

**Using the Finnish Response to Immigrants in Schools in the American System**

Senior Honors Thesis

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## **Contradicting Models**

The debate has raged for years about the transposability of the Finnish education model to the American model. Critics point to Finland's relatively uniform demographics and political leanings in contrast to the dramatically varied cultures within the United States as a primary concern with comparing the two systems. While these are impediments in implementing the Finnish system as a whole, Finland's demographics are changing in ways the United States has been experiencing for generations. The world is shrinking. Immigrants from increasingly distant areas have been moving to Finland in greater volumes over the past several years. These new migrant waves have presented difficulties to all aspects of society, and in areas far beyond Finland's borders; but they have affected Finland's classrooms, too. This trend has prompted not just a dip in the very international test scores which launched them into the global spotlight in the first place, but active responses to these challenges from across the Finnish spectrum.

America has been experiencing these individual difficulties that stem from the disparities caused by immigrants in the classroom for decades. In America, these challenges have been faced with different generations of reforms piled on top of each other, often hindered by concerns of federalism<sup>1</sup>. In Finland, they abandoned this lecture-heavy, test-based model years before in favor of an emphasis on a model intended to keep children interested in being in the classroom by providing the best schools with the best teachers to all students in Finland<sup>2</sup>. However, since the homogeneity of their classrooms has been disappearing not just in terms of ethnicity but cultural and family background, Finland's system has been flexed and these challenges addressed in different ways with varying degrees of success. The rigidity of the

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Fritzberg, "A Brief History of Education Reform."

<sup>2</sup> Sahlberg, "A Short History of Educational Reform in Finland."

American model does not allow for the spontaneous response to problems in the classroom that is the cornerstone of the Finnish system. Nonetheless, in examining the successful techniques implemented in certain Finnish municipalities and classrooms to find a better understanding of what makes the Finnish model so successful at addressing classroom challenges, we can determine the applicability of these techniques to the local level of American classrooms.

### **The Models in Context**

One of the initial and most important factors that launched Finland into the global education spotlight came from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which administers the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test. The test, taken across more than 70 countries today, is intended to assess the ability of a nation's 15-year-olds to apply their school work to real world situations with the intent of helping these nations to improve their school systems<sup>3</sup>. These tests, first conducted in 2000, revealed to the world a slew of surprising data. The world took note as nations anticipated to be the most successful ended up below the average, nations that spent the most preformed mediocrely, and nations, such as Finland, emerged on the scene as education powerhouses well above the curve<sup>4</sup>. Since then, scholarship worldwide has focused on why Finland's education system works so well. Various educators and experts have established a variety of reasons why the model is so effective, as well as why other nations, particularly the United States, could not adopt it. Among the most popular explanations in the discourse is the United States' demographics, spending practices, and values.

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<sup>3</sup> "About - PISA."

<sup>4</sup> Moore, "Learning from PISA."

In terms of demographics, it is true that Finland has had a very different population than the United States for centuries. The Nordic nation is largely homogenous. According to Finland's official, though strictly not ethnic statistics, around 7% of its population has a "foreign background"<sup>5</sup>. This appears especially drastic when compared to the "60.4%" population that is considered "white alone" in the United States<sup>6</sup>. But percentages alone hardly tell the story. The notion that homogeneity is what makes Finland's schools so successful has already been disproven. Finland's nearby neighbor Norway is also a largely homogenous state, but has never emphasized education in the same way. Norway uses a model similar to the United States; and their PISA scores have been consistently middling<sup>7</sup>. It is Finland's system, built on engagement and equity, that has given Finnish pupils a chance to shine in the world spotlight, not their demographics. However, in recent years, those demographics have been changing. Finland, while still not even close to the demographic mix of the United States, has become home to many of the socio-economic, language, and cultural backgrounds that these new populations bring. This sudden shift allows us to examine Finland's reaction to these trends; indicating if these demographic factors are instrumental in classroom discourse or mere features of a system which is successful or not regardless of the children sitting in the seats.

