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Are International Comparisons Useful?

By Edward B. Fiske

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Americans have become increasingly curious about how other countries run their school systems. Delegations of U.S. educators, policymakers, journalists, and others routinely travel to Singapore, South Korea, and other countries with high-performing students and return with lists of "best practices" to emulate. The Finns get so many requests that they have started charging visitation fees.

Such efforts make sense in our increasingly interconnected world. A global marketplace has emerged for ideas of how best to equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need to function in the early 21st century. American policymakers need to be active in this marketplace—both as consumers and suppliers.

The usefulness of learning from other countries, however, is by no means self-evident. Educational policies and practices are closely tied to national cultures, which can differ in fundamental ways. Are there really any "best practices" to learn from schools in Asia that pack 40 or more highly disciplined students into a single class? A rational reaction on the part of an American visitor to such a school would be, "No way!"

These cross-cultural differences start with the basic purpose of schooling. Most countries define the job of young people as learning, and schools spend almost all of their time on academics. By contrast, Americans ask their schools to shoulder tasks ranging from driver education and drug-abuse prevention to building community sprit around Friday-evening football. Academic learning is only one purpose of schooling—and not always the most important one.

Despite the pervasiveness of the Internet, the nature of the youth culture and family life varies across countries in ways that shape school policies and practices. Japan bars students from working part time except in the most serious cases of financial hardship, while Scandinavian and other countries limit high school athletics. I recently visited a high school in South Korea that keeps its students until 11 p.m.—not to provide more instruction, but to prevent middle-class parents from enrolling their children in evening cram schools and giving them an advantage over their less affluent peers.

Most developing countries are still struggling with issues of universal access and gender parity, which are no longer central issues for us. India's fabled strength in math, science, and engineering came about because of its decision to concentrate its resources on a relatively small number of elite students. Only now is it grappling with the challenge that we share of educating substantial numbers of disadvantaged students.

Most Asian and European countries place ultimate responsibility for academic success on the individual student and rely heavily on exams to sort students. By contrast, we assign accountability to districts, schools, and even individual teachers. Politicians in Japan tend to defer to professional educators when it comes to matters such as curriculum. Our legislators have no compunctions about imposing the latest fads regarding class size, curricular priorities, or student testing, regardless of what professional educators have to say.

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So how should we go about participating in that "global marketplace" of school improvement ideas?

As a start, we need to move beyond the "here's a country that got it right" syndrome. No country has come up with the answer to all of the major educational problems of the day. For that matter, no country has come up with an answer to perhaps the most urgent education issues of all: how to effectively educate large concentrations of disadvantaged students in urban areas.

Some of the lessons we have to learn fall into the category of what not to do. New Zealand's national experiment with market-based education policies in the 1990s, for example, might have forewarned us about the problems we are now facing with regard to our failure to balance parental choice with policies that protect the public interest.

We would also do well to remember that the global marketplace works both ways. Other countries see strengths in the U.S. system and have no hesitation about learning from us. Several years ago, I participated in a discussion in Beijing where Asian policymakers expressed amazement that their Western counterparts were looking to emulate the performance of Asian students on standardized tests at a time when China and other Asian countries were trying to move beyond a testing culture. American schools, they said, were models for how to teach problem-solving, creativity, and other skills central to the 21st-century workplace. (Debate ensued about whether U.S. schools really do teach creativity, and some consensus emerged around the notion that the real strength of the United States is the context of freedom in which education exists. U.S. students may not know as much as peers in some other countries, but they are much freer to apply what they do know. But that's a topic for another time.)

As we think about what we can realistically learn from the educational successes of other countries, the most obvious point is to look for ideas and practices that have proven to be applicable across a variety of cultural settings. Three such themes come to mind:

First, a national understanding of—and commitment to—the importance of education. Lacking natural resources, countries with cultures as diverse as Finland, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore understand that as nations they will live or die by what comes out of their heads. Serious investments in teaching and learning become a national priority in ways that, rhetoric notwithstanding, are lacking here.

Second, the importance of good teaching. High-performing education systems across diverse cultures have found ways to recruit many of their brightest young people into the teaching profession. They train them well, pay them living middle-class salaries, and—most important—treat them as professionals with wide discretion to make decisions on how best to teach their particular students. Education in these

countries operates within a culture of trust.

We take a very different approach. Rather than create a culture of respect and professionalism in teaching and learning, we embrace an industrial model, set impossible goals, and then make teachers scapegoats for school failures. It's a wonder that anyone with other options would want to become a teacher, much less make it a career.

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Third, the availability of good schools regardless of students' ZIP codes and socioeconomic status. Our funding and accountability systems inevitably foster huge achievement gaps between disadvantaged and middle-class students. By contrast, other countries with successful education systems studiously avoid concentrating the best teachers and highest-quality public schools in homogeneous geographic areas. They also seek to make sure that all students are ready and able to learn through early-childhood education, school-based health services, and other support services. Every country has achievement gaps between students from poor and wealthy families, but nowhere are these gaps as wide as they are in the United States. To our shame, we readily tolerate the largest concentration of low-performing poor students of any developed country—a fact of life that is both unfair and immoral.

So when it comes to international comparisons: Caveat emptor. What we have to learn from other countries with top education systems has less to do with strategies and tactics than with the underlying values that they bring to education. These include making education a national priority, fostering a professional climate in schools, and becoming serious about helping all students fulfill their fundamental right to a high-quality education.

If we can ever get our values right, the "lessons from" will take care of themselves.

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