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Education on the World Market

*It's true the world over:
The value a nation places
on education is a function
of supply and demand*

BY STEPHEN P. HEYNEMAN

IF I HAD \$1,000 to spend on increasing children's achievement in mathematics or science, I'd invest it in Malawi, Mexico, Malaysia, or Morocco—not in Minneapolis or Memphis. From my work on problems of education quality around the world, I've learned I could expect a better return on my investment in developing nations than in the U.S.

In the Philippines, for example, increasing education expenditures by just 1 percent and investing that amount in new textbooks caused a substantial national improvement in science knowledge in a single year. (How substantial? One-half of one standard deviation, or approximately equivalent to moving 20

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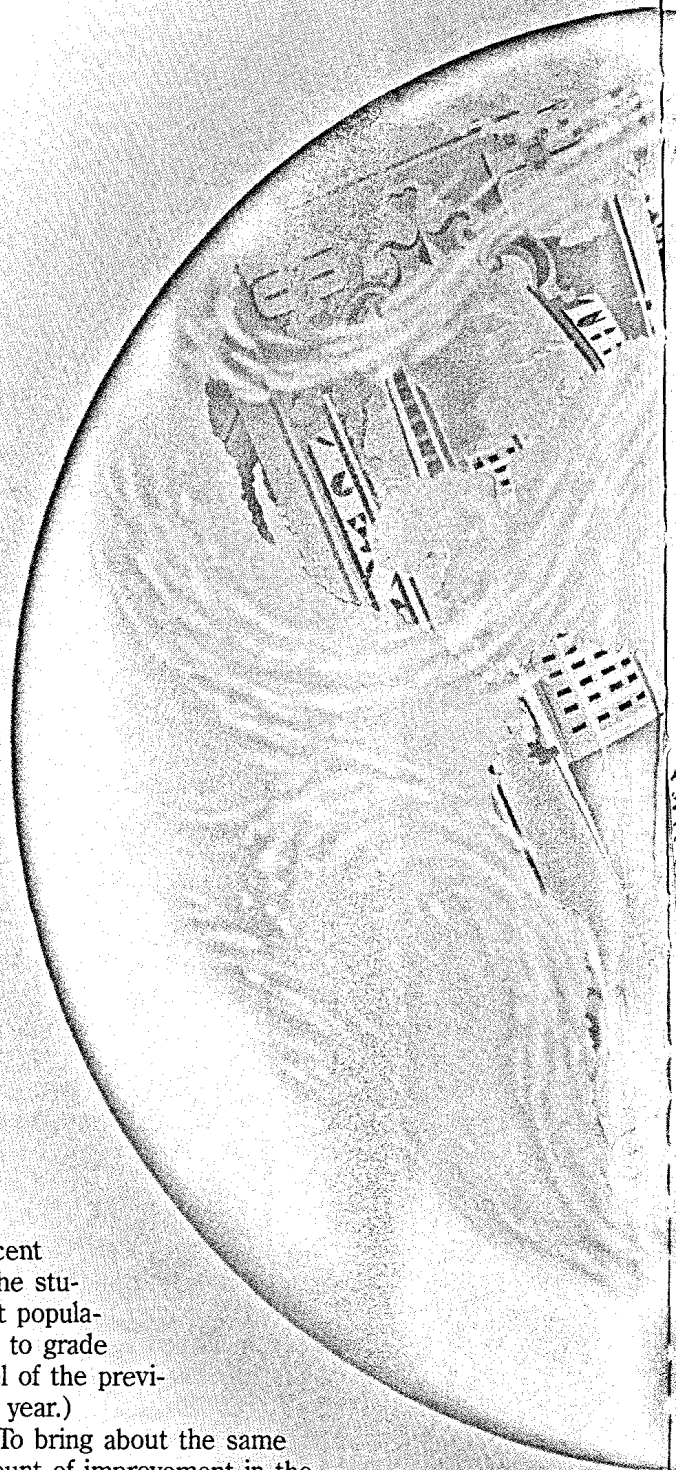
percent of the student population to grade level of the previous year.)