Another popular argument from opponents of applying the Finnish model is that Americans do or should not spend on education in the same way. But it is also true that America's GDP exceeds any other any other Democracy, and our GDP per capita exceeds that of Finland<sup>8</sup>. And most importantly, it is also true that the American government spends more than Finland's government proportionally, and more than many governments within the OECD, on

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<sup>5</sup> "Immigrants in the Population."

<sup>6</sup> "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts."

<sup>7</sup> Abrams, "The Children Must Play."

<sup>8</sup> "North America :: United States."

education alone<sup>9</sup>. If money alone were the solution, America would have certainly solved the problem. But how that money is spent is what matters, something that PISA scores have revealed to be consistent globally. In America, these expenditures often go toward an extensive standardized testing program; in Finland, these funds are almost always at the discretion of the school<sup>10</sup>. This, however, is still not the complete story. Federalism allows for and encourages spending to be determined at the local and state level. Spending of this sort much more closely resembles Finland's system, and is based on the people closest to the problem addressing it. While federal spending reigns over the modern education system, local spending is entirely possible in the United states, and is how education was handled for a long time in America<sup>11</sup>. In this way, spending practices are another important distinction between the two systems, but again not as significant as critics might posit. Where we see a distinction less easily dismantled is in shared values.

The United States government distinguishing the majority ethnicity in society as merely 'white' indicates the tradition of ethnic and cultural blending that is prevalent in American society. There is a long standing and well documented history of an ethnically mixed America, and a future projected to be "kaleidoscopic"<sup>12</sup>. In Finland, as with most European nations, being 'white' does not necessarily mean being 'Finnish', or any other 'white' ethnic group. Finland's immigrants have traditionally been from the neighborhood, such as Estonians and Russians, or even repatriates; a clear trend upward starting in the 2000's exists for foreign born immigrants in any capacity<sup>13</sup>. The limited diversity Finland does have is relatively new. Like all nations,

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<sup>9</sup> "Education Expenditures by Country."

<sup>10</sup> Nauman, "Could It Ever Happen Here? Reflections on Finnish Education and Culture," 2-7.

<sup>11</sup> Pelsue, "When It Comes to Education, the Federal Government Is in Charge of ... Um, What?"

<sup>12</sup> Perez and Hirschman, "The Changing Racial and Ethnic Composition of the US Population."

<sup>13</sup> "Immigrants in the Population."

Finland is struggling with changes in society as challenges of globalization has sent waves of immigrants across Europe and around the globe; and their struggles have been observable in PISA scores.

Since 2010, and especially since 2018, Finnish PISA performance has been on the decline<sup>14</sup>. But, in contrast to the pursuit of PISA, the Finnish government noticed these scores and determinedly did not change their practices<sup>15</sup>. Fins had already made the commitment to their model, which never focused on testing in the first place. They did not wish to change their model to allow for better PISA scores as it would run counter to the outright goal of their system; equity. Instead, the teachers of Finland were able to perform with the same freedom and passion as before immigrant populations began to disrupt their once comfortable classrooms.

Coping with these immigrant and diversity trends has been varied in both the United States and Finland, but it is clear that without addressing these struggles these systems cannot hold up. While there is a wide disparity in the pace of immigration trends between the two nations, it is due to their accelerated timeline that Finland has been forced to cope with multicultural classrooms in a different context than America. We already know that Finland's model is successful in their goal of providing an equitable outcome to all students; but it is in the response to these diversity-centric challenges that Finland's education system can provide insight for the American model. In examining whether these responses were effective, unjustified, or transformational, we can determine if the Finnish equity-based model is not only feasible in a global society, but something which can be directly applied to American schools whether at the classroom, local or federal level.

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<sup>14</sup> Schleicher, "PISA 2018 Insights and Interpretations."

<sup>15</sup> Heim, "Finland's Schools Were Once the Envy of the World. Now, They're Slipping."

