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To cite this article: STEPHEN P. HEYNEMAN (1999) American education: a view from the outside, International Journal of Leadership in Education, 2:1, 31-41, DOI: [10.1080/136031299293200](https://doi.org/10.1080/136031299293200)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/136031299293200>



Published online: 10 Nov 2010.



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American education: a view from the outside†

STEPHEN P. HEYNEMAN

This is a comment on the reputation of schools in the US from a perspective of someone who has worked extensively on educational problems outside the US. Two points are raised. One concerns a characteristic of US schools which is highly regarded. The second concerns a problematic characteristic which makes the task of schools in the US considerably harder than in other countries and may help explain why US students are sometimes known for lower performances on international tests of academic achievement.

For the last 25 years as senior educator with the World Bank, I worked on problems in about 50 countries spread across the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Latin American, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Now I hope this experience may help inform the efforts to improve education within the United States (US).

These remarks are confined to two points. One concerns a characteristic of US education which is highly regarded. There has been extensive discussion of how poorly US schools are doing. But there is one characteristic in which US schools are the envy of many around the world (Heyneman 1995). The second point concerns a problematic characteristic of American education. This characteristic is sometimes ignored by academic scholars in spite of the fact that it may be an explanation for low achievement scores and may provide an explanation for the often-heard remark from academics that in US schools 'money makes no difference' (Hanushek 1989, 1994).

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†The views are the author's alone and do not necessarily represent the institutions with which he may be affiliated. A synopsis of this article appeared in *The School Administrator*, September, 1998.

A gift unappreciated

No nation is forged from a single sect. No nation is without minorities. No nation is without differences between rich and poor, provinces and capital. Nations may appear uniform at first glance, but are not. Iran, Egypt, China, the Netherlands, Britain, Japan—even nations with ethnic titles have minorities. Estonia is only 62% Estonian: 30% of the population is Russian-speaking, 8% speak Ukrainian, Belarusian or Finnish. Kyrgystan is only 53% Kirghiz, 21% of the population speak Russian, 13% speak Uzbek, 5% speak Ukrainian or German, 8% speak other languages. However simple a country may appear, on closer inspection the number of justified generalizations decline; while nuances and dilemmas become more evident.

In every nation, the central purpose of public education remains the same as it was when first proposed by Frederick the Great in the 18th century: to provide a common public experience across sectarian groups.¹ As the Reverend W. S. Datton put it 150 years ago in New England (US), the public school is

a place where children could be educated not as Baptists or Methodists, or Episcopalians, or Presbyterians; not as Roman Catholics or Protestants, still less as foreigners in language or spirit, but as Americans, as made of one blood and citizens of the same free country. (Datton 1848: 168)

Providing this ‘common experience’ poses a dilemma—one associated with modernity. In a modern school system the provision of education—the style of pedagogy, the structure of the syllabus, the types of teaching and learning materials—cannot be uniform. The more modern the education, the more diversified and personalized delivery needs to be. While national standards may seem like a normal requirement, the idea that pedagogy, textbooks, syllabi and school administration should be uniform across the gamut of objectives, age groups and individual learning styles is being discarded everywhere. In France, diversity among its regional departments is now the norm. Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Sweden and the Netherlands have all instituted variants of school-based-management. In Russia, there is a plethora of institutional styles and materials from which to choose. In Hungary, national performance standards leave schools free to combine, merge and concentrate on the subject matter in whatever way they think most effective. In modern education systems the need for national standards should not be confused with uniform delivery. But how can a nation of multiple interests and heterogeneous identities provide a common experience and allow, at the same time, a latitude of pedagogies and delivery mechanisms consistent with educational excellence?

The Russian Federation provides a good illustration of this dilemma. Approximately half the 89 regions of the Russian Federation (roughly analogous to states), have minority populations of sufficient size to generate debate over which language should be used as the language of instruction. The number of languages of instruction has doubled. Under the USSR, five languages of instruction used to be permitted: Russian, Tartar, Bashkir, Georgian and Armenian. Now there are four more: Urdmurt, Buriat, Chuvash and Iakut. Moreover 87 languages are now taught as

supplementary subjects. In some regions speakers of Russian are in the minority. This adds a different dimension to the question of how to protect 'minority rights'. How can the basic tenets of a society, such as loyalty and citizenship, be guaranteed if educational authority is devolved to local communities and schools, as stipulated by the Russian education law of 1992 (Heyneman 1997a). Americans assume that local communities will act responsibly. In other countries this is not necessarily a safe assumption.

