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Comparing Education: The Paradox of the Chinese Student

Summary of ICA Institute Study Group
held on October 15, 2005

Discussion leader:
Dr. Robert DeHaan, Senior Science Advisor
Division of Educational Studies, Emory University
Atlanta, GA USA

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Introduction

Current research suggests that conventional teaching methods have to be revamped as the world economy becomes more connected. What has recent research revealed about how teaching should be done as opposed to the current method? In what way do cultural, historical and ethnic differences affect how that research is applied in India, China and the U.S.?

Statistics on Chinese Education

There are many more teachers in China than in the U.S. at the elementary and middle school level. This number drops in high school because education at that level is not mandatory. It is common for high school age individuals to be working full-time in China.

At the college level, China is behind. There are two times as many higher education institutions in the U.S. as in China. China's GER (percentage of college-age people that could be enrolled in college who are actually in college) is 16% while American GER is 37%. Since China started engaging with the world economy, it has seen the need to have a highly educated workforce to be able to compete. To this end, the government has enacted policies that invest in higher education. For example, money is being spent on private universities to give more options to students. Also, China has encouraged the immigration of students to other countries to be educated. Accordingly, the rate of increase in enrollment dwarfs that of the U.S: U.S. 1.5% per year, China 25% per year.

Discussion Points

The dynamics of education in China points to a socially-engineered system very dependent on government policies. The country operates like a business enterprise, dependent on supply and demand. This means that when the economy requires blue-collar workers and factories in particular regions, the government discourages higher education as unnecessary. Likewise, when the economy suggests that more technocrats are needed, then science education is encouraged as well as language skills like English and Japanese.

In the last few years China has produced nine times as many engineers as the U.S. However, the quality of those engineers is questionable, rising from the fact that course equivalence studies show that coursework could be inferior to those in developed nations. The Ministry of Education in China is aware of these problems and has suggestions about the root causes of this perceived inferiority. The ministry has pointed to problems such as:

- corruption in higher institutions
- cronyism
- plagiarism
- ineffective quality controls that have undermined the integrity of universities and quality of graduates

Chinese education is now undergoing a process of reform. As China continues to sign on to more international bodies and treaties, it has now subjected itself to an equivalency review of its course curricula along with other countries, which has forced China to look into the problems in its education system.

China's education system is based on didactic teaching and rote-memorization, where individuality and creativity is not encouraged. This is not too surprising given that education in the past has largely been the memorization of Confucian texts, likewise, the peculiarity of the Chinese language means that children are spending a lot of time memorizing characters when learning to write.

Now, the government is trying to introduce a new approach where creativity and innovation is actively encouraged. It hopes that these changes will improve the quality of research work in Chinese institutions and ultimately spur China's technological advancement.