## **Equitable in Outcome**

The backbone of the Finnish model is its commitment to equity. Pasi Sahlberg, the man who literally wrote the book on why the Finnish model works, is consistently quoted citing equity as the foundation of their system. Sahlberg sees the distinction between the American system and Finnish system in the norms and values of the people in these nations. In a lecture at Dwight University, a pricey, private American school, Sahlberg argued that Finland's model cannot just be picked up and placed onto any nation. However, he believes that the core of Finland's model can work anywhere<sup>16</sup>. The problem isn't the size and diversity, nor does it depend on whether it is Finns or 'Americans' or immigrants sitting in the classroom. The problem is that Americans struggle to agree on a shared value of equity. That obstacle is potentially the most significant roadblock in nationwide reform; but not an insurmountable one. However, Fins do not all agree on their values either, especially under the stress of these recent demographic changes. Finland is seeing a similar strain on shared values crop up in various sectors of their society.

Finland has never been all success stories. Even before their teachers were faced with immigrant focused challenges, they struggled to overcome challenges presented by minority populations, even in minority schools.<sup>17</sup>. Similar to U.S. standardization rationale, Finnish national education policies set out to ensure that any student, minority or not, is ensured a cultural and a comprehensive education. However, in practice, they often fail to adequately educate all students in this way, as many teachers fail to apply this practice equally. The struggle

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<sup>16</sup> Partanen, "What Americans Keep Ignoring About Finland's School Success."

<sup>17</sup> Mansikka and Holm, "Teaching Minority Students within Minority Schools."

these teachers have is in educating their Finnish students through a more multicultural lens<sup>18</sup>. Some schools require a different level of engagement from immigrant students who study the regular curriculum while engaging in supplemental integrational work. These cases fail to address the social distinctions that exist between the varied groups within the school, and therefore work against the Finnish goal of reducing wealth disparities through education.

However, many Finnish schools have been operating with the homogenous demographics discussed by critics of the transposability of the Finnish system. These schools, though largely Finnish in population, were never built to serve particularly Finnish or even their Swedish or Sami or Roma minorities, or any other archetypal student. The system was built to serve all students. The system is not designed to provide an equal educative outcome to all students. It is designed to teach all students equitably, so they can all leave school having learned some set of basic skills and tools that put them on an equal playing field.

### **Case Study; Successes in the Classroom**

In Finnish schools, this model of individualized help being applied to immigrant students is also functioning as a tool to help overcome poverty. Students at Meri-Rastila primary school might receive an extra hour of language classes in the morning to get caught up. Outside of that, everyone is together. Classes are never divvied up based on merit or ability nor by language or socio-economic backgrounds. Lunches are free, and students can help themselves to as much as they can eat, so long as they take only as much as they can eat. And like other affected Helsinki

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<sup>18</sup> Holm and Londen, "The Discourse on Multicultural Education in Finland."

schools, they receive ‘positive discrimination’ grants that provide additional resources to schools with proportionally higher populations of disadvantaged students<sup>19</sup>.

These sorts of details have a long-lasting impact on students. They grow up, going to school at least, with the same experience and background as all of their peers. They learn to share the same food. And when they are struggling, they take a little extra time to address it with their instructors. In this article, Saunders argues that the reforms undertaken by the Finnish government, those which rocketed Finland to the top of the PISA charts, were meant to alleviate this very issue in the first place<sup>20</sup>. Although, when Finland set about to do this it was socio-economic disparity, not language or ethnic disparities that were causing conflict in classrooms. This again takes us back to the question of the feasibility of this model, and whether the lessons learned in 2000 apply in 2020.

When originally remodeling the Finnish system, the nation sought to make teaching ‘an elite profession’ and to remove inequities between Finnish schools and student experiences. This further emphasizes that what works in Finland is their attention to detail. They did not merely luck out with a homogenous population and driven students; they work to ensure that everyone is offered the sort of equal footing implied by standardized education models that rarely ever actuates. However, again, even here Finland proves not to be uniformly successful in addressing this.

There is no denying that Finland, while facing global immigration trends, also found themselves engaged with popular global immigration backlash. More critical stories, politicians, and parents focus on the negative consequences immigrants cause in their host nations. For instance, the BBC highlights the variety of hate speech attacks and anti-immigrant political

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<sup>19</sup> Saunders, “Finland’s Fighting Inequality with Education, and Winning. What’s Their Secret?”