Many American challenges seem benign by comparison to those in some other parts of the world. Elsewhere grievances are more inflammable and protracted. With the possible exception of slaves in the 18th Century or American Indians sent against their will to reservations, minorities in the US settled in certain regions for reasons of personal choice. The Japanese who migrated to Hawaii, the Swedes who settled in Minnesota, the Irish who settled in Boston did so by and large to seek a better life.

In other parts of the world, ethnic groups have been moved for political reasons and without their consent. German-speakers were relocated to Siberia away from the war front. Korean speakers were moved to Central Asia. Jews, Cossacks, Tartars, Buriats, Poles, Georgians and many others have been relocated at various times to distant and unfamiliar territory. Throughout most of this century, these groups had no genuine political voice or authority over what was taught to their young. Now in Eastern and Central Europe and in the former Soviet Union they have both voice and authority, with few institutions or traditions such as school boards to act as constraints. Now curriculum is used to right old wrongs. Here, for instance, is a passage from a textbook in Bosnia:

Horrible crimes committed against the non-Serb population of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Serb–Montenegrin aggressors and domestic chetniks were aimed at creating an ethnically cleansed area where the Serb people could live exclusively. In order to carry out this monstrous idea of theirs, they planned to kill or expel hundreds of thousands of Bosniaks and Croats. (Heyneman 1998a)

Nor is the venom in this textbook limited to 'enemies' of the Bosnians, but rather is extended to Bosnians who did not react in the 'proper' way:

... those who ran away out of fear and who were not prepared to join those who were defending their country are now living in a foreign country waiting for someone else to liberate their country for them... such an attitude deserves every condemnation, since not to help the homeland which is bleeding is a treason and a crime of the worst category (Heyneman 1998b).

There are tensions in American schools: deeply-felt debates over multi-cultural curriculum, standards for history, bilingual education; heated discussions about birth control, homosexuality, use of prayer and religious symbols in the classroom. There is extremism in American society: some advocate violence; others claim racial superiority. But however common these extremist views may be in the wider society, these are not the views taught by public schools.

And why not? There are over 15 000 school districts in the US, each with its own governance structure. With so much decentralization, and so weak a federal role, how is it that there is so little extremism in the public school curriculum?

The debate may not appear civil or professional when the Los Angeles school board is in the midst of a discussion of bilingual education. Such passionate issues have been painful for those who have participated, and for all of us to watch. Nevertheless, by comparison with many parts of the world where there are no school boards and where the schools themselves may be used to create a revolution, the school board debate in Los Angeles may seem benign by comparison.

Sometimes overlooked is the fact that there are more costly things to a nation than a public school system, regardless of how inefficient it may appear (Heyneman 1997b, 1998). Even if slow to acknowledge consumer interests, the US public school system has unique virtues. US schools do not teach sedition against the constitution; they do not teach disrespect toward specific ethnic or religious groups; they do not include in the curriculum materials which would increase political tensions with countries to the South or to the North. None of these problems is a part of the educational dilemmas in the US, but they are very much a part of the educational dilemmas for many schools systems in other parts of the world.

However troubled American schools may seem, leaders of other countries, such those in the Russian Federation, look at the US school system and wonder at the 'beauty of its balance'. The balance over curriculum in the US is achieved without the use of terror from Washington; without the use of secret police or informants; without having to resort to prisons and armies. How does the US do it? That is their question. How is it that there is so much freedom of expression, that there can be so much authority in the hands of so many different interests and yet so few instances of extremism in the official curriculum. This marvellous system, in many ways, is the wonder of the world.

What concerns me

Let me start with a story. I was raised in a land of abundance, California in the 1950s, during a time when school attendance was widely held by my age group to be 'uncool'. Making fun of teachers and creating dismay in our parents was a competitive sport. In my mid-20s, I found myself teaching in Africa. There I discovered, much to my surprise, that schooling was highly valued. A family's future was bundled into the fate of a young student. There were no discipline problems. I learned that school was a scarce resource.²

But I learned more than that. On one occasion my father travelled from California to visit me in Africa. He was old, and infirm. He had suffered a stroke but could walk with difficulty and communicate effectively. The elderly headman of a village near where I lived, asked that my father 'honour him' with a visit. One was arranged late in the afternoon when the sun was not so strong. The headman had placed two chairs under the shade of a tree, one chair for him, one for my father. Along with the headman's sons, I sat on the ground, to translate and listen. There I was, a product of California opportunity, with two

degrees and a bright future, sitting on the ground at the feet of my father. Ten years earlier I would have found it difficult to sit next to my father. Now I was sitting happily at his feet.³

I was surprised at how easy it was. By that time, I had come to learn something which the California system—elementary, high school and university, even graduate school—never taught me. I had learned that there is one area of life in which discrimination, and unequal status, is morally right and socially mandatory. It is not on the basis of race, gender or religion. It is on the basis of age. Diana Baumrind (1974) reminds us that ‘the social movement in the US that has as its praiseworthy objective to grant more power to powerless persons has been expanded without reason or logic to include dependent children’. The American school system neglects to point out that discrimination of some kinds can be justified. American schools are more comfortable emphasizing the need for greater equality than the need for greater recognition of inequality.

