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Posted at 1:14 PM ET, 12/13/2010

What Norway (not Finland) tells us about schools

By Valerie Strauss

This was written by Thomas Hatch, an associate professor of education and co-director of the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching at [Teachers College, Columbia University](#).

By Thomas Hatch
People often try to use findings from the [Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development's PISA](#) international assessments of educational performance to tout particular policies or practices in which "high performing" countries seem to be engaged. Rather than a list of "do now's" for policymakers, however, I believe that the latest [PISA findings](#), like other forms of international comparison, provide an opportunity to reflect on the values and assumptions that underlie our educational system.

It wasn't until I lived in Norway (with my wife and daughters in kindergarten, fourth grade and sixth grade) that I took explicit notice of the fact that Norway, with many commonalities with Finland – consistently one of the highest performers on PISA – actually scores about as poorly as the United States How could this be?

When my fourth grader, who didn't start school until 9 a.m.,got home shortly after 1:30 p.m. (when school got out), I began to see some possible issues... In fact, over the course of that year, I noted many aspects of the Norwegian educational system that might explain those low test scores: a more limited emphasis on early education in comparison to many other countries along with low levels of instructional time, very few tests, little homework, and the lack of any marks, grades or formal feedback before the end of 7th grade.

But as I thought about it, and as I saw how happy my children were going off to school (on their own, on the subway...), I realized that I could use the PISA scores to argue that the Norwegian system wasn't doing as badly as the U.S. In fact, I started to tell my Norwegian colleagues that they should say that Norway was doing as well as the U.S. (and almost the OECD average) without even trying.

What's more, living in and studying in Norway made it clear that by almost any other measure besides international test scores, the Norwegian educational system is doing quite well: Drop-out rates are lower and college graduation rates are higher than most other countries; more children report they "like" school than almost anywhere else in the world; Norway tops the charts on the "mental health index" and many other aspects of quality of life; and Norway has low unemployment and one of the strongest economies in the world (supported by North Sea oil).

That does not mean the Norwegian educational system is perfect. I, like some Norwegian parents, would like to see a little more academic instruction and a little more accountability.

Overall, however, I came away with a greater appreciation for the way economic, political, geographic, cultural, social, and educational factors come together to shape students' experiences and development and the experience reinforced the impossibility of singling out any one factor.

Furthermore, my experience in Norway cast into sharp relief the different kinds of values and assumptions that drive our educational systems and contribute to both the strengths and weaknesses. Norway has chosen to emphasize all aspects of children's development in primary schools, to focus on equity and the development of a national bond among people and to make academic and job preparation a focus of secondary and post-secondary learning.

At the same time, it should be no surprise that kind of system leads to less than stellar test scores. For all its critics, even higher performing countries continue to regard the U.S. as a leader in fostering innovation, creativity, and the development of the best and the brightest students, but should it really be a surprise that same system also comes with deplorable inequities and a yawning achievement gap?

These are problems that grow out of the systems we've developed and the values and assumptions that underlie many aspects of our societies. Once we get past the clamor around the latest news on how our students are doing, we need to spend some time thinking about what we're doing and why we are doing it.

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By Valerie Strauss | December 13, 2010; 1:14 PM ET
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Indeed, where we are going. This needs to be an improvement on OUR system, OUR way of life, and OUR economic plan. IF we continue to chase other countries that honestly as a lifestyle cannot keep up then we will never succeed.

Posted by: educ8er | December 13, 2010 2:19 PM | [Report abuse](#)

For comparison, here is a quick overview of the system in Finland:

<http://finland.fi/Public/default.aspx?contentid=162939&nodeid=41807&culture=en-US>

"According to the survey, the strength of the Finnish school system is that it guarantees equal learning opportunities, regardless of social background. Instead of comparison between pupils, the focus is on supporting and guiding pupils with special needs. Very few children need to be made to repeat a year."

Are the possible causes you cite _differences_ between Finland and Norway?

Posted by: hainish | December 13, 2010 5:11 PM | [Report abuse](#)

"For all its critics, even higher performing countries continue to regard the U.S. as a leader in fostering innovation, creativity,"

Nonsense. Much of the "creative" work here is performed by foreigners who are now increasingly taking their experience to start competing enterprises overseas. NONE of the "innovation" here owes anything to the present education system.

It's truly a pity that stupidity has no energy content. If it did, Teachers College would be the next Saudi Arabia.

Posted by: physicsteacher | December 13, 2010 6:07 PM | [Report abuse](#)

physicsteacher,

"NONE of the "innovation" here owes anything to the present education system."

Take a look at the abovementioned statement again. Then take a look at the statement that follows it. Now take a good look at the second complete sentence in the middle paragraph. If you did this more often, it would save you from those pesky hypocritical pimpled spots and those inane absolutist blemishes. Basically, it will allow you to save face so you don't look like a moron when you're trying to make a clever point.

Posted by: DHume1 | December 13, 2010 6:33 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Homogenous countries with high average IQs will have good schools without even trying. "Diverse" countries with high percentages of children from low-IQ populations will always struggle. Educrats like Hatch who harp on "values and assumptions" are completely irrelevant.

Posted by: CharlesMcKay1 | December 13, 2010 6:38 PM | [Report abuse](#)

When almost everyone from Norway has Norwegian heritage and 80% of the population even goes to the same church, heck, they're all on the same page to begin with, aren't they?

A country with a population of less than five million, as homogeneous as they are, with a minimal degree of poverty (relatively speaking); theses folks should be blowing us right out of the water academically.

In addition, their contribution(s) to the world have been...?

Posted by: phoss1 | December 13, 2010 8:24 PM | [Report abuse](#)

The PISA Assessment, like all the others, ignores whether HS students have read one single complete nonfiction book, or written one serious research paper. These experiences are essential preparation for college work, by the way.

Will Fitzhugh
The Concord Review
www.tcr.org/blog
fitzhugh@tcr.org

Posted by: fitzhugh1 | December 14, 2010 11:25 AM | [Report abuse](#)

I have seen enough of what goes on in Norway WRT schooling. It bothered me enough that I choose not to live there. I have never met so many poorly educated unmotivated "professional" adults. Something is clearly wrong with their system. Kids will always be happy in school if they are not challenged.
The previous comments about homogeneity are unfounded. It is really a way if saying: "if we had no brown people in the US, our results would be better". Not entirely so, even in predominantly white areas, there are huge deficiencies.

Posted by: willis4 | December 14, 2010 5:48 PM | [Report abuse](#)

To willis4 who wrote "I have never met so many poorly educated unmotivated "professional" adults. Something is clearly wrong with their system. Kids will always be happy in school if they are not challenged."

Not so! Kids want challenge, perhaps not necessarily in the form of "rigor", but certainly in novelty and interest. Kids are natural born learners, but they like to have some fun while doing it and especially in the early years, they should have that!

It is insane that American kids no longer get to play in kindergarten, nor do quality crafts (good for developing fine motor skills which in turn is good for the brain).

Our education policy makers (influenced by the Business Roundtable see kids as a product to be used for the work force; they do not value them as human beings.



Uniting 4 Kids
<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=111772538876554&v=info>

Posted by: gpadvocate | December 16, 2010 6:59 PM | [Report abuse](#)

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