An Education:

England, the United States, and the Fight to Modernize the School System

Hayley Keon

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Abstract

The United States and England have both been historically noted as successful models of public education from which the rest western world may draw examples. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, the expansion of the job market to encompass a more global sense of competition has made the need for improved education a shared concern amongst industrialized nations. As is the precedent, the international community has turned its eye to the United States and England to find examples of education reform that transcends national boundaries and elicits success, but do such reforms exist? Are the US and England comparable enough that reforms successful in one country may be equally so in the other? Using information from scholarly works by professors and students in the two nations as well as results from a cross-cultural initiative that brought the educators from each together, a composite view is created that reveals the extent of their commonality. It reveals that the appearance of similarities may be deceiving. Though both nations operate under a three-fold reform system that focuses on standardization, unification, and competition within schools, the reform practices themselves are too diversified to be truly translatable. This stems from vastly different societal norms about education that reflect upon the types of reforms each government may deem usable. Even though research has discerned that the two are not so closely linked, the knowledge gained aids the larger field by uprooting preconceived notions about the nation’s comparability and solidifying those attributes that the education system do share.

Introduction:

In an age where job competition is no longer a national affair but a fierce, international one, the world’s major countries have turned their attention to their education systems with the intent to revitalize and reform them in order to educate students who may be more capable to earn a place in the global job market. The world’s yes are concentrated on the western world, especially at the current, somewhat teetering number one superpower, The United States, whose schools have done deplorably in the past few decades compared to their fellow first world counterparts. Attention also falls on England, perhaps by default, as the planet’s historic leader in education who, as of current, is feeling the results of a shaky and somewhat discontented educational reformation.

England and the United States share their struggle to keep learning modern just as they share a history, an ideology, and a place near the top of the world’s most educated nations. They may also share an educational recovery. One that may be copied by the rest of the western world as learning is brought into the next century, as they have often been viewed as the figureheads of strong school systems and vast knowledge.

Are these two nations’ education systems truly comparable? If so, are they similar enough that the reforms of one may be translated for use by the other?

England

England has historically been revered for its accomplished education system; one created from centuries of trial and error, success and failure. Since the medieval times, it has drawn students the world over, beckoning them with an expansive, age-old dedication to both skillful learning and rigorous academics. However, the English education system used today- which is also emulated by many industrialized nations, including the United States- is rather new.

Radically redefined in 1988, the modern English public school is governed by a national curriculum that each of the 23,000 state schools in the country must follow. This curriculum is designed through discussions between head teachers (principals) and the 150 Local Education Authorities (LEAs) that run school districts throughout England.

This education plan is then returned to the head teachers, who must ensure their schools are meeting the Key Stages- standards for learning- as outlined in the curriculum. With such rigid goals, it would appear that schools have little leeway to individualize. However, it is the general consensus among teachers in England that this is not so. “While [the English system] appears to be rigid, most educators feel they have leeway to teach subject matter that might reach more students.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This may be attributed to another aspect under the school’s discretion. Though the above curriculum is mandatory for all state schools, it is not the end all, be all. In fact, many schools impose their own additional standards in order to further educate students and remain competitive with parents, who, under the Education Act of 1988, have the right to declare which public school they prefer their child attend.

The Key Stages

The standards set forth for learning are further broken into six levels: Foundation Stage and stages one through five, which assign specific learning requirements by age group.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Foundation Stage, created for nursery aged students, assigns tasks that help teach pupils to think creatively, work both with others and alone, and accept making mistakes while focusing on mathematics, world knowledge, and language proficiency. It was originally drawn up with the creation of the national curriculum in 2000 and was updated in 2007 to create the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum. This revamping was aimed at bridging gaps in math and English learning by 2011. Stage one consists of the first two years of compulsory schooling, created for ages five through seven. It expands learning to include science, the arts, information technology, history and geography. At the end of this stage, a national assessment is given, sometimes called an SAT, by the teacher that includes math, history, and science.

