

# The Problem With Comparisons

Contrasting American education with that of other countries is like comparing apples and oranges.

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CHRISTOPHER J. HURN

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In the current debate about the quality of education, there is a great deal of concern with comparisons between schooling in this country and in other industrialized nations.<sup>1</sup> The report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, in its scathing indictment of American schools, asserts, that in international comparisons of student achievement, American students were last in seven out of 19 academic tests and first or second in none.<sup>2</sup>

The Commission heard testimony that American students receive considerably less instruction in science and mathematics than students in the Soviet Union, Japan, and much of Western Europe, and that the amount of homework assigned in American secondary schools is substantially below the amount routinely assigned in the schools of many other industrialized societies. And although experts in international comparisons debate how much

these differences result from comparing students in the more selective secondary schools of Europe with relatively unselective American schools, it seems safe to say that differences in selectivity cannot account for *all* of these outcome differences.

Japan, for example, has a higher rate of high school graduation than the United States and substantially higher mathematics and science achievement among its high school students.<sup>3</sup> Average secondary students in the Soviet Union clearly spend more time in science and mathematics courses than American counterparts. And the results of international achievement tests administered at age 14, before most selection takes place, are generally unfavorable to the United States.<sup>4</sup>

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*Christopher J. Hurn is Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.*

## The Apples and Oranges of Education Systems

In spite of these considerations, however, most of the implications of inferiority drawn from these invidious comparisons are inappropriate. They compare systems that differ profoundly in objectives, values, and organization. Selective illustrations of the weaknesses of American education compared with education in other industrialized societies may create the false impression that the road to effective reform lies in borrowing innovations or practices developed abroad. They simply cannot be shifted from one to another very different context. This does not mean that we can learn nothing from Japan or France or Britain; it does imply that intelligent discussion must start from an understanding of the unique features of the American system and how its weaknesses are (unfortunately, from the point of view of reformers) intimately bound up



Photo: Russian students, by Ron Brandt

with its strengths.

The distinctive characteristics of the American educational system help explain why it has been less than single-minded in its concentration on maximizing achievement in mathematics, science, English, history, and foreign languages. The organization of American education, particularly its decentralization and lack of a national examination system, works against such a concentration. Equally important are the American values of egalitarianism, utilitarianism, and individualism, which have given educational objectives other than maximum achievement higher priority than they have enjoyed in much of the rest of the industrialized world.

#### American Educational Values

Very little of the distinctive character, organization, or outcomes of American education can be grasped without prior consideration of long-standing value differences between America and the rest of the world. These values have shaped our relative lack of selectivity, our lack of national examinations, and our suspicion of the traditional "high culture" liberal arts curriculum. They have also

had a profound effect on educational standards and the meaning of excellence in American education.

Americans value equality, practicality, and utility; and they are both individualistic and suspicious of centralized authority. These values, noted first by Tocqueville in the 1830s, have been described repeatedly by European and American observers.<sup>5</sup> And although some West European societies have moved closer to these values in the last 25 years, the differences between America and virtually the whole of Western Europe remain notable.

As Tocqueville pointed out, American egalitarianism is less a crusade for equal income than an emphasis both on removing barriers to equality of opportunity and a hostility to the traditional European conception of different classes and categories of humans. Virtually from its inception, the common school was seen as an instrument for creating a society where distinctions of birth could be erased, which all students would attend. The popularity of education in American society, and its rapid expansion here before World War II, reflected this conception of schooling as egalitarian. With the exception of Canada and possibly Australia, no other non-Com-



Photo by John Murphy, 1st Prize Winner, 1983 Photo Contest

unist society viewed schooling in this way until after World War II.

The traditional Western European pattern was to provide separate schools and separate curricula for what were thought to be different kinds of students, and to sponsor the mobility of a few students from low-status origins into the schools and curricula designed for the elite. The system, in other words, preserved and fostered a jealously guarded cultural tradition into which a few outstandingly talented students from humble origins would be initiated.

