The Comparison of Educational Systems of Taiwan and Finland: Implications for Educational Reform in Taiwan

Authors:

丁唯洋。台北市立南湖高中 高二五班
李冠儒。台北市立南湖高中 高二五班
I. Introduction

Nowadays, we live in a global village. To strengthen the economy of every country, education to the students has become more and more important. It can be regarded as a promising investment. The way teachers teach may affect students a lot not only in their performance in school, but in their ways of dealing with things. Today, Finland is considered as one of the most competitive countries in the world and has won the champion of PISA (*1.) two years in a row (science and reading). While we did not do well on reading, tested by OECD. Professor Jouni Välijärvi was in charge of the Finnish PISA study and he believed that the high Finnish score was due both to the excellent Finnish teachers and to Finland's 1990s LUMA programme which was developed to improve children's skills in mathematics and natural sciences. He also drew attention to the Finnish school system which teaches the same curriculum to all students. Indeed individual Finnish students' results did not vary a great deal and all schools had similar scores. Therefore, we would like to compare Taiwan's educational system with Finland's. The education really cast impact on life. For another instance, a Finnish child found that a picture from Reuters (a famous news company) about a Russian submarine planting their national flag near the Arctic Ocean was actually copied from the movie Titanic. This showed that Finland children would think, ask, and find the answer actively if they have questions on their mind.

The following information comes from the books and Internet we have read recently. We divide differences between Taiwan and Finland into two parts. We need to find out about the disadvantages we have and try to improve them.¹

II. Comparisons between Taiwan and Finland

1. The differences between the SYSTEMS OR POLICIES

A. policies

a. The big budget for education (R1)

The Finnish government allots a lot of money for their educational system(4 times more than Taiwan) in order to give an excellent environment for students and hope they can contribute to

(¹. PISA is abbreviated from Programme for International Student Assessment. OECD, held this tests once three year to measure students ability including reading, mathematical and scientific literacy are covered not merely in terms of mastery of the school curriculum, but in terms of important knowledge and skills needed in adult life.)-------------------FROM http://wikipedia.tw/
THE COMPARISON SYSTEMS OF TAIWAN AND FINLAND

hometown after they graduate from universities or graduate schools. They do not need to pay for the tuition! What the students need to do is to study hard. Therefore, there is no cram schools. On the other hand, their parents, needed to pay a lot of tax (averagely pay double than Taiwanese).

In Taiwan, it is greatly different. We pay tuition and go to a lot of cram schools. For me (Michael), it takes me 14 hours a week in cram schools, including the time I get there. But I still can’t live up to my expectations. I asked my classmates about this before, and one analyzed that I was under too much pressure and needed to find out more efficient ways for studying.

(From the bottom to the above: Lithuania: 356, Estonia: 420, Korea: 623, Taiwan: 642, USA: 2493, Norway: 2740, Sweden: 2893, Iceland: 3221, Denmark: 3756, Finland: 4102.) (R2)

b. The frequency of loaning books from libraries

The government of Finland believes that knowledge is power and can change their country, so they establish lots of libraries for people. Everybody averagely borrows 17 books from the library yearly in Finland. It is the highest rate in the world. While in Taiwan, there are lots of libraries, too. However, only elders visit libraries frequently. Like most students in Taiwan, we do not go to the library very often. Maybe we have too much homeworks or assignments from school and do not have free time. For another reason, if we want to do research, we can find the information on the internet so do not need to go out. As for me, I go to the library almost 10 times a year and so does Roger, my classmate. We need to visit it more often when we have free time.

c. The equal opportunity to learn

In addition, Finnish government doesn’t give up on the students who have trouble learning or learn slowly. Teachers would help the slowly-learning students during the class or after school. For some smarter students, teachers would ask them to learn by themselves by giving them some advanced textbooks. That sounds illogical, but it is true. (R4) This phenomenon frequently and apparently appears in elementary and junior high schools. Therefore, the government puts emphasis and money
on it. According to the report, almost 20% (R5) of all the students accept this extra assistance. And after one or two months, they do not need the extra assistance. This really reaches high efficiency. Amazingly, the gap of the academic performance among all the students in Finland (from the capital to near the Arctic Circle) is less than 5%. (R6) It’s the second smallest in the world.