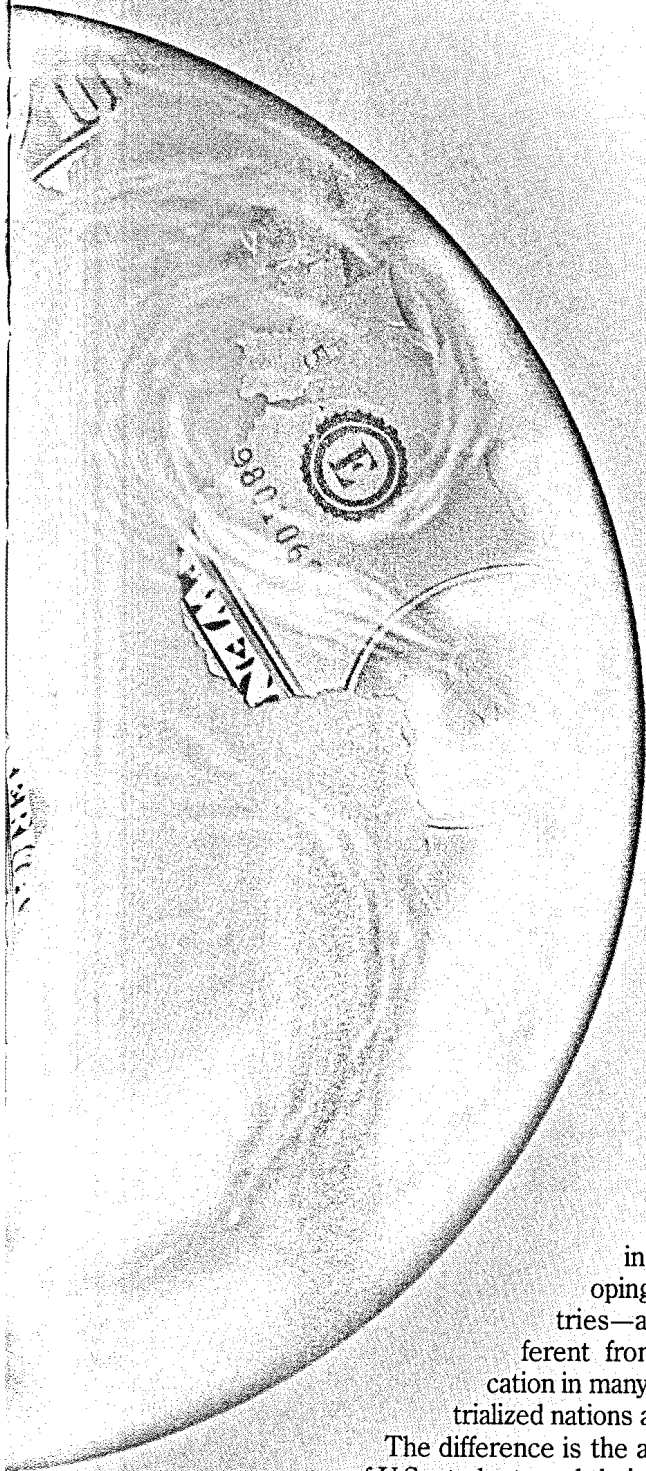
To bring about the same amount of improvement in the U.S. would require reducing the average class size to 10 students and increasing the budget by 300 percent or more.

So why are new resources for schools so effective in raising achievement in developing countries and so apparently ineffective in the U.S.? Is it because school systems in developing nations are so poor that any improvement will make a big difference?

Perhaps. But some improvements fail in poor countries and succeed in wealthy countries. In comparatively homogeneous populations such as Sweden and Japan, for example, school improvements can be quite successful.

The fact is, education in the U.S. is different from education





schoolchildren. The U.S. will account for only approximately 2 percent of the world's enrollment. Hence, what might be typical of U.S. education might be only vaguely related to what is true in the world of education.

• *Monetary resources.* The gap between wealthy and poor education systems is widening. In 1960, industrialized countries spent 14 times more per elementary school student than did the world's poorest countries. By 1970, they were spending 22 times more, and by 1980, up to 50 times more per child. In part, this gap is due to the economic ramifications of the debt crisis.

In 1987, 45 percent of Argentina's export earnings serviced that country's national debt. Debt service as a percentage of national export earnings for Algeria was 49 percent, for Turkey 32 percent, and for Burundi 38 percent. Until well into the next century, the average African country will have to spend 14 percent of its foreign exchange earnings to repay the service charge on its external debt.

This new public obligation, debt service, has heavily affected government spending on education: Two out of three low-income countries have reduced education spending. Between 1970 and 1983, the average expenditure per student in sub-Saharan Africa declined by 23 percent in elementary education, 39 percent in secondary education, and 46 percent in higher education. Moreover, these reductions have most heavily affected expenditures other than salaries. For example, Bolivia can spend only 80 U.S. cents per pupil per year on books, chalk, furniture, and equipment. Malawi spends \$1.24, Indonesia \$2.24, Thailand and Brazil \$4.00, and Mexico \$5.64.

In the poorest of these countries, a classroomful of students might have to share a single textbook. A teacher must then (often imperfectly) copy the book's content onto a blackboard so the students can (again, imperfectly) recopy it into their exercise books. This copy-copy routine yields rote memorization of simplistic and out-of-date facts, often with large gaps in logic and interpretation.

The U.S., on the other hand, spends \$171 per student per year for supplementary materials—that is, reading materials aside from textbooks. As a result, supplementary reading materials available per student in the U.S. increased by approximately 40 percent during the 1970s, and the monetary resources available to buy these materials increased by 80 percent.

• *Socioeconomic influences on learning.* Since the beginning of systematic cognitive testing at the turn of this century, students from middle-class backgrounds have often outperformed students from lower income families. But when large-scale testing began in developing countries in the early 1970s, this "iron rule" turned out to be far from universal. In fact, under some circumstances, the typical student from a low socioeconomic background performs every bit as well as a student from a middle-class background.

