

QUESTIONING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Iris C. Rotberg

A recent editorial in *The New York Times* (“Back to School, Thinking Globally,” September 6, 2005) reiterates the conventional wisdom on the global economy, international test-score rankings, and educational practices in other countries. The arguments made in the editorial have dominated our public policy dialogue for decades. Unfortunately, these arguments are not supported by the evidence.

First, the editorial assumes that the rankings of industrialized countries on international test-score comparisons are somehow correlated with the countries’ ability to compete in the global economy. That assumption has been repeated in various guises for at least the past 50 years, since the launch of Sputnik, without any evidence to support it. The examples of high-scoring countries in the editorial 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. Moreover, there is no evidence that Western European countries and Japan have education systems that have immunized them against competition from less developed countries.

Second, the editorial assumes that international test-score rankings are valid measures of the quality of education. It cites findings from one international test-score comparison, ignores the conflicting evidence from other comparisons, and then makes interpretations that are not supported by the data. 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 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. In any event, the results tell us little about the quality of education in the participating countries, and certainly do not tell us about the countries’ ability to compete in the global economy.

Third, the editorial treats “the rest of the developed world” as if it were one country and then concludes that this mythical country “does a better job of educating students of all economic backgrounds.” The editorial does not recognize 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. Both the problems countries face and the outcomes differ significantly across developed countries.

Fourth, the editorial assumes that other countries have found the “right way” to strengthen student achievement: the magic bullet is that “the nations that have left us behind...decide at the national level what children should learn and when they should learn it.” The editorial ignores the fact that many countries are questioning precisely the types of policies that the editorial finds 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 languages. Indeed, 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. The fact is there is no evidence that the organizational structure—whether centralized or decentralized—bears any relationship to academic achievement, unemployment rates, or the ability to compete in the global economy.

Finally, the editorial says little about the overwhelming impact of poverty, the main contributor to low academic achievement in every country. The link between poverty and achievement is particularly high in the United States, which has a larger gap between rich and poor, and fewer social support systems, than do most other industrialized countries.

The editorial concludes that public school children are “incrementally better off than they would have been five years ago” because of No Child Left Behind, the federal law that holds schools accountable for students’ scores on standardized tests. (In this context, it is worth noting that most of the countries we admire for their rankings on international comparisons do not use tests to hold schools accountable, and many do not even administer standardized tests until secondary school.) There is no evidence that children are “better off” because of No Child Left Behind. But there is a great deal of evidence that achievement declines as poverty rates rise. And if poverty rates continue to rise, as they have in the last few years, the gap in academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and enrollment in higher education will also rise. Increased centralization, testing, and accountability requirements will not address that problem.

Iris C. Rotberg is Research Professor of Education Policy at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. She is the editor of Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform, a book that brings together examples of current education reforms in 16 countries.