What will make American education work?

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Executive Summary

The weakness of American schools is unlikely to be overcome by technical solutions. Certainly not through existing streams of existing research, research which all too often is driven by ideology than by legitimate inquiry.

Rather what American education needs is a behavioral change in its students. If students were socialized to understand the value to their community of schooling, the benefit of subordinating themselves to elders, and the absolute obligation to respect their teachers, Americans might see their academic performance soar.

Cultures have been known to change when political consensus is built around conditions which at their outset are personally disquieting and politically divisive. Air and water quality are illustrations. Slowly, over time public opinion has reached a consensus, and we have been able to clean up our air, rivers and lakes. Even if we are not totally satisfied with the progress on these dimensions almost any reasonable person would have to admit that we have today a political consensus on the utility of such clean up actions

If we can reach a consensus on such everyday things as air and water, perhaps we could also reach a consensus on student behavior and outlook.

I have worked on education problems in 65 countries, but not the United States. I don't know much about American education. But because I have an idea of what is normal outside the United States, I have an idea about what is missing within the United States. It comes in two parts.

American Educational Research

More is spent on an aircraft carrier than on education research. And more is allocated to health research than education research. But by comparison to world of education outside the United States, the money spent on American education research is simply massive. 1The federal government, fifty state governments and more than 800 educational foundations provide a plethora of sources.2

The plethora of research sources is not the problem. The problem is that American education research is making no progress. Multiple answers, but no consensus. The same issues have been debated over many decades — new mathematics curricula, new ways to certify teachers, new incentives to improve pedagogy, equipment, physical facilities, programs to feed students, begin school earlier, diversify delivery, put college content in high school, encourage private tutoring, year round schedules. A million solutions but the problem remains. Out of 34 countries American 15 year olds rank 17th in science and 25th in math.

American education research doesn't work because experts are so polarized.3 Some say teacher training colleges are the key to education's success, others say that teacher training colleges are the source of the problem. Some say that computers and cell phones should be integrated into pedagogies; others say that electronic devises are harmful to critical thinking and should be banned in schools. 4Some say that not enough is invested in education; others point to the long-standing dilemma of having some urban school districts with high per/pupil expenditures and low achievement. The debate over whether money makes a difference has continued since the Coleman Report in 1968. Still, after a half century, education researchers can't agree on the answer. Political leaders, and educational professionals are tired of the education research community's ideological squabbling.5 And with justification, the public tends to dismiss a profession which cannot effectively agree on basic principles.

Student Motivation

The second issue has to do with what is normal to find in other countries. All countries wrestle with the tendency for children from impoverished backgrounds to perform worse in school. But the achievement gap is not constant. It is strongly associated with wealthy countries (Heyneman and Loxley, 1983). But even in wealthy countries the achievement gap varies considerably. Wealthy children in Luxemburg score 8 points higher on PISA reading tests; but in Finland children from wealthy families score only 0.9 points higher and in the Netherlands they score only 0.2 points higher (Heyneman, 2016). What causes the difference? Why do underprivileged children score almost at a par with more privileged children?

These countries have something we do not even notice. They have something which if we did have, America could solve its educational problem and achieve the potential which Erik Hanushek says is possible (Hanushek, 2014). What is it?

I was raised at a time when school attendance was widely considered to be 'uncool'. Making fun of teachers and creating dismay in our parents was a competitive sport. But 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 every student. There was massive poverty, but no discipline problems. I learned that school was a scarce resource. But I learned more than that.

On one occasion my father visited me in Africa. He had suffered a stroke but could walk with difficulty and communicate effectively. The elderly headman of my village asked that my father 'honor 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, married, with a graduate degree and a bright future, sitting on the ground at the feet of my father. Years earlier I might have debated with him over who should sit in the chair. Now I was sitting happily at his feet and surprised at how easy it was. By that time, I had come to learn something which the California school system – elementary, high school, university, and 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 reminds us thatthe social movement in the U.S. that has as its praiseworthy objective to grant more power to powerless persons has been expanded without reason or logic to include dependent children (Baumrind, 1974)

American schools are very articulate when pointing out the need for an equality of opportunity but are dead silent when pointing out that discrimination of some kinds can be deserved.

One Secretary of Education made this argument:

The child should have the option to move in terms of his own goals, not the school's goals, and not society's goals. (Marland 1976).

But there is a limit to teaching the young to assume adult responsibilities by teaching them to make rational choices. Adolescents 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 behaviors. 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. But in the United States the

distinction between being schooled and being educated is blurred. The two are confused, and this confuses American children.

The educational discussion within the U.S. sidesteps the main point of education, a point which does not require a regression equation to figure out the answer. Regression equations weigh various factors against each other in the prediction of a result such as academic achievement. The problem is that the characteristic of whether students know and accept their obligations and responsibilities as 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, 1978, 1979, 1999). Since they are not taught to appreciate the opportunities presented to them, they have not understood their 'place'.

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 parks. Because they do not know their place, even if they finish school, they may not be well-educated.

Students do not think of themselves as adolescents. They have not understood that because they are not adults they do not have a choice about whether they need to try hard in school. The justification to try hard should not be that there may be adverse consequences. Trying hard is justified because without exception, it is the right thing.

Americans seem quite capable of putting pressure on schools when they represent special interests– about abortion, creationism, Black History, gender balance. But Americans do not seem to know how to act together as like-minded adults. Because of this, schools in the U.S. try to get students engaged (i.e. to try hard) by attracting student interest. They try new curricula, new technologies, new pedagogies. They say students should finish school because their financial futures depend on it.