To be sure, these findings are related to the kind of test and the kind of country: They are more true of math and science tests than of language tests; more true of selection than of intelligence tests; and more true in poorer countries. In fact, the richer the country, the more influence socioeconomic status has on student learning.

Why is this relevant to us? For one thing, in developing countries, the main influence on academic achievement is, without question, the quality of the school. The poorer the country, the more power and influence the school has.

in developing countries—and different from education in many industrialized nations as well.

The difference is the attitude of U.S. students and their lack of motivation. That difference becomes evident in the context of world demographic, economic, and social trends.

• *Enrollment.* The balance of school enrollment has been shifting rapidly away from Europe and North America toward developing countries. Today there are more schoolchildren in Indonesia than in the U.S. and Canada combined. Approximately 80 percent of the world's schoolchildren will soon be enrolled in schools in developing countries. Countries other than the U.S. in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, or O.E.C.D. (that is, Western European countries, Japan, and Australia), along with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe will enroll 12 percent of the world's



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And in developing countries, the poor who are able to attend, make use of education as efficiently as the rich. Children of poor families in developing countries *want* to go to school and sacrifice a great deal to attend school for as long as they can.

Children in the U.S., on the other hand, appear to try their utmost to stay out of school.

Recreating a sense of scarcity

It is true that serious resource inequalities exist within the U.S., but lack of money is not the principal cause of ineffective schools or low-quality education. The real problem, in my view, is the lack of pupil motivation and, therefore, of discipline. When I ask ministers of education from developing countries about the most important problems in education, pupil motivation or discipline aren't even on the list.

Yet discipline is a major preoccupation of U.S. education officials, an incessant worry for which they develop new curricula, reform teacher training, juggle school schedules, and invent new instructional techniques. This quest for student motivation creates an atmosphere of pleading, as though the schools' only purpose is to gain a student's interest and their only success depends on whether the student wants to go to school and tries hard in class.

This curious attitude is predominant in our country but not in the rest of the world. The rest of the world doesn't ask whether a pupil is interested in school. In the rest of the world, education is considered a scarce commodity: expensive, highly valued, and respected. A youngster has no choice except to be interested in school: His family, his ethnic group, and his nation consider it essential. Students do not drop out of school simply because they want to, and they do not disobey a teacher on the grounds that it is their "right."

The single most important challenge in U.S. education is to recreate this sense of scarcity that characterizes education in the rest of the world. Our problem—which is shared in part by other industrialized countries with heterogeneous populations, such as the United Kingdom and France—is to override the differing education values held by distinct social classes, races, and language groups. Differing values about education are unacceptable. Above all else, we as Americans must agree

on this: All children have an identical obligation to attend school, to obey school rules, and to try hard.

U.S. children should not be allowed to dismiss the value of schooling. Each family must require that its children attend school without fail, obey the teachers, and behave themselves according to school rules. Any child of any race or background who does not hold schooling in respect becomes the community's problem. If my children do not value education and do not learn, they will be your problem, as your children will be my problem. This consensus on the community good is not unusual in the rest of the world—it is typical.

Motivation, then, is the linchpin. It is the precursor of all other problems and all other solutions in public education. Merit pay is not the answer—can you pay teachers enough to submit themselves to verbal assaults? A new instructional computer program is not the solution—can you expect to interest students who make money selling drugs in the hallways? Administrative decentralization and school choice are not the answer—will they have an impact on those who answer to no higher moral authority than their own whim?

All of these suggestions for improvements are relevant; all are helpful, even necessary. But all depend for their effectiveness on the consensus that schooling is valuable. And in the U.S., unlike the rest of the world, that consensus is absent.

Valuing education

The lack of motivation and the low value placed on schooling are not simply education problems; they are social problems. School officials can no longer be expected to make up for society's motivational deficit on their own. Pedagogical reform has limits.

The solution requires participation by everyone, not just educators. It requires churches and mosques and synagogues; it requires voluntary associations, unions, businesses, professional associations; it requires governments, courts, police, parents, and political leaders. And it requires agreement on one crucial point: Respect for schooling is necessary, even mandatory for the nation's survival, and society must act to reinforce this principle.

Can a society reinstall values once they're gone? Perhaps, perhaps not. But it can require certain behavior from its citizens. It can communicate to its young people that education is the most important task they have in front of them before becoming adults.

For example, perhaps the school as well as the parents should have to agree that a youngster can get a driver's license or a part-time job. The school's opinion of the student's progress and maturity is vital. Is this young person trying hard enough? Does this student exhibit the necessary deportment to allow such a privilege before adulthood? Such privileges should be contingent on success in school.

Draconian? No. Authoritarian? Yes. But authority—so long as it is derived by consensus—is nothing to be ashamed of. Elsewhere it is normal, including in other democracies. It already exists in many U.S. communities.

Like environmentalists writing policies on clean air and water, we must make valuable that which seems plentiful. Our challenge is more serious and complex than the challenge in Japan or Sweden—both, by comparison, monocultural societies. Our challenge is to extend consensus across the variety of sub-populations that make our nation great. First that consensus, then other improvements will make U.S. schools effective. **SE**