<sup>20</sup> Saunders.

victories that resulted from the last decade of immigrant waves<sup>21</sup>. Some teachers have also commented on the difficulty of immigrant students in high concentrations. These struggling teachers argue for a limit on the ratios of these students in classrooms to avoid language barriers in teaching and conflict resolution, as well as highlight concerns of Finnish parents who threaten to move their children to different schools, therefore undermining the system<sup>22</sup>. However, the uniquely Finnish response came from Finland's uniquely prestigious teachers. Teachers have not been universally successful in addressing these concerns, but they have not responded with a lack of effort or resorted to government resolutions for a solution. Instead, these struggles prompted the Finnish teachers' union, OAJ, to create a document highlighting what strategies have, in the limited cases available, worked more successfully than others.

### **Seeing Solutions**

The teachers' union laid out several best practices they found effective in addressing the issue of immigrant and refugee education. These most commonly stressed language, and honed in on two dimensions of support. Whether young or old, support to learn local language, and support for this and other learning in one's native tongue are seen as indispensable. They also seek to guarantee preparatory education regardless of where one is from or what language they speak. They seek to address teachers as well, hoping for improved training in this area, and an increase of teachers with immigrant backgrounds. Another important insight is their goal to broaden "recognition of prior learning"<sup>23</sup>. This multifaceted approach calls not only for more

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<sup>21</sup> "Migrant Crisis: Finland's Case against Immigration."

<sup>22</sup> "Finland's Teachers: Concentrating Immigrants in the Same Areas Creates Problems."

<sup>23</sup> "Finland : Teachers' Proposals to Integrate Refugees and Immigrants in Education."

resources to be poured into education for the students, but for teachers as well, and for a stronger understanding of what education really means across cultures in order to be more effective for not just Finnish students, but for anyone residing in Finland.

This is useful in two ways; it not only provides insight into the best practices which have been borne out of immigration disparities, it reveals further insight into the core of the Finnish model. Teachers are always at the front-line for struggles in the classroom. In Finland, they are often the last line as well. Teachers are given the autonomy to address challenges as they see fit, support students as needed, and implement new practices or techniques based on what is working on any particular day. This allows them to act as soon as issues arise; which is fundamental to the other important insight of the OAJ document; the solutions.

If students are struggling with a science class, they might benefit from learning it in their native tongue. But for a student from the very same nation sitting in the very same classroom, they might benefit from an extra hour of Finnish lessons so they can truly excel when it is time for the next science lesson. In Finnish schools the solution is not to study more because the teacher needs to move on in time to finish her lesson plan. In Finland, the solution is to provide the child with the support they need so that both of them are able to be successful and engaged with that science class. This is not possible in restricted environments reliant on lecture and testing. Teachers have the freedom to address conflicts and concerns as needed. In some schools this is also supplemented by those ‘positive discrimination’ funds; which often manifest as payment for additional support staff to help teachers address the minutia of these challenges within the time available<sup>24</sup>. While this brings us back to the issue of American values, and the likelihood that additional money be placed in areas adversely affected by student demographics,

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<sup>24</sup> “‘Positive Discrimination Funding’ Boosts Educational Progress among Boys, Immigrant Pupils.”

it also illustrates the capacity for Finland's system to function, and more importantly adapt, in the face of challenges. This might not provide for a one-stop solution to all of America's challenges, but it reveals the lack of autonomy teachers have in being creative in their practices, as well as the lack of incentive to do so regardless of surrounding parameters; such as standardized tests or block scheduling.

This shows that Finland's schools, while suffering from some of the same difficulties as American schools, such as 'white flight', did not allow themselves to merely rest where they were. While some teachers found themselves struggling with the same problems in having inadequate time or training to address certain challenges presented by students in their classrooms, many others were able to utilize the autonomy and support provided by the Finnish system to address these challenges before they became problems.

However, Finland is not alone in these struggles, either. Across the world, ethnic diversity has been proven to create difficulties in schooling. At the community level, education and policy seem to align better when homogeneity exists. This echoes the concerns of Finnish parents and anti-immigrant sentiment across the world, as well as the exact line of critics of the Finnish model being applied elsewhere. However, when these issues are overcome it is also proven to have broad benefits for those involved. For instance, language skills, the foremost concern of most discourse on the subject, often ends up superior among immigrant students to that of native populations as a result of their immersion in the subject<sup>25</sup>. There is also an enrichment of values and understandings that comes from working in diverse groups.