Significant advances in the latter part of the 20th century have been made in extending individual rights, privileges and opportunities for everyone. There are gaps, certainly—problems of unequal quality and a scarcity of resources. But these gaps are not, as the French say, *le noyau*. The gaps in equality are not the essence of the problem. The essence of the American educational problem is the absence of any tradition among students for understanding their place as children and adolescents (Heyneman 1997c). Let me try to explain.

A philosophic thread of American education holds that students should rationally define their own options and choose their own goals. As Edwin Herr once said, ‘within the individual must be fostered a conscious awareness that he has choices. He must be assisted to verbalize and make explicit these choices with which he is presented, and to translate these choices into action’ (Herr 1972).

And as Sidney Marland, a US Secretary of Education, reiterated, ‘the child has the option to move in terms of his own goals, not the school’s goals, and not society’s goals.’ (Marland 1976). But teaching the young to assume adult responsibilities by teaching them to make choices through rational discussion of the pros and cons has a limit. Non-adults cannot legally own property, make a will, act as business agents or fiduciaries, hold public office, vote, or enter into business partnerships. They cannot be held responsible for debts or the financial and legal obligations accruing from their participation in institutions. These are the responsibilities of adults. Regardless of how much authority adolescents are given, it is sponsored authority.

All societies, since the beginning of time, ask that children learn certain skills, certain facts, and important points of view, including certain behaviours. It is a central tenet of the Judeo-Christian philosophy of child-rearing that the community ‘train up a child in the way he should go, so that when he is old, he will not depart from it.’ (Proverbs 22:6).

If successful in understanding ‘the way to go’, a person is considered educated. In most parts of the world, to be ‘educated’ means to be ‘civilized’—a status which results from effective training. Schooling is a part of that training. Nevertheless, in the United States this distinction

between being schooled and being educated is blurred. The two are confused, and this confuses American children. As Margaret Fallers says,

The effect of leaving too much choice to young people is to make them feel insecure, to make them feel that adult society is not sure of itself... they have been taught since kindergarten that restrictions or requirements are bad and inhibiting to free growth... because the definition of what a 'reasonable' student does is so vague, schools are increasingly dependent upon counsellors to help students through the maze... Young persons should not be asked to make more than minor decisions about the content or their way of learning it... too much openness in the socialization process is terrifying to the student; it swamps him, it saps his energy; it may lead him to search for security in sex, in social movements with 'answers', in dependence on shallow personal connections, or to a position which rejects society altogether. (Fallers 1970.)

US schools are not the same in the 1990s—as they were in the 1960s. And that is good. Today there is more emphasis on 'consequences', on basic skills, on citizenship. Thanks to *The Nation At Risk Report* (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983), curriculum is no longer a cafeteria in which students can choose what is sweet to the taste. Students are taught that they will have to work hard if they are to progress to the next grade; if they want a driver's licence; if they want to get a high-school certificate. And there has been some effort to learn about the motivation of US students, and why the level of motivation in the US may be lower than in other countries (Child and Young 1990, Modell 1993).

Yet the discussion within the US still sidesteps the main point, a point which does not require a regression equation to figure out the answer. A regression equation is the statistical tool that has produced the results by which US schools are being criticized in every state legislature, in the US Congress, in the press and in academia. Regression equations weigh various factors against each other in the prediction of a result—academic achievement for instance. From the use of regression equations has emerged the suggestion that more money would make no difference. The problem is that the characteristic of whether students know and accept their responsibilities as children and adolescents has never been entered into the equations.

Unlike students in other countries, American students are not taught to understand that their schools exist as a result of the sacrifices of their parents and the wider community. They are not taught how valuable those schools are. Most importantly, they are not taught to say 'thank you' for the opportunity to attend (Heyneman 1976, 1978, 1979). Since they are not taught to appreciate the opportunities presented to them, they have not understood their place as children and adolescents. Not only do they not know their place in school, they do not know their place outside school either—on public buses, in the street, in various restaurants and cafes. Because they do not know their place, they may not end up well-educated, even if they get good grades in school.

