

My Fulbright Year: An Observational Comparison of Estonian and American Schools
Allison Vas, Fulbright English Teaching Assistant

Estonia: a post-Soviet country, impressive PISA results, and the birthplace of Skype. These were the few facts I knew about this tiny Baltic country when I decided to move here a year ago. With a university degree in elementary education in hand and a passion for both education and global exploration, I set out to begin my teaching career in a less traditional way than most United States classroom teachers.

I developed my U.S. teaching experiences as an education student and student teacher in Danbury, Connecticut, the same school district I attended as a student. Before settling into a U.S. classroom, I wanted to go abroad to both teach in and learn from another education system. Through the Fulbright Program, I was placed as an English Teaching Assistant at Foundation Innove, in Tallinn, Estonia. Over the next nine months I spent time working in Innove's International Cooperation Centre, visiting a number of Estonian schools, and assistant teaching in the Tallinn European School and Tallinna Mustamäe Humanitaargümnaasium. During this time, I drew a number of comparative observations from my own experiences.

While it will sound obvious, one of my most reassuring realizations was that no matter what country, students would much rather be talking with their friends or on their phones than in class learning. I also found that students face similar worries, regardless of their locale. They want to do well in school, they have conflicts with teachers and friends, many work in the evenings or on weekends, and they stress about their futures.

In terms of behavior, Tallinn students seem more independent than those in Connecticut. Students in Tallinn take themselves back and forth to school, even in their primary years. In Connecticut, students are provided with school buses to their streets or parents who will drive them to school daily. Furthermore, students in Estonia seem more mature and responsible. No one lines up the primary students and walks them down the hall. Students know what behavior is expected of them and they typically meet those expectations. In the U.S., there is constant behavior monitoring and elementary students are not supposed to be left alone at any time. This Estonian independence develops problem-solving skills and self-reliance at a younger age.

From an educator's point of view, it seems teacher autonomy is better in Estonia than in the U.S. Estonia has set national standards, with benchmark testing every three years. As long as students continue to meet the standards at these checkpoints, principals and teachers are free to choose which curriculum materials and workbooks they would like to use and how they would like to go about teaching. In the U.S., the district dictates curriculum choices and states conduct annual standardized testing, severely limiting teacher independence. There is so much demanded of teachers that they do not have the option to choose what and how they teach. In a difference of cultural mindset, American schools focus more on testing and teaching to achieve the expected scores than on the learning process. In Estonia, the emphasis is on learning, with testing as an afterthought to verify that students are receiving equal educations.

To the contrary, I do feel that American teachers are more creative than Estonian teachers. There seems to be a general, unspoken routine that Estonian teachers follow, featuring desks in rows, teaching out of textbooks, and having students complete the work in the classrooms. In the U.S., there is a high demand for differentiation in every regard. Learning environments must be created to accommodate student needs. American primary classrooms are designed to have areas that foster specific types of learning, like a reading corner, math centers, or a rug area for class discussions. This is also evident as American teachers design multimodal lessons that allow students to move around the classroom,

incorporate technology, involve collaborative group work, and develop critical thinking skills. Engagement is key and lesson activities must vary to maintain students' attention. When teachers need to constantly differentiate their teaching, it necessitates creativity in order to design lessons that meet a variety of learning styles all at once.

Both countries seem adept at incorporating technology into the learning process, although it is done in drastically different ways. In general, Estonia is a forward-thinking, digitally-advanced society. This is evident in schools where robotics and programming classes begin in the primary grades, with the aim of teaching students to be creators rather than consumers. Estonia is also proud of their digital program called e-Kool (or e-School), a universal platform that allows teachers to post homework assignments, share comments and grades, and more. Parents and students both have access into this platform, making it a convenient means of open communication. In the U.S., similar digital platforms are also becoming the common mode of communication between parents, students, and teachers, but the choice in platform can vary between schools. Like Estonia, the United States integrates technology into the classroom from a young age, but most students are taught to use technology as a tool to aid their studies rather than as something they can design and customize themselves. In Connecticut classrooms, it's common to find students working on Chromebooks or iPads to conduct a research project or to create a digital presentation.

Perhaps what struck me as the most prominent difference between the two education systems is Estonia's focus on multilingualism and the importance of a global outlook compared to the United States' lack thereof. I was awed to learn that most Estonian students graduate secondary school speaking three to five languages. Per Estonian national curriculum, all students must study the Estonian language and by third grade they must also be studying English. After that most students study a third language of their choice, with the most popular options seeming to be Russian, German, Finnish, and French. In secondary school students can take on another language, in addition to those they're already learning. Within Tallinna Mustamäe Humanitaargümnaasium, my secondary students were raised with a Russian mother tongue, and have studied Estonian and English for years. They are also studying German, although they like to say they don't know it. This is considered quite normal; speaking multiple languages is nothing special. In America you are considered quite talented if you are so much as bilingual. Unfortunately, few students understand the true value of speaking multiple languages. Foreign languages are seen as a pre-requisite to enter university, not a key to communicating with and understanding more of a global society. The United States has a long way to go in this area of education.

In conclusion, I can certainly say I have learned more about Estonia than I knew a year ago, especially in regards to its education system. What I cannot say is that one education system's approach is better than the other. Estonia has a much smaller population, roughly 1.3 million people, so it's easy enough to implement and monitor a national curriculum. Connecticut's population alone is more than 3.5 million people. When it comes to the United States' 326 million people population, it is no wonder a national curriculum is a struggle to implement.

Both countries have their strengths, and certainly both countries have more left to be learned. During my time in Estonia, I encouraged differentiation and creativity within my classrooms. I shared engagement activities and lesson ideas that connected with the curriculum but reached beyond the confines of the classbook. When I return to a United States classroom, I hope to spread some of Estonia's regard for language learning and global awareness.

If there is anything I have learned from my time in Estonia, and specifically Innove's International Cooperation Centre, it is that the world is too large to limit ourselves to the confines of our borders and our current ways of thinking; the best way to learn and improve is

to collaborate with those around us. In the exchange of ideas, we can share and better our own practices, while also gaining fresh perspectives and new ideas to try.

The thoughts and views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State, the Institute of International Education, or the Fulbright Program.