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Commentary

Beyond the Herd Mentality

The Minds That We Truly Need in the Future

By Howard Gardner

As an educational researcher and writer, I have had the opportunity to travel throughout the world. In conversations with education policymakers, I have made an interesting, though unsettling, discovery. The new purpose of education around the world can be expressed succinctly: It is to improve, or in rare cases to maintain, a country's standing in quantitative international comparisons, most often the Program for International Student Assessment or the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study.

—Nip Rogers

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with having a high standing in some kind of international comparison. No doubt there are things to be learned from effective schools in countries like Finland or Singapore. And yet, the more I have thought about it, the more I have become convinced that the goal of topping the international comparisons is a foolish one, and the rush to raise one's rank a fool's errand. In the process of pursuing a higher rank, educational leaders are ignoring deeper and more important purposes of education.

Let's begin with the obvious. Only a few countries can have the lead in these "league-table comparisons." And so, as in Olympic-level basketball, backgammon, or ballet, most countries are destined to be disappointed, and most ministers of education advised to shift portfolios before the next list is posted.

Consider, next, the tenuous relation between performance on such measures and the success of the society on other metrics. In the early 1980s, many Americans disparaged their schools as the source of economic doldrums and looked admiringly at the Japanese example. If only we could have the test scores of those Japanese students! In the next two decades, Japanese students continued to do perfectly well in examinations, and yet the economic and social performance of the country was unimpressive. Meanwhile, though there has hardly been a sea change in American schools, our society has enjoyed enviable economic prosperity during the same period.

Even when tests are instituted or cited for praiseworthy reasons, undesirable results often obtain. The peril of making tests all-important and of "teaching to the test" has been well documented. Ample examples of genuine cheating by students and teachers, or other, subtler forms of compromised work, can be adduced. And when tests become dominant in our society, citizens with options cash them in. Parents who do not like a testing regimen place their children in independent schools or home-school. Accomplished veterans or promising new teachers, who

want to be able to create their own curricula or to teach in ways that are not honored by the tests, migrate to the private sector or leave teaching altogether.

As far as I am concerned, however, all these criticisms are secondary. The decisive reason to avoid the “herd mentality” of education ministers is that improving performance on a particular test is a terrible goal for an education system. A transient numerical result, due to any number of reasons, becomes the *raison d'être* for the whole educational process. What a depressing prospect.

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Instead of beginning (and, all too often, ending) with test scores, we should begin by considering the kinds of minds that we want to cultivate in our education system. My own reflections suggest that in the future, we need to cultivate five kinds of minds if we want to be successful as a nation and, more important, as a world. Those minds include:

- A disciplined mind, that can think well and appropriately in the major disciplines;
- A synthesizing mind, that can sift through a large amount of information, decide what is important, and put it together in ways that make sense for oneself and for others;
- A creative mind, that can raise new questions, come up with novel solutions, think outside the box;
- A respectful mind, that honors the differences among individuals and groups, and tries to understand them and work productively with them; and
- An ethical mind, that thinks, beyond selfish interests, about the kind of worker one aspires to be, and the kind of citizen that one should be.

No doubt, some measures for each of these could be devised, though I doubt that a paper-and-pencil or computer-administered, short-answer test will prove adequate. But the important point is this: Any country—and certainly one as prosperous and well-positioned as the United States—should begin educational discussions with a serious consideration of the kinds of human beings we would like to have and to be in the future.

And that is why the education ministers of the world remind me today of lemmings—marching confidently, but proudly and disastrously, into a sea of ignorance.

Howard Gardner is the Hobbs professor of education and cognition at Harvard University’s graduate school of education, in Cambridge, Mass.

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