U.S. EDUCATION: A CONTRARIAN PERSPECTIVE

INTERVIEW WITH SEYMOUR MARTIN LIPSET

Public Perspective: The comparative test score data say that the US is not doing well in terms of educational outcomes—especially in the field of mathematics. How concerned should we be?

Seymour Martin Lipset: This is actually a complicated question. For one thing, should we be comparing 100% of the school-age population in the various countries? Perhaps in fact for a country to do well in international competition in science or technological innovation, it needs to have strong achievement ability and motivation in the top 10-20% of students. The whole population doesn't necessarily have to get high scores.

I make a similar point in *Continental Divide* [New York and London: Routledge, 1990], writing about Canadian society. There are a lot of data which show that the Canadians lag behind Americans and people in a number of other countries in terms of entrepreneurial orientation. Still as a country, Canada has done very well economically. Between 1985 and 1989, for example, Canada's rate of economic growth was second only to Japan's. Perhaps the relevant factor is not overall national characteristics, but whether there is present a sufficiently venturesome minority to take advantage of economic opportunities and thus stimulate growth. Even though Canadians as a whole rank relatively low in entrepreneurial orientation, the country has minorities, especially those of Jewish and Scottish roots, that seem to provide what is needed in entrepreneurial energies.

Of course we want to see all students do better, and certainly the low math scores of American K-12 students should not be dismissed as unimportant. But I would caution against interpreting such overall performance scores as determinate of the place of the US in international economic competition.

PP: You seem to be a contrarian on this matter. Are there any other reasons why Americans shouldn't necessarily be alarmed by findings like those we bring together on pages 9 and 10?

SML: In fact there are. In the early 19th century Horace Mann and other educators were pushing for what were then called "common" schools—schools that were integrated socially as far as class was concerned. The children of the rich and the poor, of the immigrant and the native-born, should go to the same school. That idea contrasted sharply with the European system, where the top 10% went to first-rate schools and the rest were given rudimentary and then vocational education. The argument that Mann and other US education reformers made very explicitly was that if we were going to have an open society, the people who come out of depressed social conditions should have the same educational opportunity as the privileged. That meant going to the same school. Now the second thing they recognized, which many other people didn't, was that the common school couldn't be as good as an elite school, that we would be holding back the best students in order to let the others catch up. This was a conscious policy, based on the assumption that holding the best back was not going to damage them in the long run, even though they didn't learn as much or as fast in their early years.

Of course, there was one area where the US did not have common schools—and that was the one bounded by race. This omission from the prevailing standard was finally addressed in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954).

Brown had a big impact here, but it did in Europe as well. In Sweden, for example, the Social Democrats, though long in power, had never touched their own segregated—in terms of class—school system. *Brown* suddenly sensitized them to this notion that having a separate system for the elite was discriminating against working class kids. And they shifted very consciously, though in a limited way, in the direction of the comprehensive school. Of course, the British also moved after World War II to break up the elite "grammar school" and go the direction of the comprehensive school. You give up something in this process.

PP: To carry it one step further, are you arguing that if we had test data for the past 130 years we might see at every stage that American primary and then secondary education might not look particularly good by a lot of measures, because we had deliberately asked schools to play a different role, the melting pot role?

SML: Yes. But beyond this our notion has been that educational excellence could still be achieved at the college and graduate school level. The average entrant to the university in the US is behind the average entrant in Germany.

It's in advanced graduate education that the US really surpasses its competitors. The data you've assembled on Nobel Prize winners attests, I think, to the fact that an educational system built on egalitarian premises can yield exceptional attainment at the highest level.

This seeming contradiction goes back to American individualism. Our schools are profoundly individualist. This can be a problem—in the area of discipline, for example. But when it comes to creativity and innovation, a system which is highly individualist may have a great advantage. The Japanese, for example, seem to surpass the Americans in more routine applications, but their universities do less well nurturing the creative impulse.

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