Stage two covers the next four years, enriching the subjects already breached in stage one and ends with the National Curriculum Test for English and Mathematics. Stage three spans years’ seven, eight, and nine, bringing students through their middle schooling. In this stage, the curriculum further expands to encompass citizenship education, sex education, modern foreign language, and career education. It is also ended with a National Curriculum Test. Stage four encompasses years ten and eleven. In addition to focusing on deepening understanding of their courses, students also begin taking external tests, which are comparable to the United States’ SATs and ACTs in that universities view them to get a better understanding of a student’s proficiency, though often in a specific subject. Stage five, the final stage of the program, is allocated to grades 12 and, where applicable, thirteen. This is the age where students sit the GCE Advanced Subsidiaries and the A2 exams.

Successful Reforms

The most notable reform in recent history has been the Education Act of 1988[[3]](#footnote-3), which, as previously mentioned, established a national curriculum and gave parents a say in which school their child receives his education. This act also sanctioned for the creation of Local Management Schools (LMS), which are the English counterpart to the US charter schools, as well as the removal of academic tenure in order to improve quality of public education.

However, the polls are still out, two decades later. The success of this reform is directly related to the reliability of the source. Many educators still feel that the standardized system elicits results at the expense of vast knowledge; that, in teaching the strict Key Stages, students lose the diversity in their education. Additionally, teachers are not included in the decision on which standards to set and, critics claim, it is teachers that know best what can be implemented successfully to improve education.

Critics of this system encourage schools to opt out of district control and become private. This move is, generally, a better financial choice that would offer teachers and administration higher pay and, through tuition fees, better learning materials. The head teacher would also hae complete control over what is taught.

Another option is to become an academy, which is most comparable to the US charter school in that it is government funded but privately run. A brainchild of former Prime Minister Tony Blair, the academy option was created to bridge gaps in learning through alternative teaching methods and, by most accounts, has been a huge success.

In just the past year, there has been a sort of mass migration from public to academy. 16.5 percent, roughly one in every ten, of secondary schools in throughout England registered as an academy in 2011, which equates to about 547 schools[[4]](#footnote-4). Cpnsidering that the goal set by Blair’s Labour Party was 400 academy school by 2010, it is clear that the populations of such schools were initially underestimated.

Remaining Flaws

Though it has numerous accomplishments, the English model is not perfect. Still, even with a more standardized education system, children, especially in urban areas, are falling through the cracks. Government funding, allocated based on the number of students and financial need per school, is often unequally distributed. Difficulties with choosing the right public school send some students far out of their way just to attend class.

Repair for these issues are still underway, though not near completion. “We want to want to create an education system based on real excellence, with a complete intolerance of failure.” PM Cameron mentioned in his address on September ninth of 2011. He admits that they have a ways to go. “Every year that passes without proper reform, is another year that tens of thousands of teenagers leave school without the qualifications they really need.” To alleviate these yearly educational fatalities, he has dedicated himself to a three part goal. “One: ramping up standards, bringing back the values of a good education. Two: changing the structure of education, allowing new providers in to start schools - providing more choice, more competition, and giving schools greater independence. And three: confronting educational failure head-on.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The United States

Unlike England, the United States has not had a multitude of centuries to practice educating, or the historic prestige of their western counterparts. However, through ingenuity, experimentation, and that characteristic dedication that has come to be expected, America has earned its place amongst the ranks of highly educated nations.

The United States did take on some attributes of the new English system, most notably aspects included under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. Though the two nations have come to take on similarities in the area of education, they are marked by noticeable differences.

The United States has 100,000 public schools that are organized by 14,000 school districts[[6]](#footnote-6). The districts separately determine their curriculum for the schools within their control. This decentralization has visible pros and cons: by governing at the local level, districts can quickly and efficiently gauge the needs of their facilities. However, the national government contributes only eight percent of the schools’ funding, and mainly for NCLB pursuits, which often leaves much to be desired by way of school materials and staffing.

Successful Reforms

Since the publication of “a Nation at Risk”, a national study that links the declining economy of 1980’s with a poor education system in regards to other industrialized countries, the United States has favored a move to a more efficient school through reform; though this move has been a long time coming.

After that publication, the federal government stepped in to raise the bar on graduation requirements, teacher preparation standards, teachers’ pay, and guidelines for determining the state curriculum. However, it would require multiple successive reforms to bring the nation up to par, including the NCLB act.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, an amended version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, has been a contentious issue among educators, parents, and students. It is successful in that it was passed and school districts are still required to uphold its standards, though many are appealing for relief from under the math literacy requirements imposed- with the expectation of 100 percent of students to be mathematically literate by the 2013-2014 school year[[7]](#footnote-7). NCLB provisions include annual testing for grades three through eight in mathematics and reading, as well as testing a portion of fourth and eighth graders per state to compare mathematics scores.