This shows that the opposite end of this argument is also not the final nail in America's education coffin. Teachers are not stuck in a perpetual state of inadequacy merely because their

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<sup>25</sup> Maestri, "Can Ethnic Diversity Have a Positive Effect on School Achievement?"

challenges have yet been inadequately handled. Finland was faced with a sudden onset of these issues, and so had to respond suddenly. The struggles that exist in American classrooms are generations old and have not been responded to effectively by anyone in any of those generations. However, these same issues, if properly addressed, could push American schools a little bit closer to the universal student success of the Finnish model; a system which actually leaves no child behind.

A large aspect of recent education research circles around the topic of ‘multicultural education’ (ME). This term, often flanked by jargon, merely seeks a system which takes into account and engages with students of all diverse backgrounds and has long been discussed in terms of its implementation in the US and across the globe<sup>26</sup>. The concept of ME, however, is still not perfect in Finland, which is where we get into disparities between Fins, Finnish minorities, and immigrants in their success in schools. Some Finnish teachers fail to fully embrace ME, and change their teaching styles. These cases often manifest in Finland’s schools that have long standing minority populations and did not face the same necessity to change practices in order to overcome ethnic disparities<sup>27</sup>. This reflects the struggle of American teachers in embracing the same notion of ME. Even though teachers in these Finnish schools consistently supported engaging ME in their classrooms some did not grasp it fully<sup>28</sup>. In America, the question remains whether teachers are supportive of following ME practices in their classrooms, but there is no doubt that the imperative is not there. Helsinki, where positive discrimination funds are used, was among the most deeply affected by these immigrant waves, and also one of the most successful municipalities in counteracting these challenges<sup>29</sup>. That

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<sup>26</sup> Alghamdi, “Multicultural Education in the US.”

<sup>27</sup> Mansikka and Holm, “Teaching Minority Students within Minority Schools.”

<sup>28</sup> Mansikka and Holm.

<sup>29</sup> “‘Positive Discrimination Funding’ Boosts Educational Progress among Boys, Immigrant Pupils.”

illustrates how impactful these challenges can be at the onset as opposed to in a continued struggle against them. So, regardless of America's current subscription to ME practices, there has not been the imperative for American teachers, schools, or policy makers to fully embrace and implement ME, or really any broad changes to the system.

### **Application in America**

This brings us back to the issue of American values. The difficulty here is in the lack of necessity to shift priorities in education. However, it does not need to be a uniform shift as shown by Finland's own difficulties with unifying values, and the changes can happen at multiple different levels. The biggest impediment on implementing these changes and addressing education starts at the top. ME education practices are not enshrined in federal education policy. But policy makers are only in office at the whim of the American people, which leaves individuals ultimately responsible. The beginning of addressing these changes and struggles in education comes with the initiative to actually address them.

The more people discuss these ideas the more the barrier of contradicting values is broken down. This, in American education policy, could mean a shift away from the controversial high-stakes testing model. It could mean a shift in the requirements of a teaching job; elevating the prestige, pay, and dedication of teachers to classroom excellence. It could mean more funding, or a close examination of the role of federalism in education, or merely a reallocation of what is already being spent. But it must come from an overall shift in what we value in education. In America, the system we have is still debated in terms of its effectiveness in addressing all aspects of a child's development. But critics say high-stakes standardized testing

fails to address anything outside of test-based knowledge; such as emotional or social learning<sup>30</sup>. These aspects of learning are essential to the Finnish system, which focuses on children engaging with life skills, values, and their peers. However, achieving this, and creating a community that cares about emotional and social, as well as cultural, learning as a part of childhood development cannot rest in the hands of men and women in Washington who never see these classrooms. It must also come, like Finland, from teachers.