In Taiwan, there is no policy like this. If we have any questions, we should find the answers by ourselves. Some students are too shy to ask. Therefore, they keep them and still can’t figure out.

d. No rankings and no classification

Are rankings or gifted classes good? It is now being widely discussed. As far as I am concerned, I am in an English-gifted class and think it is good because we have some extra oral, literature, and writing classes. That really broadens our horizons. However, the Finnish government does not adopt the same idea. They are against the idea of being ‘superior’, ‘classification’ and ‘rankings’. They consider that they would hurt students’ feelings and even any praise to students in public. While Taiwanese ranking is a way to inspect what you learn, what subjects you should improve, but it may make students be pessimistic with bad scores not only in school but also in life. For example, there was a student who studied in a prestigious school and got a bad ranking on monthly test and then he could not endure anymore and did not know how to face his parents. Finally, he committed suicide. To prevent the related tragedies from happening, the Finnish government forbids the rankings.

As for in Taiwan, we have now got rid of rankings. Strangely, there are still some gifted classes in some schools. This is an obvious classification. They can use more resources. For instance, some English gifted class has oral classes, literature classes. These are good, but from others’ points of view this can be a little unfair. I think our government should put more resource to the region where the resource lacks most.

e. The qualification of teachers

High-standard and devoted teachers should be count as a part of the result of the revolution. Obviously, the qualifications of being a teacher is much more stringent than in Taiwan. ‘Being a teacher is not for money, but for our country. I believe that better the teacher we have, greater our countries will be.’ Finland’s official once said. The government regulated that Master’s degree is necessary for being a teacher. They would also like to ensure if you really have the enthusiasm in teaching and a life-learning ability so that students will receive an innovative and intriguing education. The chance of being a formal teacher in Finland is 10%.( R7). Although the salary is not high, they are still proud of being a teacher. Actually, they have the higher status than professors in the society. At the same time, the government gives schools and teachers independence in deciding
textbooks, school regulations, and so on. That is to say, every school does not have the same progress on schedule and not every student has the same schedule. The chief executive officers in a school consist of 7 people, two representing teachers and the other 5 representing the locals. They decide the direction of the teaching, the money to use and hire teachers if needed.

f. The problems the authorities facing

However, as a proverb goes, ‘everything is not a bed of roses.’ The Finnish authorities are now facing some problems. For example, there are more and more immigrants and it will gradually become a multicultural society. How to let the immigrants mix into their country becomes an important issue. It is both a political and an educational question.

B. the systems

The Finnish government adopted ‘comprehensive school’ (R8) as their educational system in the beginning of the 1970s. What’s more, the government still provided textbooks, traffic fare, lunches, and even tuition for every student. It has been in practice for 30 years. And it would remained when the political party changed. From the design of the system to how to divide the resources, they set ‘equality’ as the center. There are 600 thousand elementary and junior high school students in Finland and they are distributed to 4000 different schools. 20 students are the top limitations in every class. This kind of class is beneficial to their policy--no child is left behind. No discrimination--they still take care of the foreign students (exchanged students or immigrants). They often distribute more resources to where there is most need. That is because Finland has suffered from less-child for years so they cannot lose one more student. Before the age of 16, they do not need to take any exams. The Finnish government considered ‘No Pressure’ as basics, and they can learn without any pressure. With the perfect systems and the big support from parents, they should get the fruit of high score in OECD tests.

As for Taiwan, our government adopted the 9 years obligatory educational (R9) system. The main goal of it is to connect the elementary school with junior high school and reduce the repeated lessons between elementary and junior. It seems to be a good idea. However, the result didn’t live up to our expectations. Why? Because we didn't do the experiment beforehand and the preparations were not enough. The system emphasized the various government didn’t train the teachers. What’s more, many editions of text books really confused students. They did not know how to prepare for the high school or college entrance tests. Students complained that something they didn’t learn, but it still appeared in the tests every year. If we do not change our system, there will be much bigger problems very soon.