Since the beginning years of the program, many educators have expressed their distaste. A poll of school principals across America revealed that “nearly half of school principals and superintendents view the federal legislation as either politically motivated or aimed at undermining public schools.”

Though it has its drawbacks, one undeniably impressive brainchild of NCLB is the Reading First grant program, which extends finances to school districts around the country to set up “research-based reading programs” for kindergarten through fifth grade, with preference to poverty stricken areas. However, funding for this program, originally at 10.2 billion dollars, was cut severely.

Another reform movement that has occurred relatively recently is the move to experimental charter schools; a mass migration, by all accounts, as two million students now attends them as of December 2011. With such growing popularity and positive publicity, it is difficult to pinpoint any problems with the charter school system; though there is one monumental flaw- it appears that students who attend them may be learning less, not more.

“ A 2009 Stanford University study in 16 states found that on average, charter schools were not performing as well as their traditional public-school peers. Comparisons of math and reading scores revealed that 17 percent of charter schools showed better academic results than comparable public schools, while 37 percent underperform.”

Similar to the English academy, a charter school is government funded by privately run. Many of the more popular charter schools boast lengthy waiting lists and have recently been glorified in popular film.

Remaining Flaws

Like England, the U.S also struggles to close the gap between underprivileged and wealthy children which is a highlighted problem in urban areas; as well as lacking financial support from the federal government. Another pointed issue is the chaotic variety of curriculums within the United States, which leave some American students more learned than others. An example of this being elementary students in New Hampshire, whose scores in fourth grade reading and mathematics exams far exceed those of New Mexico, pointing to a series of weaker curriculums throughout the state[[8]](#footnote-8).

A Shared Cause for Concern: England and the US Share the Same Problems

Perhaps it is the shared heritage and mirroring education systems that lend the United States and England to face similar problems. Both are knee-deep in educational inequality, standardization backlash, and weakening economies cutting corners on improving the schooling of the average student. However, these shared concerns may be enough to connect these two nations in a way to benefit both; with academic scientists working jointly to solve pervasive, overlapping problems.

“In England and the United States, lack of focus and accountability were identified as major deficiencies in their educational systems.” With such similar concerns, it is no surprise that national reforms have fallen into the same categories. Both systems have three facets to reform: standardization, unification, and competition. They tackle these movements, too, with similar methods.

Standardization, as already discussed, creates a knowledge base upon which the governments can build reform. Knowing where students are lacking is fundamental and, though somewhat haphazardly, this standardization works to equalize the educational playing field between the different socio-economic classes[[9]](#footnote-9).

Unification manifests in different ways per country, mainly due to fundamental differences in governmental thinking. In England, which is under a unitary government to begin with, unifying the entire school system was no stretch. In the United States, however, complete unification is difficult to manage, not to mention somewhat unconstitutional. So, in order to rectify the flaws in the education system in a way that remains true to American governmental thinking, The US federal government issues standards that all school systems must include if they wish to receive funding. The money then becomes an economic pressure that influences compliance, rather than law.

Competition, too, is a trait that is deeply rooted in the history and character of both England and the United States. Using this method of influence is not a modern technique; in fact, schools throughout England have been pitted against each other for centuries before public schooling was even an option[[10]](#footnote-10). In America, the move to allow academic competition amongst public facilities has been met with some trepidation, however results have proven that a healthy amount of competition and student choice elicits a vibrant improvement in each individual school.

Academic leaders in the two nations have not allowed these similarities to go unnoticed. In 2004, a delegation of teachers and a head teacher from an English public school came to the north eastern US through a program with the Urban Institute, a research based group that lobbies for better educational opportunities for students in large cities, where economic rifts leave many school-aged children with a lackluster education. These visitors were invited into schools across the country, where they had the opportunity to analyze the way an American school runs.

The educators had many comments, not all overwhelmingly positive. Noting that US teachers were, in some instances, subpar, they expressed polite dissatisfaction. “That teacher would never be teaching at my school. My boss wouldn’t allow it.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

However, they were rather impressed with the level of experimentation that occurred within the classroom. It was clear that the different methods used to reach students benefitted the entire class, successfully transcending learning styles and boundaries to teach the curriculum. “The number one thing England can learn from the United States is experimentation.” Commented a member of former PM Tony Blair’s cabinet.

