



A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Teacher Accountability Systems in the United States and Abroad

Claire Linnemeier¹

Abstract: On a global scale, the United States is struggling to compete with other countries' education systems. There are several theories as to the cause of our decline that involve various attempts at education reform. Some involve a greater focus on teaching students "global competence" and others involve a more equitable and reliable accountability system for teachers. Much of the push for equitable systems comes from countries that have outstanding education ratings, such as Finland. This cross-cultural analysis provides some in-depth ideas for a framework that could work for the United States in the same way. This referred framework is summarized by W.K. Cummings when he states that the most fundamental kind of education reform is to create a "new concept of the ideal person," as defined by the society in which the education system resides.

¹ Claire Linnemeier graduated from Indiana University in 2011 with a bachelor's degree in Legal Studies in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs. She then went on to graduate school at IUPUI in SPEA with a concentration in Public Management and will graduate next fall. She has worked in Washington, D.C. as an intern for both the Library of Congress and the Department of State and has a growing interest in education and its reform.

Education is an all-affecting and evolving institution that continually needs to be updated and redesigned to keep up with our increasingly globalized world. Countries around the world are developing and implementing new and alternative education practices and devising a new type of education reform in order to meet these demands. The United States ranks 25th in Math overall and 20th among 15 year olds in global rankings². There are many theories as to what could be causing such low rankings.

With these theories come proposed solutions. William I. Brustein, Professor and Director of International Programs at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, suggests students need to be globally competent. Brustein defines global competence as the ability “not only to contribute to knowledge, but also to comprehend analyze, and evaluate its meaning in the context of an increasingly globalized world.”³ To look at education in the United States as a global idea, it is important to understand how other countries approach education.

In a comparative analysis of education in Finland and the United States, Tiina Itkonen and Markku Jahnukainen found that in Finland, the responsibility of the state is to fully support citizens in the quest for a decent standard of living and provide them with this opportunity in education and all aspects of life; the resulting policies are based on an equity framework.⁴ Education is a national initiative with a national curriculum, and local schools teach based on the national goals and use the goals to guide local decisions. Teacher training is an important part of education policy in Finland. Finnish teachers must hold a Master’s degree based on national standards, and teachers are held in high esteem. Teacher retention is also high with only a 7.2% attrition rate.⁵ Assessments are also a large part of education policy, but the goals of these assessments are to inform national policy and do not affect school funding; the results serve as a guide for improvement.

In Guinea, there have been alternative and innovative approaches to providing teacher accountability while still maintaining teacher empowerment and performance. In his study of teacher accountability and empowerment in Guinea, Martial Dembele discusses a program called Small Grants Staff Development and School Improvement Program.⁶ The program implemented several methods to build accountability and empower teachers by keeping them in control of the competitive allocation of program resources. The teachers in this program responded very positively to the expectations and requirements of the program. The designers of the program “successfully balanced organizational support and teacher autonomy and self-direction”⁷. This type of approach suggests accountability and teacher empowerment are not at odds and that they can be complementary when implemented in such a fashion.

Teacher accountability is not just a rising trend internationally. The United States has seen major trends toward teacher accountability since the implementation of “No Child Left

² Pearson Education, Inc. (2007). *International Comparison of Math, Reading, and Science Skills Among 15-Year-Olds*. Retrieved 2012, from Infoplease: <http://www.infoplease.com>

³ Brustein, W. I. (2007). The Global Campus: Challenges and Opportunities for Higher Education in North America. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 382-391.

⁴ Itkonen, T., & Jahnukainen, M. (2007). An Analysis of Accountability Policies in Finland and the United States. *International Journal of Disability, Development & Education*, 5-23.

⁵ Itkonen, T., & Jahnukainen, M. (2007). An Analysis of Accountability Policies in Finland and the United States. *International Journal of Disability, Development & Education*, 5-23.

⁶ Dembele, M., & Schwille, J. (2006). Can the Global Trend Toward Accountability be Reconciled with Ideals of Teacher Empowerment?: Theory and Practice in Guinea. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 302-314.

⁷ Dembele, M., & Schwille, J. (2006). Can the Global Trend Toward Accountability be Reconciled with Ideals of Teacher Empowerment?: Theory and Practice in Guinea. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 302-314.

