**Project Title**: The Option of Vocational Schools

**Purpose and Objectives:** This project attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors influence a student’s decision to attend an academic or vocational school for upper secondary schooling?
2. What are the curricular differences between the academic and vocational track? Do students who choose the vocational track learn the critical thinking and civic skills that students on the academic track acquire? Once in the vocational track, do students have the opportunity to switch to the academic track and are they successful?
3. What lessons from Finnish vocational schools can I bring back to my students who opt out of the college track?

**Background:** Only one in four Americans who enter ninth grade will attain a college diploma. In the District of Columbia, 90% of students will either never start college or fail to finish with a degree (Kernan-Schloss & Potapchuk, 2006). For the past 9 years, working and teaching in Southeast, DC has proven this statistic to not only be true but also has created a culture of learned helplessness in a population of students who, historically, are already behind. Students need to have high quality educational options that will result in skilled jobs, apprenticeships or college degrees. With the current economic status in the United States and recent educational cutbacks, vocational education has once again become part of the reform conversation. It is important to look to other countries demonstrating success with their academic and vocational education systems, such as Finland, to learn lessons and strategies that can be implemented in American schools to increase student opportunities for success.

In “Standing on the Shoulders of Giants,” Marc Tucker argues that the United States must look toward the strategies that are driving the best performing countries in an effort to reform American education policy (2011). Throughout his proposal, Tucker refers to Finland’s educational system as a country because of the high ranking 2009 PISA (Programme for International Student Achievement) scores in reading, math and science, but also as a country that has developed policies and structures that are resulting in high-performing global achievement (Tucker 2011).

In Finland, all students receive a similar comprehensive education until the age of 16 when they choose to continue in either an upper secondary school academic or vocational track. The track taken at this juncture determines the quality and types of learning opportunities that a student faces. The majority of students continue their education with 53% choosing a general upper secondary school and 39% choosing a vocational track (Salmela-Aro and Soini 2009). This transition is also seen as a method of integration into society for immigrant and minority students. Finland provides a unique opportunity to see how children of immigrants acclimate and find success in a high-achieving, equal and open society (Kilpi-Jakonen 2011). Both vocational and academic education takes approximately three years to complete and then students can apply to tertiary education if they so choose. Preparation for tertiary education is completed in both the academic and vocational tracks affording students the choice to either join the workforce or continue in academia. Jarvinen (2001) suggests that there is gap in knowledge of general life skills that is occurring in the vocational track that hinders students from not only proceeding into tertiary education but also exerting influence as a citizen once integrated into society.

**Methodology & Implementation:**

*Participants:* The sample population will be drawn from Finnish students who are 15-16 years old, completing their ninth year of comprehensive school and making the decision to attend general or vocational upper secondary schools. It will also involve students who have completed vocational schools and are choosing to apply to tertiary schools or join the workforce. For a successful study, participants will represent multiple populations including, but not limited to: the majority population of native Finnish students, the minority population of Swedes and the immigrant population.

*Data Collection:* Data will be gathered through multiple methods including self-reported surveys, focus groups, classroom observations and case studies. Surveys will include questions regarding expectations, perceptions of the two sectors of upper education, demographic descriptors, and influencers on educational decisions. Classroom observations will be conducted to determine the skills being taught in vocational classrooms that address the ability for students to be successful in the workforce, society and in higher education. Case studies will be conducted with students who have finished vocational schooling and are making the decision to enter the workforce or to continue on into higher education with a focus on future opportunities based on this decision.

*Assessment:* The data gathered will be analyzed to determine a list of factors that influence student decisions to attend vocational school. Data will also yield information surrounding the perception of vocational and academic tracks as well as the skills taught in each of those schools. Classroom observations will identify skills taught in each track allowing for a comparative study between vocational and academic curriculum. Case studies will provide a narrative to further understand the decision to attend a vocational school.

**Application:**  Thurgood Marshall Academy proudly reports that 100% of the students who graduate are accepted into college. This statistic provides high expectations for current seniors to attend college, despite their academic desires or talents. As a result, many students enroll in an institution and quickly decide that they do not want to be in college. They accrue financial debt and face disappointment from their community as a result of this decision. Although Finland has systemic differences from the US, studying the successful educational structures would give me a new perspective on vocational education that I could share with my students, my colleagues, and my school community. I would benefit from learning the factors that go into this decision since I am directly involved with American students at this juncture in their own lives. Understanding the gaps that occur with skills that are taught in Finland’s vocational schools would also help me to address potential skill gaps with my students who might choose a vocational school in place of college. Additionally, I will seek out professional development opportunities to provide my new understanding to my colleagues and peers in DC. At times when an outsider examines a successful system, clarity can be brought to the things that are being done well and a new perspective gained for areas of improvement. Finnish schools would benefit from my research by the identification of gaps in curriculum between vocational and academic tracks. Curriculum modules can then be designed and implemented through professional development session to address the identified missing skills.

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