

Catching Up or Leading the Way

American Education in the Age of Globalization

by Yong Zhao

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Preface

Dr. Zhao grew up in China and immigrated to the US in the 1990's. From his perspective he sees that China seems to want an education that America seems eager to throw away. This is one that respects individual talents, supports divergent thinking, tolerates deviation, and encourages creativity. At the same time, the US government is pushing for the kind of education that China is moving away from. This is one that features standardization of curricula and an emphasis on preparing students for standardized tests. He wonders why Americans who hold individual rights in high regard would let the government dictate what children should learn, when they should learn it, and how they are evaluated.

Get my kid out of here

— Zhao relates a story about his son who told him that he figured out how to get a better score on Michigan's NCLB tests. His strategy was to stop being creative and imaginative. Instead he would follow the scoring rubric, that was analyzed and taught by his teacher. His score did improve but for this and other reasons the Zhaos decided to move him to a school that was not governed by NCLB

What's wrong with NCLB

The most serious consequence of NCLB is that it leads to homogenization of talents. While the intention is to ensure every child receives a good education, the problem is that NCLB practically defines good education as being able to show good scores in a limited number of subjects. As schools conform to standardized curriculum, children are deprived of opportunities to develop talents in other areas. If it works, we will develop a group of individuals with the same abilities, skills, and knowledge. American needs a citizenry of creative individuals with a wide range of talents to sustain its tradition of innovation. Reforms aimed as saving America are putting America in danger.

The two gaps

Two gaps are commonly cited as reasons why American schools need to improve. One is the performance gap between whites and minorities, primarily blacks and Hispanics. The other is the gap between average performance of American students and students from other first world countries. Zhao cites work by Berliner (2006) in pointing out that we didn't need NCLB testing to tell us where to find failing schools since the common characteristic they share is poverty. There is strong evidence to support the idea that even a small reduction in family poverty significantly improves school behavior and student performance. Test bias also contributes. When tested for creative and practical abilities, minorities do much better.

Making things worse

Current reform efforts may further disadvantage minority students by forcing them into a narrow set of subjects and testing them in only one type of ability. Poor results then demonstrate how incompetent they are. Zhao argues that gaps should be aimed at reduction of poverty, recognition of a broad range of talents and abilities, and reconsideration of the value of different talents and knowledge. At a national level, our test scores are impacted by the number of poor students, and studies have shown that there is no connection between a country's economic success and its test scores. Zhao does believe that we need school reform to meet new challenges. He just does not believe that NCLB reforms are going to move us in the right direction.

Gaps, Myths, and Fear

— Zhao goes back to missile gap that President Kennedy used to help him get elected in 1960. Subsequently Kennedy found that the gap did exist, but it was in our favor. The myth of the gap resulted in a fear that we needed to do something about it. The launching of Sputnik caused a fear that our educational system was inferior to the Soviet Union. A Nation at Risk (1983) reported we were at risk of being passed by other developed countries. Since the public seems to trust test scores as an accurate way to judge schools and nations, the NCLB legislation was seen as an effective way to rate school performance. Like other political movements, this one is also fueled by fear. Like the missile gap, the learning gap is also a myth.

Narrowing the Curriculum

Five years after NCLB was passed, about 62% of school districts have increased instructional time for English or math or both in elementary school. To do this, time was cut from one or more other subjects. The decreases add up to a total of 145 minutes a week or nearly 30 minutes a day, which is an average of 32% in the total instructional time devoted to these subjects.

Strengths of American Education

While test scores show America falling behind, the economic reality does not. In 2008, the US ranked first out of 131 countries of the Global Competitive Index, which measures the ability of countries to provide high levels of prosperity to their citizens. The US also has 75% of the world's top 40 universities, 70% of the world's Nobel Prize winners, and received 38% of the patents for technology inventions in 2008. This would indicate that the crisis was manufactured.

Talent shows & extras stuff

— Zhao uses talent shows as one way American schools succeed without standardization. Shows that allow all to participate are inclusive and preserve a pool of diverse talent. They encourage initiative and responsibility. They send the message that schools value different talents. They help children be proud of their strengths rather than focusing on their weaknesses. Numerous after-school activities also promote individual differences and interests.

What do we want?

— Do we want a diversity of talents from individuals who are passionate, curious, self-confident, and risk taking, or do we want a nation of excellent test takers with outstanding performances on math and reading tests? The current reformers have chosen test scores in a limited number of areas over diversity, individual interests, creativity, and the risk taking spirit that has helped sustain a strong economy and society in the United States.

What will China do?

Countries like China, South Korea, Singapore, and Japan are reforming as well. Unlike the United States, they are pushing for more flexibility and more choices for students. They see fostering creativity as an important goal. Instead of more national standards they are allowing more autonomy at the local level. These Asian countries who have scored high on international tests are advocating for more individualization and attending to emotions, creativity, and other skills.

China: No Threat Yet.