In the past 20 years, of course, some of these clear-cut and well-known differences have disappeared. In Britain and Sweden, for example, separate schools for the most academically able students have been replaced with American-style comprehensive secondary schools. And virtually all countries have greatly increased opportunities for university edu-

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*Japanese students, courtesy Embassy of Japan*



education. But important differences in the degree and kind of selectivity remain. Even in European comprehensive secondary schools there remain sharper distinctions between academic college-oriented tracks and vocational tracks than in the United States and smaller percentages of students enrolled in the former.<sup>6</sup> National examinations, which are no less rigorous than in the past, still determine access to universities in much of the rest of the industrialized

world. The award of degrees in the new universities of Europe remains controlled by boards of examiners drawn from the traditional and most prestigious institutions who see themselves as guardians of traditional standards of excellence.

The reluctance of Americans to distinguish between patrician and plebeian classes of students is paralleled by the absence of a clear and immutable hierarchy of patrician and plebeian subject

matter. American universities and high schools have for many decades offered courses that would, until recently at least, have been nearly unthinkable at virtually any European university or selective secondary school: courses in marketing, accounting, nursing, creative writing, typing, and home economics. Thus, American egalitarianism has long taken the form of a suspicion of high culture as a model for all educational institutions. In America, no one

curriculum and no two or three schools have enjoyed the kind of effortless prestige accorded to the classics curriculum at Oxford or Cambridge or to French literature at the Sorbonne.

To Americans, much of the appeal of education is its usefulness; it provides skills and advances careers. But in most of the world, education has not been viewed this way. The highest prestige and esteem have frequently been reserved for subjects that are distinctively, even defiantly, nonutilitarian. The famous toast at Cambridge University in the 1930s, "To pure mathematics, may it never be of use to anyone!" expressed these sentiments exactly, with the added irony that the subject became immensely useful in ways that could not be foreseen before World War II. One could almost say that throughout Europe and Japan prior to this time subjects were prestigious to the degree to which they were *useless*, and lacking in prestige to the extent that they were directly or immediately useful in providing some skill of a technical or applied variety. Thus, in the English case, classical languages had higher status than modern languages; Oriental languages higher than European languages; mathematics higher status than science; and theoretical science higher status than applied science.

American educational rhetoric has long stressed how education should meet the "needs" of students and the "needs" of society, and this rhetoric has undermined the character of the traditional liberal arts and science disciplines. The very terms of much educational discussion in the United States have treated the traditional liberal arts curriculum less as an intrinsic good requiring little justification than as a subject whose importance must be assessed in relation to the needs of particular students and a rapidly changing society.<sup>7</sup> The logic of such utilitarian justifications, therefore, has shaped the distinctive character of the American secondary school curriculum: the emphasis on elective rather than required courses, the stress on innovative or experimental approaches to the teaching of the traditional subject matter, and the

absence of sharp boundaries between material that is thought appropriate for college-bound and non-college-bound students in other countries.

Finally, in this regard, Americans, more than most other people, have tended to see education in individualistic terms. They have placed relatively more emphasis on education as a means for individual advancement and self-realization and less emphasis on what is, to European eyes, the central mission of conveying a common body of knowledge and a common cultural tradition. The worth of an educational system, Americans have believed, is to be judged by the extent to which it furthers individual achievement or intellectual and moral development, rather than its success in subordinating individuals to an authoritative moral and intellectual tradition. The authority of that tradition has been lower in the U.S. than in most other industrialized societies.

American exchange students in Europe or Japan, for example, are disconcerted to find that questions are not asked during formal lectures and that the social distance between faculty and students is great. American secondary school teachers visiting France and Japan are bemused by the persistence of symbols of authority that have long since disappeared in the United States, by pupils springing to attention when the teacher enters the room, by the formal attire or gowns of the faculty, or by the relative silence that accompanies the lesson. European teachers are similarly intrigued by American teachers who teach sitting on the edge of their desks; by the informal seating arrangement in many American classrooms; or by codes of student conduct that permit students to smoke on school premises, chew gum in class, and ask for a formal hearing when they are disciplined by a teacher.