Teachers are stuck in a difficult situation in American schools. They are not incentivized to change. And as the economic principal states ‘people respond to incentives’<sup>31</sup>. The teachers who do wish to change and better serve their students are hindered by government policy and a lack of time and resources. Often American teachers must ‘teach to the test’ which adds another layer of undue pressure<sup>32</sup>. However, there are little changes, which do not fall outside of these boundaries, that teachers can implement. A focus on children as individuals is the beginning. The cliché is ‘my students are more than a test score’, but that, like Finnish minority schools addressing ME, can easily become a saying and not a practice.

If we consider the language barriers that are identified as the biggest struggle in educating students of different backgrounds, then we know that understanding the impact of how information and interaction are understood on either end of communication is the first essential step. But Finnish minority educators easily found themselves in the trap of ignoring the impact of language in the classroom, especially in students who spoke the same native language as the instructor. In the United States, the issue may not always be immigration, as was the case in Finland, though immigration does create these same disparities in certain areas of the nation.

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<sup>30</sup> Sloan, “What Is the Purpose of Education?”

<sup>31</sup> Southwood, “People Respond to Incentives.”

<sup>32</sup> Overman, “Fighting the Stress of Teaching to the Test.”

However, language is the means by which we express what we know and take in new information. In the United States, if we consider the different dialectical patterns of students who sit in the same classroom as well as the dialect of the teacher as different languages, then embracing these differences and engaging with them is one way to overcome the stringent guidelines of standardized testing. Discourse on dialects already suggests that acknowledging them in the classroom can have positive effects on learning, but this comes with important qualifiers in terms of how it is addressed and attitude with which it is addressed<sup>33</sup>. This brings us again, back to the lack of incentive to change, as a focus on dialects needs to be handled deftly by these teachers. Teachers who do not feel the inherent commitment to improving their classes through this lens will simply not do it. But for those teachers who dive into dialects through a Finnish lens, addressing content with ‘standard’ or ‘non-standard’ dialects, and emphasizing them differently as needed by the classroom, could prove to be all the difference in that child’s education. Not only could this allow students who may struggle with content due to a dialectic issue to be able to comprehend the material in a new way, if taught the difference in words and the way questions are asked on these exams; they would have to interact with their peers in a more immersive way than test-focused classwork may traditionally provide. This would force students to engage with the differences between them and their classmates, and dive into the themes at the core of ME.

Another practice teachers can implement in their own classrooms is a method of individualized help. While restricted due to the strict timeline which is a by-product of standardized testing, allowing teachers to engage with students differently is a key component of Finnish education. Instead of a lecture-based lesson, teachers could focus more on creativity in

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<sup>33</sup> Tegegne, “The Use of Dialects in Education and Its Impacts on Students’ Learning and Achievements.”

their planning. While a lecture may seem effective because it covers the content on the test quickly, it fails to embrace the differences between students, and the way they think. Structuring classes differently and embracing different teaching and learning styles in these lessons would provide something for each student in the classroom depending on the lesson, and this could trigger connections between other concepts in the subject. And again, essential to ME, it would force students to think about concepts in new ways, and along the way, if acknowledged in an engaging way by the instructor, would allow them to explore the practical implications of these differences in the classroom and in coexisting.

Teachers can benefit at their level from leaning into the Finnish model which so elevates teaching as a profession. But teachers are challenged by government policies which restrict their freedom in the classroom and do not require them to adapt to changing student bodies. Governments, however, are a byproduct of the people. The policies of the government cannot be blamed any more than the students sitting in the classroom can. It takes a serious commitment to change to implement it in this nation. It does not have to be world-wide change, but it needs a commitment no matter the scale. Teachers can commit to change their practices in the classroom, and governments can commit to changing their policies for education, but it is only in the hands of the people that this change really manifests. As people we need to determine what that change looks like, but nothing will happen if we do not make the choice to have that conversation. They decided a long time ago, in Finland, that they were going to put the onus of that change on teachers and remain dedicated to preparing teachers to address these needs when they arise. When the challenge came, Finnish teachers were ready to act and adapt. In the United States our onus is, at best, on a test; a test which we, as a people, do not agree will work. Whether the solution is in the Finnish commitment to teachers and equity, or a new model of ME

for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need to do the work of having these conversations, and determining what that looks like for us in practice.

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