China's growth has been largely fueled by vast cheap labor, mostly making things invented or designed elsewhere. For China to import one Airbus 380 aircraft, it needs to export 800 million shirts. Indigenous innovation is still a dream for China. This stems from the fact that what schools value and measure may not be what is important in real life and it may even hurt.

China's 5th Grand Invention

As early as AD 605, China's central government began to use a national exam system to select government officials. (The other four inventions were the compass, gunpowder, paper, and movable type.) Tests seemed to discriminate against individuals who were talented in science and technology. The gaokao test given at the end of high school has a profound effect on all schooling and society. Studies have shown that students ranking in the top 10% are not as successful in life.

Impact of the daily grind

Many students in China attend school and study and do little else. Increased competition in getting into better colleges and an exclusive focus on test scores place unbearable pressure on students. Suicide is the number-one killer of Chinese between the ages of 15 and 34. Many cases of cheating are reported and are punished as criminal actions. Another casualty is creativity. To be creative is to be different. All schools work against creativity expecting children to conform.

America's Secret Weapon

American children are less exposed to the creativity-killing machine that we call school. Parents of talented students in the United States are less likely to emphasize external standards. This may not lead to high test scores, but it helps preserve and protect individuality and creativity. American parents have a broader definition of success. In Asia, students have little room for exploring individual interests. Creativity cannot be taught, but it can be stifled.

Globalization Challenges

— Zhao does a good job of explaining what has led to globalization. If you don't know the details I recommend this book. I also point you to the summary of Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat*, which can be found on this blog. Important questions for educators related to this issue are:

— Why would the world's employers pay us more than they have to pay talented people from places like India to do their work?

— What can we do to help our children live, work, and interact with people from different cultures and countries? The ability to interact effectively with people who speak different languages, believe in different religions, and hold different values has become essential for all workers. NCLB has already squeezed out room for subjects other than those being tested.

Virtual World Issues

— Zhao does a good job of summarizing how the Internet is impacting the lives of its users. He discusses various online gaming options available, the impact of cyber crime, how anyone can become an online producer of content, and how the virtual world that many people live in part-time is as real as the physical world psychologically, economically, politically, and socially. It can be viewed as a foreign culture that we must learn to interact with.

Education meets the virtual world

A majority of our schools have done little more than offer courses on computer keyboarding and other simple computer skills, besides using the new technology to enhance the teaching of traditional subjects. (Doug: This was a general finding of my dissertation.) School use of technology has yet to recognize the transformation that it has brought about. The virtual world is becoming a significant source of jobs while schools teach skills and knowledge needed for an industrial economy. (Doug: This is not to mention that online education allows students to learn what they need, and possibly better, than they can learn in schools. The increase in home teaching is one result. Are schools so slow to change that they will be left in the virtual dust?)

The New Vital Knowledge?

While it is not totally clear what should be taught, Zhao offers some guidelines. He believes that schools should offer a comprehensive, balanced curriculum that includes opportunities for students to explore and develop both left and right brain thinking. They should also help children develop a global awareness, an appreciation for differences, an understanding and an ability to interact with the digital world, and the knowledge to develop a healthy mind and body. Schools must also allow children to study what interests them, what they are passionate about, and what they are good at. We avoid developing skills that are available at a cheaper price elsewhere or those that can be done by machines. Creativity, high-level cognitive skills, and emotional intelligence are also important.

Global/Digital Competence

— Zhao believes that our schools need to promote these two important competencies rather than set them off to the side in order to prepare students for tests. Since cultures are learned by people who live in them, they are hard to explain and teach. You can't simply tell someone, they need to experience it. Foreign language teaching can be an avenue for understanding cultures. As for digital competency, we need to teach how to live in, make a living in, and shape the virtual world. American schools are well equipped to do this. It would be unwise to abandon this advantage and focus on teaching things that do not take advantage of this asset.

Final Suggestions

— Zhao offers suggestions as to how schools can improve. In order to become more global and to better understand other cultures they can bring in foreign exchange students and teachers so that the school has a more real diversity. They can also offer online courses so that the curriculum can be more diverse. The internet can also allow contact and virtual visits to expand the school's horizon. Since many valuable skills, knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and perspectives do not have widely accepted standardized tests, schools need to expand the way they access student learning.

What I left out of this summary

- ❖ In an effort to encourage my readers to buy this book I have left out enough content to encourage anyone interested in my summary to get this book in their hands. Here are some topics that I did not include in my summary.
- ❖ Details of the history of education reforms from the 1950's to the present
- ❖ How genetic diversity enhances productivity and ability to adapt.
- ❖ Lots of cool statistics and information about China
- ❖ A great summary of what globalization is all about
- ❖ A tour of the virtual world inside the Internet
- ❖ Lots of rationale for what schools should focus on in the 21st Century
- ❖ A model of what it takes to be digitally competent and his opinion of the Obama administration's initiatives as of May 2009