From the point of view of ideal progressive practice, no doubt, American pedagogy and classroom organization are still authoritarian in style. But the contrast with much of the rest of the world, with the possible exception of Scandinavia and England, remains great. In Europe and Japan, the implicit

model of education remains that of the school as a representative and custodian of a cultural tradition to which students owe allegiance and subordination. Obedience to the teachers or the school's authority—symbolized, for example, by the Japanese school children who thank the teacher at the end of each lesson—takes on the character of an intrinsic good, a sign that the students accept the larger authority of the moral and intellectual tradition of the society. In America, by contrast, schools have been increasingly seen as a "resource" whose task is to serve "clients." Discipline and subordination of students to school authority are viewed as necessary evils rather than educationally beneficial in their own right.

#### The Organization of Education

Despite postwar changes increasing the importance of state boards of education and the expanding role of the federal government, American education remains uniquely decentralized. There is no uniform national curriculum, as in France or Japan or the Soviet Union; there are no national standards for the certification of teachers; and no national examinations that test mastery of subject matter or provide a basis for comparing students and school districts. Nor does America have anything analogous to the British system of national school inspectors who visit schools regularly and report on curriculum, teaching methods, and student achievement. State Boards of Education do, it is true, ensure some commonality in curricula and in the credits required for graduation, but these requirements are limited and permit considerable flexibility in the courses high schools require; and, of course, requirements differ widely from one state to another.

There are several effects of this extreme decentralization. First, because the role of national education elites in determining curricula and educational practice is much less important in the United States, there is far more diversity in these areas. For example, nowhere in Japan or France do we find such a sharp contrast in the teaching of science and mathematics as often exists between

large cities and small towns in the United States. Nor would we be likely to encounter small rural communities where the teaching of the theory of evolution is controversial or even forbidden. Local control, in many small communities in the United States, means control by a public who is not convinced of the importance of studying foreign languages nor persuaded that calculus or set theory is necessary for the employment of the future labor force. The weakness of national educational elites in America tends to reinforce a relatively narrow utilitarian or vocational conception of education at the expense of cosmopolitan or liberal attitudes.

Decentralization also shapes the teaching profession itself. As state employees, teachers in France or Russia or Japan expect and frequently experience considerable upward mobility during their careers. Because American teachers are employees of local communities and because state certification procedures are not uniform, such mobility is less institutionalized in the United States. American teachers, furthermore, enjoy generally less prestige and less secure professional identity than their European and Japanese counterparts. American teachers experience far more scrutiny of their teaching and grading practices and of their personal lives than most teachers elsewhere.

The relative absence of external examination in America adds to and sharpens many of these contrasts. Though not all industrialized societies have a truly national system of uniform examination on the lines of the French baccalaureate, virtually no advanced societies outside of North America have a system where advancement or graduation depends on the accumulation of credits for course work rather than on passing examinations set and administered outside the school. Almost everywhere outside North America, students' lives are punctuated every few years by external examinations of great consequence for their future careers and in which failure is much more than a remote possibility.

Examination systems place great constraints on schools, teachers, and stu-

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dents. Because of the necessity of preparing for them and because examinations are only provided in certain limited subjects, European and Japanese schools tend to be far more single-minded in their degree of concentration on important (and usually traditional) subject matter. Religious and moral instruction, sex and health education, arts and crafts, driver education and cooking: they may be offered as optional subjects in many schools, but they take up minuscule amounts of students' time and energy. Nor do we find experimentation in other industrialized societies on anything like the American scale with alternative approaches to teaching the traditional disciplines: courses in creative writing, issues of war and peace, or the nature of race prejudice. Since national examination boards do not test mastery of such material, it would be foolish of schools to teach it, regardless of teacher or student interest. Examination-based systems, therefore, impose clear and unequivocal standards of academic excellence on schools and these standards are necessarily exclusionary and hierarchical. While the transferability of credits across the American system may encourage students to believe that a course in English at a community college in California is equivalent to three credits of English literature at Berkeley, no such egalitarian illusions are possible in France or England or Japan. In these countries the glory of success in gaining admission to the University of Tokyo or the Sorbonne or Oxford implies the stigma of failure for the great majority who falter at one of the many hurdles along the track leading to this apex of academic achievement.

