in order to understand how developers could integrate a more personal feeling into and encourage dialogue within a web-based classroom. These interactions however will be useless, regardless of the

format, MOOC or the traditional classroom setting, if the teachers are not qualified and competent.

This brings me to my next point. We need to improve teacher qualifications in a manner similar to Finland's and Singapore's system. This means raising the pay grade, the entry qualifications, and the level of respect for public school teachers. This seems like an obvious solution. If we want our children to learn the best, they need to learn from the best, in the best conditions. If we shortchange educators now, then we are creating a host of problems for the teacher and their students. How can a teacher be effective if he or she is distracted by the rent, job security, and the ultimate lack of societal respect?

Final Thoughts

By the end of August this coming summer I will be on a plane, headed from Boston to Beijing, with no real idea of when I will be returning. The contract I have signed binds me to teach English to young children for one year. That is one year without breathing New Hampshire air. One year without watching the maple leaves change color. One year without getting upset at the Massachusetts and Maine governments whenever I try and buy alcohol, cigarettes, or some other state-taxed item outside of my home state.

If I had the time I would add a section about Chinese education to this paper. I have heard that there are some very interesting things going on in the People's Republic, surprisingly similar to the American system. I suppose Singapore will have to do for now.

My journey to China reflects the ever increasing global nature of this planet. One hundred years ago we would be hard pressed to create cross cultural dialogue so easily. Now we can sit in New Delhi and call Japan, or Mexico, or Zimbabwe. In fact such businesses are thriving. But, as I digress, my own personal story, this paper even, showcases how the world is becoming smaller every day.

This is encouraging. The best way to learn new things is to travel. Whether it is in the pages of the OECD's PISA report or within Beijing's Forbidden City, the solutions to problems in life are often found in the strangest of places.

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