

BARNES AND NOBLE BOOK TALK, 1/25/06

Introductions

Original Rationale for Book:

- **Narrow and often misleading interpretations of the international test-score rankings; these rankings are typically the main source of information about other countries' education systems.**
- **My personal experience in teaching a course, which showed the difficulty of obtaining good information in English, written by "insiders," which pulls together key reform issues for a wide range of countries, breaks mental sets, and demonstrates the difficult choices and tradeoffs each country must make.**
- **Book that would be of interest to the general public as well as to those in the field of education.**

Brief Description of Book:

- **Book focuses on education reform in 16 countries. Most of the authors are from the countries they are writing about; the others have had extensive experience in the countries. The chapters describe education in a broader societal context—those factors in the society that both facilitate, and constrain, reform—social, economic, and political systems; poverty; children's health status; resources for education; and the society's priorities, values, and political systems.**
- **Major reasons for reform: (1) major political and economic change (China, Russia, South Africa, Chile, Germany); (2) increasing diversity (e.g., Sweden, France); (3) rising or declining student cohorts (Turkey; Japan); (4) globalization (Singapore); and (5) concern about what are perceived as superior education systems in other countries (United States).**
- **Clear worldwide trends—(1) strengthening educational equity; (2) reducing central control; (3) holding teachers accountable for student performance; (4) increasing the flexibility of learning environments; and (5) increasing access to education.**

Examples of Myths that are Exploded by the Book:

- *Europe—or put another way—the “rest of the developed world” is one country.*

In this mythical country, all children reach high academic standards and by the time these children are adults we will not be able to compete with them in the global economy (reminiscent of Lake Woebegone, where all children are above average). This assumption--by education policy analysts, by journalists, and by the general public--ignores the significant differences among developed countries

in the level and distribution of their funding for education; the quality of their academic offerings; the extent to which their students are tracked by academic ability; their university attendance rates; and, perhaps most important, the quality of education each country offers to low-income children, minority children, children with disabilities, language minority children, and recent immigrants. The educational systems, the societal context, and the outcomes differ significantly across developed countries.

- *If a country ranks high on international test-score comparisons, we know it has good schools.*

The international test-score rankings are virtually impossible to interpret—not surprising, given the major sampling problems and the difficulty of ensuring that comparable samples of students, schools, and regions are tested across countries. The fact is that in some studies the United States ranks below the international average, in some equal to it, and in others above it. The point is that test-score rankings tell us little about the quality of education in any country—or for that matter, in any state or school district. They tell us a lot more about the sample of students who took the test and about a country’s poverty levels.

- *If a country ranks high on international test-score comparisons, it will defeat us economically.*

That assumption has been repeated in various guises for a least the past 50 years, since the launch of Sputnik, without any evidence to support it. The examples of high-scoring countries typically reported in the press bear little resemblance to the countries that are currently our main economic competitors. The outsourcing of technical jobs occurs instead when American workers are unwilling to accept a large reduction in wages to compete, for example, with computer programmers in India, or with computer manufacturers in China—both countries with only about a third of the age group enrolled by the final years of high school. There is also no evidence that Western European countries and Japan have education systems that have immunized them against competition from less developed countries.

- *Other countries have found the “right” way to educate students: the magic bullet is to decide at the national level what children should learn and when they should learn it.*

This assumption ignores the fact that many countries are questioning precisely the type of policy that our analysts find exemplary. France, for example, is reassessing its highly centralized system because of a concern that the system cannot meet the needs of an increasingly diverse immigrant population, with its mix of racial/ethnic groups, cultures, and religions. The fact is that many countries throughout the world are moving from a centralized to a decentralized

system of governance. Other industrialized countries—Australia, Canada, and Germany—have long-standing decentralized systems with little change in governance envisioned. There is no evidence that the organizational structure—whether decentralized or centralized—bears any relationship to academic achievement, unemployment rates, or the ability to compete in the global economy.

- *Schools will improve if we hold teachers accountable for students' test scores.*

The United States has placed an increased emphasis on holding teachers accountable for students' test scores, which are used as indicators of teacher performance. The United States has by far the most demanding test-based accountability requirements, but a few other countries—England, in particular—are also using tests for accountability purposes. In most countries throughout the world, however, testing is typically used for purposes of student selection into academic secondary schools and universities, or to determine graduation from secondary school—not to hold teachers accountable. In fact, many countries do not administer standardized tests until the later grades, and Canadian schools, for example, rarely use them at all. This divergence in testing practices between the United States and most other countries is ironic because a major impetus for the testing movement was our perception that other countries were outperforming the United States in international test-score comparisons. Yet, in our attempt to be more like the countries we most admire, we have adopted practices that few of these countries use.