#### What It All Means

The foregoing suggest that most of our rough-and-ready comparisons of the outcomes of American education with outcomes in other industrialized societies are inappropriate. Examination-based systems in societies where national intellectual and cultural elites have great power to prescribe the curriculum necessarily have different outcomes than a decentralized course credit system. We may deplore the fact that American secondary school students spend little time in foreign language study, in serious and sophisticated science courses, that they do relatively little homework, and that they seem rarely to attain the high levels of achievement in mathematics of many of their European counterparts. But the decentralization of American secondary education and the absence of national examinations do not create incentives for rigorous single-minded concentration on high achievement in the traditional arts and sciences. Local school boards may, and frequently do, have other priorities. Teachers have considerable freedom to design their own courses and standards of evaluation. And students, in the absence of external examinations for which they must prepare, have incentives only to meet the standards of excellence that prevail in each particular course. Inevitably these standards will differ between, for example, the Bronx School of Science and a high school in Corinth, Mississippi.

But it is not only the organization of American education that discourages such single-minded concentration on the traditional disciplines. Americans' conceptions of the purposes and goals of education are far more various and ec-

menical than European conceptions. Americans believe, more strongly than Europeans, that one should not distinguish between a gifted elite and the majority, that students should acquire a diversity of useful skills, and that the perpetuation of high culture is not necessarily more important than the task of producing informed citizens. The outcomes of American schooling are also shaped, therefore, by the often uneasy compromises between these differing objectives—compromises that do not have to be made to the same extent in systems where academic achievement in the traditional disciplines reigns supreme as the paramount goal of schooling.

Perhaps the multiple and contradictory impulses that have characterized American conceptions of education help explain the ambivalence we have long felt towards our educational system—an excessive and even chauvinistic celebration of its virtues on the one hand, often followed a few years later by an exaggerated breast-beating and invidious comparisons between our "failure" and other countries' "success." But it is important to note that to a large degree the virtues and vices of any educational system are two sides of the same coin.

No doubt it would be splendid if one could combine the egalitarianism, diversity, and experimentation of the American high school, and the motivation, morale, and sheer hard work of the Japanese, with the intellectual rigor of the French lycée. But if any present system pales by comparison with this hypothetical one, such a combination seems no more likely than one that combines the anti-intellectualism of many American high schools, the emphasis on strict memorization and frantic competition in Japan and the shabby neglect of all but the most able students in French secondary education.

This is not meant to be a counsel of despair, still less an argument that we live in the best of all possible worlds. These reflections do suggest, however, that any reform may be costly not only in material terms but also in its consequences for the attainment of goals other than academic achievement in the traditional disciplines. We may well decide after careful consideration that this price is worth paying, but the current mood of near hysteria is hardly a propitious environment for the sober consideration of such difficult questions. □

<sup>1</sup>This article is a revised and shortened version of a paper co-authored with Barbara B. Burn, entitled "An Analytical Comparison of Educational Systems," which was presented to the National Commission on Excellence in Education in Washington, D.C., February 1982. Any errors of fact or interpretation are the responsibility of the present author.

<sup>2</sup>National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, April 1983), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup>Ezra F. Vogel, *Japan as Number One* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), Chapter 7.

<sup>4</sup>L. C. Comber and John P. Keeves, *Science Education in Nineteen Countries: An Experimental Study* (New York: Wiley, 1973).

<sup>5</sup>For representative accounts, see Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation* (New York: Basic Books, 1963); and Robin Williams, *American Society: A Sociological Interpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1970).

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, the description of the English case in Julianne Ford, *Social Class and the Comprehensive School* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

<sup>7</sup>Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School* (New York: Random House, 1961).

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