

A Global Perspective: A Comparison Of Asian And American Educational Systems That Impact Student Academic Achievement

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ABSTRACT

Asian countries rank the highest in the world when it comes to education. The United States will soon lose its economic power if there is not an increase in its educational ranking. There are vast differences in the educational systems of Asia (China and Japan) and the United States. These differences may account for the poor education and achievement gaps in the United States and the high achievement in Asian countries. It is important to determine these differences. The authors discuss the differences between Asian and American education systems that impact student academic achievement.

The purpose of this article is to explore the differences between Asian and American education systems that may impact student academic achievement. It is possible that America may have to adopt Asian education practices to improve its students' academic achievement. The students of America have been left behind for so long, it is time to catch up and surpass.

Basic Components of Asian Education

In Asian countries, education is a national product – all decisions are made at the national level. In the United States, however, decisions about education are left to the states; nonetheless, the national government does place standards on education that states must adhere. Brent Staples of the New York Times explains the affects of the America's national educational law *No Child Left Behind*:

The No Child Left Behind Act, passed for years ago, was supposed to put the problem of closing the achievement gap on the national agenda. Instead, the country has gotten bogged down in a squabble about a part of the law that requires annual testing in the early grades to ensure that the states are closing the achievement gap. The testing debate heated up last month when national math and reading scores showed dismal performance across the board. (2005)

At the basic level of education are textbooks. The tool used to teach and guide towards knowledge. Asian teachers create the textbooks and every student takes the same test for achievement levels. All Japanese texts are written and produced in the private sector; however, the texts must be approved by the Ministry of Education. Textbook content, length, and classroom utilization in Japan is quite different than in the United States. The content of Japanese textbooks is based upon the national curriculum, while most American textbooks tend to cover a wider array of topics. Japanese textbooks typically contain about half the pages of their American counterparts. Consequently, unlike many American teachers, almost all Japanese teachers finish their textbooks in an academic year. (Ellington, 2005)

Differences between the United States and Asian Countries in Schooling

Another difference in education between the U. S. and Asian countries is the schooling track that students follow. Ellington mentions that between 75 % and 80% of all Japanese students enroll in university preparation tracks. Most university-bound students attend separate academic high schools while students who definitely do not plan on higher education attend separate commercial or industrial high schools. In the United States, students enter secondary

schools based on either school district assignment or personal choice. In Japan, almost all students are admitted to high school based upon entrance examination performance. (2005)

Elaine Wu further examines the educational ranking of the United States in relation to Asian nations. She attributes U. S. ranking to the way educational material is delivered to the students. The United States focuses more on procedure, and we try to teach many topics fast. Other countries tend to break topics up and go much more in-depth. They work on the concept, not just the procedure. Countries that did well in the global educational rankings focused on teaching the ideas and taught a few topics a year. Kids will learn what a fraction really is, not just how to add and subtract them. Many research reports such as *A Nation At Risk*, and the National Commission on Excellence in Education, have been used to find the fallacy in American education. They have found that reform is needed in math and science. Secretary of Education in 1983 said this about America's education situation:

If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems that helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. (Hawkins, 2000)

When American students are compared to their peers around the world, American students continuously are outperformed.

Some International Comparisons

Making a comparison to a European feudal system, Gary Decoker explains that over 15,000 school districts make curricular decisions following the guidelines of their respective states. Impressed by Japan's performance in math and science, many Americans have begun to question the curricular diversity of their own system and to consider national standards as a means of improving U. S. education. America has tried to mimic the Japanese systems by overemphasizing its homogeneity and equating national curriculum guidelines with national standards.

The educational practices used by the nations are vastly different. These differences are the components that are responsible for the lack of achievement in American schools. Wendi Schweingruber discovered that standards developed by Achieve rest almost entirely on the notion that curricula in the countries that are outperforming the U. S. cover more complicated material earlier. In order to discuss this orientation in an informed way, it is necessary to consider these curricula and associated textbooks. A number of studies have specifically undertaken international comparisons of these items. The study of *A Splintered Vision* found that the U.S. curriculum is broad but shallow, that we touch on topics again and again, but never deeply. Other countries such as Germany and Japan, being most often cited in this study, are able

to move to more complicated material earlier, because they approach the curriculum in a narrower, but deeper way. The basic idea is that they are able to gain mastery by concentrating on a smaller number of topics and then moving on. In addition, the performance expectations implied in U.S. curricula and textbooks centers on routine procedures and discrete knowledge, which hampers conceptual understanding. (2000)

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the way material is taught and what is used to teach that material in America is apparently making a difference in the student academic achievement. The education disparities that the United States experiences are placing the students of America at a great disadvantage. This disadvantage can cause American students to be unable to perform on the global stage or to operate in the world that surrounds them. The United States needs to implement the educational practices of those countries that outperform it.

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