

The Standards Debate Across the Atlantic

As European countries become integrated into the European Community, they are examining each other's standards and the standards of the U.S. and Japan.

Standards in education are by no means a unique concern of the U.S. They also concern the "other United States," the European Community (EC) of 320 million citizens balancing the U.S. on the other side of the Atlantic.

In recognition of European integration and in anticipation of 1992, the deadline for the next major step toward this end, Europeans are looking to their own educational standards. Sometimes each nation looks internally, at its own standards—British, French, Dutch, German, Spanish, or Italian. But European countries are also looking with ever-increasing interest at each other's standards, and Europe as a whole is measuring its own performance against that of the U.S. and Japan.

A recent survey of education in the European Community, *70 Millions d'Élèves, l'Europe de l'Éducation (Seventy Million Students, Educational Europe)* refers to the "Etats-Unis d'Europe" (United States of Europe), and the author asserts that American work on school effectiveness is "valid for Europe."¹

The British and the French

Yet there are considerable differences between Europe and the U.S., and one

of the most profound is the process used to determine high school graduation. The French baccalaureate and the British General Certificate of Education, Advanced Level, are typical examples of the European system.

Despite differences between British and French practices of high school graduation assessment, their similarities are most striking when both are compared with American procedures. Both British and French procedures are based on terminal assessment,

with little or no weighting for grades accumulated in previous years of study. Both place heavy reliance on formal written answers to question papers that are classified and unseen by either the candidates or their teachers until the examination. Both use open-ended questions and attach considerable importance to the students' ability to develop their arguments in extended prose. Candidates' answers are dispatched to national agencies, where they are graded.

As Grant Wiggins (p. 18) mentions, the British use elaborate moderating procedures to ensure comparability of standards among individual exam graders, who grade hundreds of thousands of exams; and the French have similar mechanisms to ensure objectivity. Naturally, considerable public interest is attached to what is the culmination of 13 years of schooling. In Britain, the local papers commonly comment on the performance of the most successful students—and on their schools. In France, the best exam answers are published in the national press.

Since European universities are selective in different ways from their American counterparts, this achievement is important for the individual student. Success on these formal

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school examinations is the normal qualification for entry to the university; and, in much of Europe, universities are obliged to accept all successful candidates. Students therefore attach great importance to their performance. Indeed, in France, successful students do not "pass," they are "recus" (received), with all the word implies about being admitted to a special body, the university.

All European universities charge home students merely nominal fees or offer universal fee remission; and all countries have elaborate systems of student finance designed to ensure that monetary problems should never be a barrier to university study. But the tough academic hurdle represented by the French baccalaureate, the British "Advanced Levels," the German *Abitur*, and by similar formal national standards in other countries limits university entrance. The intention is to make standards criterion-referenced, although the public is sometimes suspicious that politicians may "adjust" pass levels in order to fine-tune the university population.

British and French schools have eliminated the pressure that students or parents might exert on their teachers to inflate their grades by having papers graded by anonymous graders who are usually far away from the schools. As a high school teacher in the 1960s, I was able to say to my students, "Together, we will get good grades—and I can help you." Since grades were not my gift to bestow, students saw me as an ally, while someone else was the judge.

Common Concerns

Despite these differences from the U.S., there are still similar concerns about standards, often expressed by employers and frequently discussed by the press. Such concerns commonly relate to basic skills or to the work ethic of students.

Anxiety over literacy rates runs high. A British report early this year, alleging falling standards in the primary schools, was recently echoed in France. The educational establishment has accused both the British and the French reports of scaremongering, but both have found support in the press

and with the business community. Allegations and counter-allegations, research evidence and conflicting research evidence—this scenario will seem familiar to anyone who follows educational debate in the States.

One major social change may be reflected in falling language skills standards. In the past three decades, massive immigration to meet the growing manpower needs of the more prosperous countries of Northern Europe has produced a rapid increase in the number of students whose mother tongue is not a European language. In Britain, France, and the Netherlands most immigrants come from former colonies; in Germany, most come from southern European or near-European countries, such as Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey. In all countries, most immigrants have arrived with non-European languages as their mother tongues. And, unlike the sizable population of Hispanic immigrants in the U.S., their languages (Arabic, Turkish, Rudi, or Gujerati, for example) are outside the European family of languages; often they employ a different alphabet.

Such immigrants are enriching the European language pool, and their presence reinforces the European awareness that bilingualism is a normal, widespread human skill. But they have also introduced into Europe a variety of foreign accents and non-standard forms of European speech and writing. So far as I know, none of the research purporting to detect a decline in literacy has attempted to disaggregate performances of native Euro-Caucasian students from that of first- or second-generation immigrant students. Indeed, any attempt to do so would be politically inept and dangerously divisive. But in the absence of such evidence, it is at least feasible that literacy rates are falling in the schools with large immigrant student populations who have unique language needs of their own.