It is also ironic that as many countries throughout the world struggle to make a transition from rote learning to school environments that emphasize a broader set of skills, the United States, which has a reputation for flexible teaching practices, appears to be moving in the opposite direction. There is an increasing emphasis on testing, more pressure on schools to raise scores, and strong incentives to “teach to the test.”

- *We can “fix” our schools without addressing underlying societal problems.*

The fact is that the broader societal context is by far the most important factor in determining whether, how, and with what results education reforms are implemented. Education reform takes place in—and is often constrained by—poverty, children's health status, the level and distribution of resources for education, priorities, values, and political systems. In addition, there are other societal factors that determine the opportunities available to a country's citizens. The advantages of an egalitarian education system will be diminished, for example, if only students from elitist schools are chosen for high-level positions in government, or if there is discrimination in the job market against minorities and women, or if college tuition is unaffordable. On the other hand, problems in the education system can be somewhat alleviated if a country's economy is good, if there are entrepreneurial opportunities, and if second and third chances are

offered. Education policies clearly make a difference, but they can only partially compensate for the broader societal factors. The most overpowering of these is poverty, the major factor accounting for low achievement.

- *Our educational problems are unique to the United States.*

Just the opposite. Country after country has found that the overwhelming problem is the achievement gap between poor children and their more affluent peers. The size of the gap varies, but its existence is universal. Although educational reforms are also triggered by other concerns—global competition, cumbersome bureaucracies, or rigid instructional and testing practices—the central problem in most countries is an achievement gap that is closely associated with students' socioeconomic status. In many countries (for example, France and Sweden), the gap has become more visible with increasing immigration and the resulting “pockets” of poverty. The proportion of the population that is foreign-born is now higher in London than it is in New York. In some countries, the socioeconomic gap is closely aligned with different regions of the country: in China and Russia, increasing income disparities are also reflected in increasing disparities in school funding and educational attainment as their educational systems have become more decentralized.

No country has found that education practices alone have solved the broader problems of society or eliminated the gap in educational performance between children of high and low socioeconomic status, although educational policies can contribute to magnifying or reducing that gap. In the United States, for example, the negative impact of poverty on educational achievement is exacerbated by inadequate resources in many of the schools serving low-income communities—indeed, our distribution of education funds is much more unequal than that in most other developed countries. Germany's highly stratified education system also appears to increase the correlation between students' socioeconomic status and their academic achievement. In contrast, Sweden has a smaller gap. Although causation cannot be established with certainty, a reasonable hypothesis is that Sweden's relatively “flat” distribution of income and wealth, its social-support system, and its equitable distribution of educational resources have made a positive difference. But they have not eliminated the gap; as in other countries, socioeconomic status remains the best predictor of educational attainment.

- *There is an easy answer to the question: which country has the best education system?*

But the question is meaningless without defining what outcome measures and educational processes we value. Are high test scores in mathematics and science most important. If so, for 10 percent of the population? For 50 percent? A high proportion of children completing secondary school? Affordable access to higher education? If so, for what percentage of the population? Is it important

to us that classes have a mix of student-achievement levels? Or do we prefer the system to track students to ensure that those who are higher-achieving receive an elite academic education? Is there individualized instruction for both the higher-achieving students and those with special needs? Is there a wide selection of courses and extracurricular activities? Are educational resources distributed equitably across the system? Is there meaningful school choice? Is there a test-based accountability system? The fact is that there is no answer to the question of which country has the best education system because it almost always comes down to value judgments about how an education system and a society should work.

- *And a closely related myth—if we select the “correct” policy, there will be no tradeoffs or costs to consider.*

There is an unspoken premise that countries with effective education systems (i.e., high test scores) have gotten it right without ever having had to make difficult choices or cope with negative consequences. The reality is just the opposite: all countries’ reforms require policy makers to choose among conflicting goals. In every country, there are examples of tradeoffs, painful costs, and ironies. Examples: (1) strengthening educational equity (South Africa, United States, England, and Germany); (2) reducing central control (Russia, China, France, Turkey, and Israel); (3) holding teachers accountable for student performance (United States and England); increasing the flexibility of learning environments (Singapore, Japan, China, and Turkey); and increasing access to education (England and Egypt).

- *Things have gotten worse.*

Just the opposite. Despite the challenges I have discussed there has been an enormous increase in educational access over the past generation, which has occurred throughout the world at all levels of education, along with increased attention to educational innovation and the needs of diverse student populations (e.g., compulsory education; access of minority students, girls, and students with disabilities; access to higher education). And in the United States, as families’ educational levels have risen, so has student achievement.