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Futurist Book Group Discussion

National Differences, Global Similarities: World Culture and the Future of Schooling

by David P. Baker and Gerald K. LeTendre

Stanford University Press, 2005

ISBN-0-8047-5021-1

Synopsis of the November 2006 Futurist Book Group meeting, summarized by Lisa Roney and Carolyn Shettle

Baker and LeTendre bring an important international perspective on U.S. educational institutions and examine educational trends likely to affect education both globally and in the United States. Their discussion relied heavily on data from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) which contains information from approximately 50 countries. The generalizability of their observations is limited somewhat by lack of TIMSS information for the poorest countries and its limitations to mathematics and science education. The group believes that some of the findings may not transfer to very poor countries and fields other than mathematics and science.

The authors emphasize the commonality in educational institutions among industrialized countries and make a number of interesting observations:

- mass schooling is on the rise;
- the effect of family on student achievement outweighs the effect of schools;
- shadow education systems (i.e., tutoring and other educational experiences designed to complement classroom experiences) are increasingly important;
- educational differences between males and females are declining;
- education is being pushed to ever younger kids; and
- the popularity of home schooling is rising.

The book suggests that current trends in these areas will continue. However, the group felt that the book failed to adequately address some factors likely to impact the future of education. These include the increased availability and use of technology in the classroom and increased opportunities for international travel, influences of the school without walls concept, environmental/direct science experiences, and outward bound.

The group also pointed out that there may be unique aspects of educational institutions and environments of the countries studied that were not fully described in the book. For example, the United States (and to some degree Canada and Australia) have more ethnically diverse populations than most of the TIMSS countries.

One of the most intriguing topics explored in this book is the impact of inequality on education. The authors provide evidence that inequality in resource allocation to schools results in relatively low mathematics and science scores. They also find that school violence is associated with schools having lower overall achievement, greater variation in math scores, and more use of shadow education. They charge that U.S. programs aimed at poverty are weaker than in many other wealthy nations and "...the United States, economically dynamic and the most politically powerful nation in the world, has a poor record in establishing a fair and level educational playing field."

The authors also have an interesting view of the role of educational reform. They claim that reform doesn't change much but creates a sense of dynamism. They also say that "Educational reform cycles seem to occur most rapidly in the United States where there is a pending sense of educational doom" and point out that no organization like the National Science Foundation (NSF) or the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) ever finds all is well in education. Instead, they "look for solutions, find problems, and rally around implementation of reforms." (p.166) This emphasis on reform has resulted in rushed and unsophisticated analysis of test results causing nations to misinterpret results and make reforms in nonproductive ways

Group members were also surprised to find that the United States has approximately average rates of violence among 7th and 8th graders and that school violence is not related to crime rate.

Additional predictions:

- In the future one of the differences among nations will be their ability to train teachers to high standards, which will create differences in the quality of instruction between the poor and wealthy nations
- Debate will continue on whether teachers should be specialists or generalists
- The overall trend will be toward more decentralization but with a continuing of a mix of centralized and decentralized elements; however, since the United States is currently at the extreme of the decentralized continuum, centralized reforms such as "No Child Left Behind" may result in greater centralization.

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study focused on mathematics and science education. By 2018, will the liberal arts be de-emphasized in favor of "utilitarian" education? Why or why not? Also, what new areas of learning will emerge?*
- *According to Baker and LeTendre, the popularity of home schooling is rising. Will home schooling be even more popular ten years from now? And, are there any long-term changes in family life as we now know it that will impact home schooling?*

- *What is the future of education for gifted students? Challenged students? Will education of the future be more individualized, helping each student build on his/her strengths? Or, will it be more monolithic, with fewer “opportunities to excel” and the resulting loser mindset for students who don’t “make the grade”?*
- *Do you agree that the overall trend will be toward more decentralization, and if so, in which countries?*
- *As the reviewers suggest, how will IT, increased opportunities for international travel, and new approaches such as the school-without-walls concept, impact education in the next decade?*
- *What major differences will exist in education among various nations in 2018?*
- *Finally, will a new understanding of the brain lead to new modes of education beyond the lecture and class discussion approaches?*