"Added Value"—Real or Insignificant?

Discussion of good, effective schools took a major new turn in the 1980s with the publication of two major studies, *Fifteen Thousand Hours* by Michael

Rutter and associates and *School Matters* by Peter Mortimer and associates.² Rutter and Mortimer noted a striking paradox: on the one hand, there is research, much of it American, alleging that the impact of schooling on students' life chances is minimal; on the other hand, British parents go to considerable lengths to choose (within the publicly funded state system) the schools where they want their children to study. Are the parents' instincts wrong? Or are there real differences in outcome between schools, which research has not detected?

Using sensitive measures of behavior and academic performance, Rutter and Mortimer uncovered significant differences in "added value" between schools. Differences in outcome, including retention and dropout rates, percentage of students who go on to higher education, and employment success, reflected *actual* differences in schools, even when full allowances had been made for the social, attitudinal, and educational differences of students on entry. As Rutter and Mortimer put it in their now famous phrase, "Schools make a difference." But differences between schools are particularly conspicuous when we recognize that the term *standards* denotes more fields of behavior than intellectual performance alone.

The work of Rutter and Mortimer presupposes that parents can select the schools to which they will entrust their children. Indeed, pressure on educational systems to raise standards (however measured) can be most effective when schools realize that they need to win, and then to retain, the confidence of the parents in their community in order to remain in business. This is the free-market view, and, paradoxically, where public schools are concerned, it is more in evidence in Europe than in the States.

Europe Has More Choice

No EC country has the principle of secularity, as embodied in the Constitution of the U.S. On the contrary, European governments have historically had close association with the churches; and much public education in Europe was once provided by the churches. Today, throughout all EC

countries, national networks of church schools coexist with schools funded directly by the state. But, in contrast to the U.S., church schools are funded by the government and offer free, or nearly free, education. At the very least, therefore, European parents have a choice between a state (usually secular) school and a church school (which usually offers the same curriculum but within a Christian framework and is financed from state funds). The two systems are often competitive, and in a largely secular age parents are as likely to choose the school in whose teaching they have the most confidence as the school that corresponds to their religious faith. Indeed, there is growing evidence that parents choose church schools because they believe they offer firmer discipline, a more structured ethos, and more traditional teaching—"standards," at least in one sense of the word. Parental choice within the free, publicly funded state system is carried still further in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands. The Dutch, for historic reasons, have no less than four competing school systems, reflecting past religious divisions. They offer parents a wider range of choice than most other European countries. In Denmark, the government permits individuals or groups to set up their own private schools and apply for state funding.

Recent changes have been most marked in the United Kingdom; yet, despite the controversy surrounding moves under the Thatcher administration to reinforce parental choice, the practice of choice is nothing new. Schools have always been conceived of as communities, with something of the characteristics of a family (teachers are officially *in loco parentis*), and it is considered right that different schools, even when in the same neighborhood and under the same "Office," will have distinct communal personalities and ethos distinctively their own. Given that each school has its own team of teachers and develops its own priorities, it follows that it is right for parents to choose the type of school they consider appropriate for their sons and daughters.

The Standards Debate Here and There

One of the many fascinating differences between Europe and the U.S. lies in the vocabulary of the standards debate. As an outside observer of American educational debate, I detect that in America accusations of falling standards are commonly directed at *systems*—state governments, school boards, curricular practices, educational innovations, patterns of teacher education. On a different level, the finger may be pointed at individual teachers, with reference to personal accountability for student performance or to competency testing.

On my side of the Atlantic, the pressure for standards seems to be directed at *institutions*—especially the individual school. Parents do not as a rule choose individual teachers, nor do they really exercise an educational choice when they move into a particular community and accept the educational system that goes with it. But they do exercise considerable choice in selecting the schools to which they will entrust their offspring. We are undergoing a consumer revolution; and where schools are concerned, parents as clients are becoming more discriminating and more exigent.

As the two economic giants of the industrial world, the U.S. and the EC have come to the realization that their long-term futures depend on their human resources. The schools will ensure our future—or will imperil it. In the current debate, we have much in common, as we defend similar democratic, pluralistic values and work to further the well-being of our citizens; and we draw upon complementary traditions. For each of us, there is a rich treasury of educational experiences on the other side of the Atlantic. We shall be foolish indeed if we do not draw on it. □

¹F. Vaniscotte, (1989), *70 Millions d'Eleves, l'Europe de l'Education*, (Paris: Hatier).

²M. Rutter et al., (1979), *Fifteen Thousand Hours*, (London: Open Books); and P. Mortimer et al., (1988), *School Matters*, (Wells: Open Books).

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