Students do not have a perspective of themselves as a group which is consistent with that of adult society. They do not see themselves as children or adolescents. They have not understood that they are children, and because they are children they have an obligation to try hard. The justification for this obligation to try hard is not that there may be adverse consequences if they don't. Trying hard is justified because it is the right

thing to expect from everyone without exception.⁴ Americans seem quite capable of putting pressure on schools when they represent special interests—on abortion, creationism, Black History, gender balance. But Americans do not seem to know how to act as like-minded adults. Because of this, schools in the US try to get students engaged (i.e. to try hard) by attracting their interests. They try new curricula, new technologies, and new pedagogies.

And what message do students receive from these efforts? American students come to the conclusion that maybe they should try hard in school because it is in their own best interest for occupational reasons and income in future years. But they are also encouraged to choose for themselves their future path on the basis of reason. In many instances, they reason that they are not interested in their occupational or financial futures; they are interested in other issues. They are interested in social issues. They are interested in whether they have enough friends or in whether they are well-liked. They may be interested in making money, in drugs, in Hollywood or in other escapes. Or they may be preoccupied with other (perhaps normal) things—which is justifiable as long as there is a balance in their expectations between their obligations and their privileges.

But when children and adolescents decide they are more interested in their own issues than in sacrificing for their long-term financial and occupational future, the reasons to try hard in school simply collapse. When the rational reason to try hard is supplanted by a child's disinterest, there is nothing to take its place effectively as a motivation. Students take advantage of this motivational vacuum by choosing to not try hard. Schools are then blamed for the result. Blaming schools for a problem of faulty child rearing constitutes the essence of the American educational problem.

In other countries, schools are not blamed because students are not attracted to the most recent pedagogical innovation. It is not necessary for students to be interested before they are expected to try hard. In other countries schools try to interest students, but not because it is a necessity. Before entering a classroom it is assumed that students will try hard. Trying hard in school is routine. The expectation to try hard is treated like driving on the right side of the road, or putting on a seatbelt. It is like asking children to say 'thank you Mrs. Jones, I had a very nice time at the party'. It is treated simply as routine behaviour, learned early, so that when a child is older it can become automatic.

Economists suggest that there is a positive relationship between scarcity and value. How can value and respect be generated for something that is available to everyone and easily obtained? How can a sense of scarcity be created when now there is even discussion of opening up higher education to all who apply? How can a post-industrial wealthy country return a sense of value to schooling?

One more story

In the Oakland hills where I was raised, I used to gaze out on the twinkling lights of San Francisco. When there was no fog, the experience was

magical. During the late 1950s there appeared something which prevented me from seeing those lights. In the day it was visible as a brown cloud. It wasn't until the 1960s that it acquired the name smog. Political liberals argued that the sources of smog—auto exhaust and factories—should be controlled. Conservatives pointed to the cost of amelioration. By the 1970s the politics of smog had begun to change. In fact, the first serious auto emission regulations under the California Air Resources Board came when a conservative was governor. By that time it had been realized that all people were suffering from smog—children, poor, rich, elderly—and this helped turn smog into a non-partisan issue.

A similar consensus has been reached about the quality of water in our rivers and streams. Fishing and swimming have returned to waters which before were polluted. Throwing litter out of car windows used to be considered a game. Now it is not. Smoking cigarettes used to be a sign of sophistication and good for you. Now the consequences are better appreciated. In each of these cases, within a generation, attitudes and behaviour changed, even in a nation of abundance and a plethora of cultural traditions.

These changes did not come in a flash of universal insight or by accident. They resulted from mutually-reinforcing multiple interests, creating what Edward Shils once called a 'massive presentness', which underpins the transference of a single experience into a tradition (Shils 1981).

Given what I have observed of school systems outside the US, if I were asked to alter one thing about US schools, I would change this: I would suggest that schools teach children to say thank you. Thank you for the opportunity to learn. Thank you for the sacrifices made to provide our schools. I would suggest that schools help reinforce not only the virtues of individualism, but also the virtues of understanding one's place—as children and adolescents. I would suggest that this be done by creating a natural respect for those who are older. I realize that such lessons, if left to an unfettered bureaucracy, could be applied in a harsh manner and could become a means of oppression. But the application need not be harsh.

Instead, good behaviour can provide children and adolescents with a sense of freedom. What becomes routine, and good, is always appreciated. No matter how many times one may have heard it, when a child guest says 'Thank you for inviting me, I had a very nice time', it makes one feel appreciated as a host. Behaviour toward teachers and school administrators should be no less appreciated.