2. The difference between the ESSENCES of education
a. The relationship between teachers and students

In Finland, there are two teachers in every class. One is a teacher; the other one is an assistant. When students have problems, they are willing to talk to their assistant or teacher to find out the answer, not merely about schoolwork, but emotional problems. Therefore, they have a good relationship and even can be regarded as friends, not merely teachers and students. They even keep in touch even after they graduated from schools.

In Taiwan, we noticed that a lot of students rarely talk to their teachers, but only greeted the teacher when they meet in the hallway. No matter how familiar we are with a teacher, it is not easy for us to spontaneously talk to them about our concerns, and teachers wouldn’t know what ways we should improve. This can’t improve academic performance. We are really more conservative.

b. The unique ways of teaching

This difference of teaching has the biggest impact on Finnish studies. In Finland, first, they change classrooms almost every class so that students learn with some related equipments. Hence, they can learn and get impressed deeply. One of our friends from Finland, Scotte, an exchanged student, said that this is the best way to boost students’ interests and he is surprising to see how less equipments we have in our school. To build such an environment, Finnish parents hence have to pay much tax to their government. Moreover, teachers do not teach in the old-fashioned way, but use power-point or organizing competitions for the students. That can help them pay more attention to their lessons and reach the efficiency they expected. It really surprises us that teachers managed to turn boring classes into interesting ones.

As for Taiwan, we can say it is the dilemma of the government whether to build a perfect environment for students or paying less tax. In class like chemistry, music, cooking….and so on, we go to the lab when it is necessary. However, in most of the classes, teachers still use the old-fashioned way by rote learning and lecturing. They claim that these are the short cuts to knowledge. For example, my math teacher announced that 70% memorization and 30% concept is the best way to learn math. He asked us to remember all the types of the questions we have done before. The Finnish teachers proved that it is wrong by testing two groups of students who had studied in two different ways in the same time. One group learn things by concepts while the other one by memorization. And it turns out that the former one learns much more efficiently.

c. Memorizing and understanding and unique homework

The way students learn individually also differs between the East and the West. For instance,
education in Taiwan is mainly based on book learning and memorization. They focus on exams. Teachers often have to rush through the textbooks to meet the deadline of every monthly examination. I have experienced this stress. At that time, we could not help but try our best to take all of the notes in class. However, to take ocean-like notes, we did not pay attention to the whole classes at all. This can make a temporary memorization, but after the monthly test, we gave them all back to the teachers. Finland students put emphasis on understanding. For instance, they use appropriate concept or formula to learn math without trying hard to memorize the different kinds of the math questions and even this way can reminds the related questions they have done before. The lack of understanding results in the need for cram school. However, some students become too dependent on cram schools, so they often goof off in schools. And cram schools are often arranged in the evening after school. According to research (R6), learning in the morning is much more efficient than in the evening. Students may feel tired during the classes in cram school and easily fall asleep in class. Thus, they learn almost nothing and would like to call it a day. This is an awful problem! On top of that, there are a great number of tests in school. It is a realistic world. How to get good grades and be admitted to prestigious universities is our main concern and goal. So the attitude and behavior will decide our grades.

If we take a look at Finland’s way of learning, we know that the students in Finland have a comparatively relaxed pace of learning. This allows better and deeper understanding of the topic they are working on. They spend more time on discussions to know what the thought you have and what’s the difference between others’ and mine. They are also often given assignments in the forms of a report or a project instead of tests, and they have to do their own research and gradually develop their independent learning skills. This type of homework can help them grasp the main point in their studies. We only do two reports in a semester, which are much fewer than the reports done by average Finland’s students. To reach the efficiency, we hope that our teachers can assign much more reports.

III. Questionnaire

We designed seven questions to interview people, who are all senior high school students (90 people) about our educational system to know what they are thinking about our educational system and to know whether we should revise it.

