

## **US Education in the Global Context**

***"Be happy with what you have, and you will have plenty to be happy about." - Irish Proverb***

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In **Education Week** (February 9, 2005) Iris C. Rotberg contributes a fascinating guest commentary, "The Bigger Picture: U.S. Education in the Global Context." The following is an excerpt from this piece:

### **Do other countries face problems similar to those in the United States?**

Yes. 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 education 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, the gap has become more visible with increasing immigration and the resulting "pockets" of poverty. Increases in the mix of racial/ethnic groups, cultures, and languages have created new challenges for countries like France and Sweden, whose education systems must respond to increasingly heterogeneous student populations. 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. Increasing income disparities in China and Russia, for example, are also reflected in increasing disparities in school funding and educational attainment as their education systems have become decentralized.

### **Have these countries found ways to solve the problems?**

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. 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; indeed, as in other countries, socioeconomic status remains the best predictor of educational attainment.

To read this entire article (the section on testing is very interesting as well), go to:

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/02/09/22rotberg.h24.html>

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