But what should school leaders and administrators do about this? What should they do differently? Teach in a new way? Design new rules for school administration? I don't think so. I believe that this is not a pedagogical problem. It is not solely a problem of school administration. It is a wider problem. It is a problem of children not getting up to give an older person a seat on the bus. It is a problem of children disturbing others with noise. It is a problem which includes many things in addition to trying hard in school.

How do other countries accomplish this sense of place in their children and adolescents? The USSR, a country which had only a fraction of the

resources available to the US, financed pre-schools largely for the purpose of creating a sense of place. The poorest part of the USSR was Tajikistan. When I visited Tajikistan for the first time in 1992, I visited pre-schools only 40 kilometres from the border with Afghanistan, one of the world's most impoverished countries. In the USSR over 65% of the four-year-olds were enrolled in pre-school. This enrolment is higher than that achieved by the state of California. Even today, the Russian Federation allocates more money to pre-schools as a percentage of its education budget than any country in the industrialized world. Of the money spent on education, 27% is spent on pre-schools. The country with the next highest rate is France, with 11%. The US spends less than 1% of its educational budget on pre-schools.

But even within the allocation for pre-schools, American expenditures are not allocated for the same purpose as other countries. Americans tend to think pre-schools should prepare children for elementary school by emphasizing how to read. Other countries do not emphasize how to read. They emphasize how to act. The purpose of pre-schools in other countries is to establish the routine in children of trying hard. And it is this routine which makes the difference later.

If one had asked the engineers back in 1950 to clean up the Potomac River, they would have known the measures to take. But they would have caused such a political problem with the people living along the river who were used to dumping garbage, and the owners of factories and farms, that they would never have been successful. The Potomac did change, but it changed because there was wide agreement that it was time to change.

So too with education: it should not be the administrator's job alone to change the behaviour of students. It is the family's job. It is the job of churches and other public agencies which deal with children and families. It is the job of private industries, advertisers, cafes and other parts of the community. But who is to get this process started? Who is to help organize it? Who is to point out the problem and to help articulate it?

That is our job. It seems to me that our job as educators is to point out what may not be obvious to everyone that no matter how well planned and financed, schools cannot be effective without student motivation. We should point out that motivation comes from sources which do not depend on rational argument; from sources well beyond new education techniques. Adults should not have to argue the case in favour of seatbelts every time a child enters a car. Seatbelts should be so routine that putting them on is not even noticed. So should trying hard in school.

Summary

In many parts of the world, extremism can be a part of the curriculum. When this occurs, public schools achieve a result exactly the opposite of their purpose. Instead of helping to create a consensus on public welfare and the public good, they contribute to civil unrest and social instability. In these circumstances schools can lay an intellectual foundation that leads to a

breakdown in the social order and, in extreme cases, to civil war. Governance of schools in the US is decentralized, and extremism is not a part of the curriculum. In this respect US schools are the envy of many around the world.

But in other respects US schools are an embarrassment. One embarrassment, which seems obvious looking from the outside, is the absence of tradition for students to understand their place as children and adolescents. If American students were to understand their place, without feeling oppressed; if trying hard were routine behaviour, if a sense of the value of schools could be re-created, the US would then have a school system which would be effective at using new resources to improve educational quality. If US students were to understand their place, then US schools would indeed accomplish what everyone wants, they would lead the world in the next century.

Notes

1. Because Prussia had recently acquired lands in which there were Catholics as well as Protestants, in his *Generallandschulreglement* in 1763 and in the *Allgemeine Landrecht* of 1794, Frederick the Great established the principle of compulsory education, a supervisory role for the state with respect to private (usually) church providers and, most importantly, the principle of tolerance of religious activities in lieu of Prussian loyalty (Helmreich 1959).
2. One indication of how valuable schooling is can be calibrated by simply asking students what they think of school. If asked whether 'they would leave school as soon as possible', 45% of the secondary school students in the US answer 'yes'. This compares to 30% in England and 10% in India (see Heyneman and Loxley 1983).
3. What did these old men talk about? Neither had experience with each other's culture. They didn't share any common language. But they were about the same age. Both had been teenagers at the outbreak of World War I and both had wanted to 'fight the Germans'. The headman had marched 1000 miles northward in and around Tanganyika looking for Germans and, after three years, returned home without ever encountering one. My father thought that was hilarious. He then relayed his story of joining the US Navy in San Francisco, spending two years training and waiting in hopes of being sent to the Atlantic Ocean where there was a chance of seeing a German ship. He never left California. The headman thought that was equally hilarious.
4. How are student obligations reinforced in other countries? In some parts of Eastern Europe, parents are called to school each semester. Their children's grades are announced as the parents sit together in the classroom where their children attend. The grades are read out publicly for all to hear.

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