Apples, Ligonberries and Lychees

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Hardly a month goes by without some major media story telling us how bad the US education system is compared to the rest of the world. A simple Internet search will lead you to plenty of stories of how the US lags behind numerous countries in student test scores. But when considering test scores, the educational outcome, how relevant are the comparisons we make that dominate the headlines? And why is it that we only seem to compare outcomes and not educational inputs? Aren't outcomes highly influenced by inputs?

Finland is often cited for its educational success, yet Finland and the US share little in common culturally or economically. Finland has a population of around 5 million people, little different from that of Houston. The country is the size of New Mexico. Its economic output is about that of Louisiana. Finland's population is almost totally homogenous, while the US is a country of immigrants. Finland's outcomes may be great, but is a country so different from the US really a useful benchmark?

The Japanese kick our behinds in math and science, but Japan may have the most homogenous society in the world. That homogeneity means Japanese share very similar cultural beliefs, which leads to common practices within schools, administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Homogeneity is a very important education input in Japan. There is no way that can be replicated in the melting pot US. And given that Japan's economy has been in the doldrums for over two decades, why would we think their educational system is worth benchmarking? In Japan, "smarter" citizenry has not led to economic vibrancy.

We also compare ourselves to Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan. The Asian Tigers have been ripping the cover off the educational and economic ball, but these are tiny countries or city-states. Like Finland, it is extremely impractical to use these tiny socioeconomic systems as benchmarks.

Now we are starting to compare ourselves to China, where recent testing suggests Shanghai students could be the smartest in the world. China's economic size may be approaching that of the US, but by nature, any country going through an emerging growth period will have different cultural values from one already at the top of the economic heap. Students, teachers and parents in emerging growth countries possess an immense desire to get ahead, to become more successful. This is not a replica of US culture today, where success is more expectation than aspiration. This significant cultural input difference has a great influence on outcomes.

If there is any one region that provides the most apples to apples comparison to the US, it may be the European Union. The EU is similar in geographic size, population and economic output. It also hosts several cultures, which suggests that the EU has comparable cultural diversity. So, should the EU be our benchmark, our best practices role model? It certainly has been the model for US environmental and healthcare policy. Why not then education policy?

We should not compare ourselves to the EU because like Japan, it is in much worse economic shape than the US. Why are we using broken socioeconomic systems for benchmarking and

policy guidance? Those better educational outcomes in Europe and Japan are not leading to better economic outcomes.

There is probably no other country or economic region that shares enough in common with the US that we should use their educational outcomes to significantly influence our policy. Even trying to compare different states within the US has the potential to create ineffective policy and result in poor resource allocation.

With the highest concentration of advanced educational institutions in the world, the often-envied Massachusetts is almost an education-based economy. That can't be said of any other states so why are we using them as a benchmark? Massachusetts is an educational outlier. Its "success" in education is not something we can replicate around the country because few other parts of the country are just like Massachusetts.

Comparing our educational outcomes to outlier success stories may be less than productive. And just focusing on outcomes without considering inputs is enormously misleading.

Some inputs are quantifiable, while others are not. Take teacher to student ratios. The Institute for Educational Science (IES) has been tracking teacher to student ratios since 1955. Of course we all know that the lower the teacher to student ratio, the more time teachers have to spend with each student, the better the outcome. We "know" that, right? Well guess what?

According to the IES, teacher to student ratios have plummeted since 1955. Today our national average teacher to student ratio is around one to fifteen. In 1955, it was around one to thirty. So teacher to student ratios have been halved in the last 58 years, but now we're producing less than capable people?

Okay then, let's look at overall education spending per capita. A recent study by the OECD reports that the US spends more per student on education than any other country. Wait a minute, we're spending more per student than anyone in the "advanced" economic world and still moaning about our outcomes? With amazingly low teacher to student ratios and the largest per capita spend, why aren't American students head and shoulders above the rest of the world?

According to the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, over the last twenty years the number of school administrators has increased at a 2.3X rate compared to student growth. And if you go all the way back to 1950, the number of administrators in education has increased 7 times faster than the number of students. What has all that additional administration done? It has shoved bureaucratically-created curriculum, systems and standardized testing down teachers' throats. It has institutionalized education. It has increased the time teachers and schools must spend on administration and reporting. It has forced attention away from the student teaching and learning process and towards administration.

The outcome of institutionalized education isn't any different from the outcome of anything institutionalized. The greater the burden of administration, the less productive the execution. The larger the infrastructure, the more cumbersome, less flexible and less efficient it is.

Maybe we should take a chapter from the private sector. When private sector industries become complacent because they are dominated by large bureaucratic organizations, it becomes time to deregulate that industry. It becomes time to release the creative energy of free enterprise by forcing that industry to break down into smaller more nimble units. Deregulation pushes down decision-making. It makes individual companies and individuals more personally responsible. Private sector deregulation usually leads to better outcomes for the consumer, so why not "deregulate" the massive bloat in education?

Unfortunately it is not in the nature of public institutions to be "deregulated." It would mean people lose jobs and big institutional entities would lose budgets and influence. Raises and promotions in public institutions come from expanding, not contracting, budgets. And the moment any politician suggests budget cuts, the educational infrastructure dramatically erupts with sob stories about the harm we are inflicting on our "poor, poor children."

The other education input problem we seem to have is a lack of student desire to achieve.

All of humanity's potential emanates from the combination of two inputs: genetic predisposition and individual desire. We are born with a certain intellectual and emotional nature. Some of us are luckier than others, but our genetic predisposition is not a predictor of our potential. The world we live in has enormous influence on our outcome. A poor genetic foundation can still significantly advance if environment creates desire. At the same time, a great genetic foundation can be significantly impaired by lack of desire. And of course, a challenged genetic predisposition combined with lack of desire results in serious individual, as well as societal, challenge.

Where does desire come from? Part of it comes from a country's socioeconomic system. Are we encouraging or discouraging desire? Emerging growth countries have a huge advantage because people in them want to create a better life. They have burning desire. But in "advanced" economies, that better life already exists. "Advanced" economies are weighed down by the malaise and distractions of prosperity. So if a country's general socioeconomic position numbs individual desire, where can it come from? It can come from parents that have expectations of performance, and enough time and money to support their children's effort.

The elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about is the destruction of the nuclear family. The percentage of children in the US being born outside the traditional nuclear family is approaching 50% and projected to exceed 50% by 2016. According to a 2007 OEDC study, only four countries have a lower two-parent average than the US: Latvia, Belgium, Estonia, and, surprisingly, the UK. Guess which country has the highest percentage of two parent households? Finland. And according to the United Nations, only four countries have a higher per capita divorce rate than the US: Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and the Cayman Islands.

The simple implication is that single parents have tremendous economic and parental responsibilities, arguably too great to be successful at both. If there were data to review, it would likely suggest that the great majority of single parents struggle to be good at either.

Solving our supposed education problem is most likely found by considering our input challenges rather than comparing us to socioeconomic and education outliers.

Our educational system needs to be relieved of the administrative bureaucracy that is strangling school districts' adaptability and teachers' abilities to teach. The institutionalization of education has transitioned student responsibility from the teacher to a bureaucracy. And our social policy needs to focus on reducing single parent households. But like many things in our current world, policy today is about treating the symptoms rather than curing the disease. By not curing the disease, we ensure that government will beget more government to "solve" ever more problems.