1. How often do you go to the library?
   A. Once a week
   B. Every two weeks
   C. Every three months
   D. Twice a weeks
   E. Seldom
2. What kind of books do you often read in the library? (Multiple choices)
   A. Fashion and gossip
   B. International financial and technology
   C. Education and arts
   D. Ecology, environment and recycling
   E. Politics society
   F. Sports and health

According to the result of above two questionnaires, there are few people who are willing to read some related to international, financial and politics. This is not good. In the global village, we should read this more and more so that we can guess where the world is going and do some changes. Schools should encourage them to read this.

3. Which kind of teaching do you like? (Multiple choices)
   A. use POWER POINT
B. read out the content
C. going on the stage to teach your classmates
D. drawing the relationship of the plot
E. Create more organizing competitions
F. the others

For the way of teaching, most people like the way of drawing the relationship of the plot, dividing into groups to discuss and do some organizing competitions. They think that teach by reading out the textbooks and going on the stage to teach classmates are boring to death.

4. **Do you support rankings?**
   A. Yes
   B. no

Most of interviewers disagree with canceling the rankings. They think rankings are competitive and can make a big progress under the pressure. Definitely, we found that those who support rankings often do well on tests and are always optimistic and confident about their lives.

5. **How many lessons a day do you think is suitable to us?**
   A. 4 lessons    B. 6 lessons
   C. 5 lessons    D. More than 7 lessons
All of my classmates think that five or six lessons a day are very suitable to us so that we can have more free time to develop ourselves.

6. Do you think that College or high school entrance tests are suitable to measure students' ability?
   A. Yes
   B. No

More than half of my friends believe that the college or high school entrance tests are something to measure how much we learned and which college we can enter.

7. If you were the chief of the Ministry of Education, what would you revise about our educational direction? (Multiple choices)
   A. raise the budget for every school
   B. evaluate the way of teacher’s teaching strictly
   C. increase the free time we have
   D. abolish the elite teaching
Most of the students think they should choose the lessons they like. I agree with that because it is time for us to consider what we like and what we want to do in the future and learn more about what we will use in the future.

IV. Conclusion

Both educational systems have advantages and disadvantages. Generally speaking, the Finnish education encourages people to pursue their true interests and learn lots of skills they want. On the other hand, all we can do is study over and over again. That is to say, we are trained to be a ROBOT, which aims at answering every academic question. However, when encountering some social problems, we do not know what to do. Confucius is known as the greatest teacher ever. In schools, we are taught about all the famous lines that he said. Things like ‘the teacher should teach according to students’” But do we really see this policy? We acknowledge that we have the best teacher but we produce robot students. If we won’t reform our educational system, it makes no difference whether we have great teachers. Taiwan actually is one of the strongest countries in Asia, but we still cannot catch up with some advanced countries, including Germany, Finland, USA……and so on. If we don’t reform our educational system, we will be surpassed by other developing countries.

In addition to this, the educational system also has an impact on the social level. For example, the two educational systems produce different values. Our education gives out the concept that finding a good job is the main purpose of life. While this creates some social stability, it also means that the
THE COMPARISON SYSTEMS OF TAIWAN AND FINLAND

spiritual life of each person is not easy to attended to. On the contrary, the Finnish people know better about relishing life and this world. We believe if we want our society to be more progressive and be in line with the most advanced countries, there is definitely a need to reform our educational system.

V. Reference (Cited)

A. Books and magazines:
1. The Common Wealth Magazine 384th<獨立與探索 > Published on 2007/12/30 retrieved on 2008/1/19 2008/2/3
2. The Common Wealth Magazine 384th<波羅地海幸福國 > Published on 2007/12/21 retrieved on 2008/2/5

B. Education in Finland - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia>http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_Finland retrieved on 2008/2/11

VI. Other reference (Incited)

A. Books and magazines:
1. Education & Research — Virtual Finland> http://virtual.finland.fi/Education_Research/
2. Finland :: Education -- Britannica Online 3.