

Letters

An Apology . . . and a Plea

I am wounded by Naida Tushnet Bagentos's reference to "locker room jokes" ("Letters," October 1987), but I deserve it: the analogy was tasteless and inappropriate. I apologize to her and to others who might have been offended. Most troublesome to me is that the ideas presented in the article might now be taken lightly, perhaps even cynically. I pray that this is not the case, for so much is at stake as we aspire to be a true profession.

THOMAS J. SERGIOVANNI
*Department of Education
Trinity University
San Antonio, Texas*

An Unfair Comparison

I have enjoyed *Educational Leadership* over the years and have agreed and disagreed with many of the articles and editorials, but your October 1987 "Overview" has me upset. You do not take into account what part of the population Harold Stevenson ("America's Math Problems") is comparing. Asian countries do not allow the entire population to attend school, and those involved in mathematics are the elite part of the schoolchildren. Yet Stevenson makes a broad statement that the children of the American educational system are far behind those of the Asian school system.

Your comment that "the academic performance of American students is considerably lower than that of students in most other developed countries" (p. 3) is just another example of the bandwagon effect many people are using to tear down our educational system. We need a boost. We are hit with regulations regarding "asbestos," "hot lunches," "school bus safety," "school consolidation," and other issues that must be dealt with in the name of education—but no funding is included with these regulations.

It is time Harold Stevenson and other people who compare our education with that of other developed countries take a strong look at what they are comparing and not condemn the system with unfair statements.

Please understand that I am not saying the American educational system is without fault—I am saying that anyone who wishes to make comparisons should make these comparisons on a valid basis.

DENNIS MAASJO
*District Superintendent
Turner Public Schools
Turner, Montana*

Stevenson Replies: A Valid Comparison

This is a brief response to Dennis Maasjo's charge that we should look at what we are comparing in our studies of mathematics achievement and not condemn the American system unfairly.

We have not compared American children with elite groups of children in the other countries. Elementary school education is universal in Japan and in Taiwan and in many areas of China, including Beijing. Mathematics is a required subject in the curriculum for all children. Our samples of schools are representative of the range of schools in each city.

Further, to avoid giving unfair advantage to any group of children, we based the mathematics tests on detailed analyses of the mathematics curriculums in each city. The plain fact is that American children do not do nearly so well in mathematics as children in other developed countries—even in countries with standards of living well below that of our own.

It would be easy to disregard the dismaying results if they were simply due to faulty sampling. But they are not. The truth is that we are faced with a complex task that requires constructive action. American children will not be competitive in mathematics until parents acknowledge the degree of their children's deficiencies and school systems begin to place greater emphasis on solid instruction.

HAROLD STEVENSON
*Center for Human Growth
and Development
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor*

Planning and Commitment Come First

"Staff Development and Student Learning: A Synthesis of Research on Models of Teaching" (Bruce Joyce, Beverly Showers, and Carol Rolheiser-Bennett, October 1987) summarizes the goal of staff development programs. No matter which model or program design is selected or adapted, it must be clearly stated and completely understood that the goal is for students' learning to increase.

An increase in student learning cannot be expected to occur overnight or by chance. On the contrary, all members of the educational community need to know the plan, format, timelines for implementation, and expected outcomes. The most severe impediments to successful implementation of a staff development plan in a large district are the mystery, the suspicion, and the uncertainty.

Joyce, Showers, and Rolheiser-Bennett summarized the research on the various models of teaching and what is known about the impact of each on student learning. However, I encourage practitioners to focus on the planning and commitment that *must* be in place before any staff development model is embraced. Districts considering major multi-year staff development programs should perhaps adopt this motto: "If we cannot do any good, we will not do any harm." That should be the minimum premise for educational endeavors that affect learning.

MARY G. BENNETT
*Director
Board of Education
Division of High School Proficiency
Test Development
Newark, New Jersey*

(B)ringing in the Old

With its focus on collegial learning, the November 1987 issue is a welcome change from all the attention given to mastery learning and teaching.

I couldn't help thinking, however, as I read the articles (particularly Sharan and Sharan's "Training Teach-

Letters

ers for Cooperative Learning") that "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose!" Fishbowls, buzz groups, and making posters as a team—I felt as though I were revisiting the late '60s and early '70s when everyone was using the "Lost on the Moon" exercise to teach students how to work in small groups.

Why is it educators always throw out the old to bring in the "new" instead of revising and building on the best of what they do? We seem to be coming back to some methods we shouldn't have left in the first place.

ANNE WESCOTT DODD
Brunswick, Maine

Thanks for the Themes

I carried my copy of *Educational Leadership* to lunch today, as I often do. The thought occurred to me, as it often has, that I should express my

gratitude and admiration for the hard work and dedication of you and your staff in the production of *Educational Leadership*. Each issue seems to come at the perfect time to assist me with timely, scholarly information that directly applies to projects with which I am, or plan to be, involved. I particularly appreciate your thematic format. I have come to depend on you to provide me quick access to the latest research on timely topics. You are a valued asset in my work!

LYNDA REDDELL
Supervisor

Secondary Curriculum
Visalia Unified School District
Visalia, California

What About Culture?

"America's Math Problems" by Harold W. Stevenson (October 1987) fails to mention culture. See *Time* magazine,

August 31, 1987, pp. 42-51, "The New Whiz Kids":

"Asian culture breeds success, perhaps Confucian ideals that stress family values and emphasize education. Sociologist William Liu of the University of Chicago argues that immigrants from Asian countries with strongest Confucian influence—Japan, Korea, China, and Viet Nam—perform best (p. 45)."

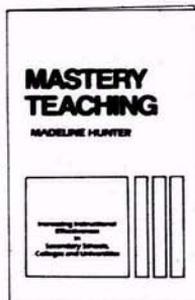
There is more to high expectations than expectation—is it religion?

CAL GETTY
Principal

Orchards Elementary School
Vancouver, Washington

The Kind of Education We Want?

Since "A Nation at Risk" the American educational system has taken a beating. Now "America's Math Problems" by Harold W. Stevenson (October



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1987) makes it quite clear that we have the kind of education our society wants. Parents want their children to be successful, feel good about themselves, and have a chance to enjoy life. That means that our school days have less rigorous academic requirements than those of some other countries.

The Asian cultures have become the standard to which we are compared. We need to evaluate our assumptions about the meaning of childhood and personhood. The key to reexamining our beliefs may be the terms "productivity" and "resource." When referring to schools and children, the children are resources, and the schools are factories where the productivity measured is how effectively the resource can be used by society. The idea that the individual is a resource to be used by society is the core of the Asian (and the Soviet) system. The American philosophy, puts the *individual's* needs first.

Does an advanced technology imply that the individual becomes a resource to be programmed? Does lack of economic competitiveness with other

countries mean that our society must view our children as "deficient" because they don't measure up to another culture's definitions? What do we value about the Japanese culture besides their economic success? What do we value about Chinese culture besides their children's math prowess? We have much more to consider before making "cultural changes" based on dissatisfaction with scores in math, and our schools will have to evolve within our own cultural framework, in relation to American understandings about life and its meaning.

GWYNN PEALER
Ocala, Florida

What Do You Think?

We welcome your comments on articles in *Educational Leadership*. Please send letters to: Executive Editor, ASCD, 125 N. West St., Alexandria, VA 22314-2798. Letters selected for publication may be edited for brevity and clarity.

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