But what message do students receive? American students come to the conclusion that they should not try hard in school because they are not interested in their future. They are interested in other issues. They are interested in social issues. They are interested in whether they are well-liked. They are interested in making money for tennis shoes or drugs. They are more interested in their Face Book page.

But when children and adolescents decide they are more interested in their own issues than in sacrificing for their long-term future, the reasons to try hard in school collapse. When the reason to try hard is supplanted by a child's disinterest, there is nothing to take its place. The result, particularly in high schools, is close to chaos. Because of consolidation and an inability to narrow curriculum choice, American high schools are 1.7 times larger than the OECD norm (OECD, 2018). School size and crime are closely associated. About one third of youth assaults take place in schools. Ten percent of schools experience burglaries, a rate five times that of stores (Rubel and Ames, 1986).

But criminal activity in American schools is not the main problem. The main problem is student behavior. In one year, more than 48,000 students had to be expelled from public schools in Wisconsin for bad behavior (Ford, 2013). Sixteen percent of American students have to avoid at least three places around their school's property because they are afraid. 50% of American teachers report that they experience verbal abuse every month (Rubel and Ames, 1986, p. 13) Lack of student respect and discipline determines teacher job dissatisfaction, burnout and early exit from the profession (Sullivan, 2014); Friedman, 1995; Kokkinos, 2011).

Students who are unmotivated, alienated or apathetic sap the enthusiasm of first year teachers by making them feel ineffective, isolated, and without professional empowerment. Roughly half a million teachers move or leave the profession each year; about 50% of all beginning teachers leave the profession within five years. The rate of teachers who leave high-poverty schools is 50% higher. Of teachers in a high poverty school, 20% will be gone before next September. (Seidel, 2014).

The cost to recruit, hire and train replacements is $US 7.3 billion annually. Managing the disrespect for rules and procedures, wandering around the hallways, talking out of turn, moving furniture without permission and disruption of other classmates leads to lower achievement. Schools are then blamed for the result. In essence, 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 (Modell, 1983).

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, "Excuse me, Madame." When passing an adult in a crowded hallway. It is treated simply as routine behavior, 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 Last 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 daytime 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.

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 behavior have 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 interests, creating what Edward Shils once called a 'massive presentness', which underpins the transference of a single experience into a national tradition (Shils 1981).

Given what I have observed of school systems outside the US, if I were asked to alter one thing about U.S. 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 adults 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.

Good behavior 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 guest says 'Thank you for inviting me, I had a very nice time', it makes one feel appreciated as a host. Teachers and school administrators should be no less appreciated.

But what should school leaders and administrators do differently? Teach in a new way? Design new rules for school administration? Perhaps. Codes of conduct and school uniform policies should be revitalized. But motivation is not primarily a problem of school policies. 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. 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 adolescents? The USSR, a country which had only a fraction of the resources available to the U.S., 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, I visited pre-schools which were only 40 kilometers from the border with Afghanistan, one of the world's most uneducated countries. But in Tajikistan, over 65% of the four-year-olds were enrolled in pre-school, higher than 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 (Heyneman, 1979).

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 giving them a 'head start' in how to read and calculate. Other countries do not emphasize how to read or calculate in preschool. 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.

So too with American student motivation: it should not be the administrators' responsibility to change the behavior of students. It is the family's responsibility. It is the responsibility of churches and public agencies which deal with children and

families. It is the responsibility of private industries, advertisers, parks, 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 high 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 empirical evidence in favor of using seatbelts every time a child gets in a car. Seatbelts should be so routine that putting them on is not even noticed. So should trying hard in school.

If motivation to try hard was universal before children entered a classroom, then educational innovations and investments would bear fruit. If high motivation was the norm, then teachers would feel respected, stay longer in the profession, and there would be less unfairness to students who want to study and can't because of the misbehavior of others. If trying hard was the norm and varied little by social group, then the American school system could live up to its potential.

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Appendix:

Wars Within American Education Research

The research wars in the United States have four sides. First there are the irredentists. Irredentists believe that no problems are worthy if they are in the interest of the other political party in Washington.

Second there are the single solution specialists. They have an answer before research is conducted. For them, the purpose of research is to validate the solution they are already promoting —- vouchers, modular learning, management information systems, distance teaching, decentralization, charter schools, educational technology, performance pay.

Third are the conspiracy theorists. Conspiracy theorists believe that pre-conditions make the schooling hopeless because of capitalism, because of neo-liberalism, because of institutional racism. No solution is acceptable for them because preconditions can never be solved without a revolution.

Fourth are the modelers. Modelers are those who adhere to absolute interpretations of social science. They believe that money should be invested only on the basis of cost/benefit analyses or economic rates of return. They may hold that randomized trials are superior to surveys; that surveys are superior to in-person interviews. These battles are counter-productive because they ignore the shortcomings in all methods.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Stephen P. Heyneman served the World Bank for 22 years. Between 1976 and 1984 he helped research education quality and design policies to support educational effectiveness. Between 1984 and 1989 he was in charge of external training for senior officials world wide in education policy.

And between 1989 and 1998, he was responsible for education policy and lending strategy, first for the Middle East and North Africa and later for the 27 countries of Europe and Central Asia. In 1998 he was appointed Vice President in charge of international operations of an education consultant firm in Alexandria, Virginia.

In September, 2000 he was appointed Professor of International Education Policy at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. He received his BA in Political Science from the University of California at Berkeley, his MA in African Area Studies form UCLA in 1965, and his PhD in Comparative Education from the University of Chicago in 1976.

Mr. Heyneman delivered this address at the Milken Institute Global Conference in Santa Monica, California, which was held April 28-May 1. Learning of the challenges faced by Dorchester County's schools, he sent this paper to the Dorchester Banner, asking that it be published.

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