Behind.” Adoption of accountability standards is strongly influenced by globalization forces that are increasing competition in the global market. The more this pressure rises, the more legislators and the public in the United States begin to point their fingers at teachers as the reason the current education system is failing. However, most finger pointing is not based in “systematic and rigorous empirical evidence on the effectiveness of regulatory mechanisms introduced to control the teacher profession such as standard setting, teacher testing, evaluation and accreditation of teacher preparation.”⁸

Leading to this idea of teacher accountability is a concept of the “ideal person.”⁹ Once societies have defined what the ideal person is—citizen of the world, student, academic, etc.—then societies can create a new concept of an ideal teacher for the ideal person. On top of all of the politics and bureaucracy within the American education system, there seems to be a larger force at hand. As times are rapidly changing, the world and its technology is moving far ahead of what seems like a dated system for education, and educational philosophers are having a difficult time determining what needs to be taught to produce a citizen of the future.

Sir Ken Robinson, a prolific and world-renowned education and creativity expert, has some ideas about education reform.¹⁰ He claims every country is trying to reform education for two reasons; the first is economic. He sums up the economic motivation and difficulties in it stating, “How can we educate our children to take their place in the economies of the 21st century? Given that we can’t anticipate what the economy will look like at the end of next week.”¹¹ The second reason is cultural; each country wants to pass on its cultural identity while participating in globalization. Robinson argues that the current education system was designed and conceived in the intellectual culture of the enlightenment and the economic circumstance of the industrial revolution. Although these ideas are radical and largely philosophical, they are an image of what the future could be for education.

With the United States focused on teacher accountability, the teacher is often blamed for poor student results. In an interview with Robert J. Helfenbein Jr. Ph.D., Director of the Center for Urban and Multicultural Education at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (<http://education.iupui.edu/CUME/index.aspx>), he offers insights into the past and future of teacher accountability and why it is of great concern.¹² According to Helfenbein, the focus on accountability has been growing and can be traced back to “A Nation At Risk” during the Reagan administration. He claims this focus reflects the influence of the business community in education. Examples include a shift in language with the use of buzz words such as “accountability, stakeholders, data-driven, incentives, branding, etc.” While Dr. Helfenbein suggests this change can be viewed as positive or negative, he argues education is an emerging market that can be exploited for profit. He believes educators should be held accountable for student learning; however, the method and process of measuring outcomes is the real issue. Helfenbein cited two key issues with standardized tests. First, teachers do not have a role in

⁸ Tatto, M. T. (2007). Education Reform and the Global Regulation of Teachers' Education, Development and Work: A Cross-Cultural Analysis. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 231-241.

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¹⁰ Robinson, S. K. (2010, October 14). *RSA Animate - Changing Education Paradigms*. Retrieved 2012, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcdGpL4U>

¹¹ Robinson, S. K. (2010, October 14). *RSA Animate - Changing Education Paradigms*. Retrieved 2012, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcdGpL4U>

¹² Helfenbein, Jr., R. J. (2012, June). V-598 Interview: Education, Globalization, and Teacher Accountability. (C. Linnemeier, Interviewer)

developing the standardized tests, yet they are held accountable for the results. Second, Psychometricians have found standardized tests do not measure what policy makers intend for the tests to measure and are therefore a weak indication of a teacher's effectiveness.

While some argue standardized tests are meant to aid in the professional development of teachers, Helfenbein suggests the tests get in the way of the teachers' inherent desire to improve their practice.¹³ He claims many teachers feel they are unable to spend time on improvement because of increased duties on the job, being reduced to test prep, and the cut in funding for quality professional development. Helfenbein claims policy makers are so focused on the outcomes (such as test scores) that they have forgotten about the inputs (professional development, student support systems, community engagement, etc.). Helfenbein says this is also a way for policy makers to essentially "wash their hands" of accountability.¹⁴

Teacher accountability systems are unfairly based on false premises, serve to gut the public education system, and ultimately de-professionalize the job.¹⁵ This is exactly what the teaching community does not need. Powerful and profit-driven interests that exist in America's current individualistic and capitalistic society are having a huge impact on education policy, keeping the growing youth of America from achieving their full potential for the future. The larger political and socioeconomic stakeholders in the system have neglected and wrongfully underfunded the deeper problem while placing blame on the disenfranchised and hardworking teachers of America. "Blame the kid, blame the teacher, close the school, and you're absolved of any larger accountability to these young people entrusted to a public system."¹⁶

¹³ Helfenbein, Jr., R. J. (2012, June). V-598 Interview: Education, Globalization, and Teacher Accountability. (C. Linnemeier, Interviewer)

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¹⁵ Helfenbein, Jr., R. J. (2012, June). V-598 Interview: Education, Globalization, and Teacher Accountability. (C. Linnemeier, Interviewer)

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