Sub-Standard: Why the Standardized System Faces Backlash

Clearly, most opinions in both England and the United States have fallen out of favor with the standardized system, which uses exams to collect information on the level of student proficiency in school subjects. However, even in the face of serious judgment, these standards remain an integral part of both education systems because, in reality, they have benefits.

Such benefits include the ability to gauge the proficiency levels of all students in the nation and better understand learning vacancies. With this information, demands for improvement can then be set in the way of Key Stages (England) or the series of United States standards that vary by state but are under the jurisdiction of the NCLB.

However, such aversion to this method is not entirely unfounded. As previously mentioned, many people feel that teaching strict standards limits the students’ education and creates a generation of children that know little beyond what is set forth to be taught. Critics believe that the school is ruled by the test, when it should be the other way around and that exams should conform to what students learn in the individual classroom.

Both nations have been grappling with whether to keep this system or get rid of it, but the historic inequality that could be recreated amongst schools throughout the country is a danger not worth risking. Currently, all reforms aiming at ending the standardized method have stalled in both England and the United States

English Exams

Standardized tests in England accompany the end of each Key Learning Stage, which ensures that students are prepared to continue into the next portion of schooling. Beginning at the close of Stage One, students take exams that are aimed at mathematics and English proficiency, which are created jointly by members of each LMS and administered by teachers in schools nationwide. These exams, called National Curriculum Tests, report viable information that influences the creation of the curriculum to work towards bridging learning gaps.

In a student’s eleventh year, one begins siting external exams that work similarly to the US SAT/ACT exams. They are used by universities to better comprehend a student’s knowledge base. Often, pupils will also enroll in A-Level courses, which are classes not in conjunction with compulsory education, but prepare them for their university major. These classes are also accompanied by exams.

Finally, in their final year of mandatory schooling, students sit the General Certificate of Secondary Education exams, which determine whether or not they have learned what was required of them to graduate to university or trade school[[12]](#footnote-12).

The United States’ Standardized Tests

The United States’ standardized exams operate on two levels- national and state. At the state level, the standardized tests are relatively ununiformed, for example, the Virginia Standardized Tests (SOL) are not necessarily comparable to the New York standardized tests like the Regent Exams.[[13]](#footnote-13)

At the national level, the most notable standardized tests are those created by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). These exams are often givn in reading, mathematics and the sciences[[14]](#footnote-14).

Unification

When discussing unification, England and the United States are easier to contrast than they are to compare. The question on whether to have “Unified or diversified education” has been one of heated debate amongst scholars from both nations. English public school are completely unified while the US school are basically the opposite, complete disunity. This is not to say, though, that the United States is not working to bas unified as possible, given that each state has the right to control its school system under the constitution.

In this aspect, unification and standardization create each other[[15]](#footnote-15). To set standards and test students on them is to reach the only level of unity that the US government can currently obtain, as there is no true national curriculum.

School Competition

School competition is another reform to come more slowly to the United States, due to objections that are not entirely distasteful. In a country that works to ensure equality for all, school competition could sponsor the notion that to attend one institution may inherently make a student better than another when, in reality, the school ought to be merely a facility for learning and that all students have the opportunity to strive for the best education possible, no matter their socioeconomic status, neighborhood, or school.

England’s education climate, on the other hand, has always relied on fierce competition that has spanned centuries. However, the competition of old was based more on an economic class society with children of certain wealth or family going to a school by default. The type of competition meant to revitalize England is one based solely on the academy merit of the institution[[16]](#footnote-16).

Conclusion

The idea that both England and the United States will share the same educational reform is not a supportable one. Though the nations share a history and numerous traits between their education systems, their contrasts make mirror reforms improbable. However, their comparable attributes do lend them to require a focused attention on the same three aspects of reform: standardization, unification, and competition. Where each country takes these categories will be moving in what may possibly be completely opposite directions.

This leaves more questions, perhaps, than answers. How comparable are they really? What is it that drove the two systems that, at first glance, appeared so alike into different paths? What does his mean for the rest of the industrialized and industrializing countries where education reform is continually a necessity?

Academics, researchers, and teachers alike may dedicate the majority of their lives answering the questions, making them in the truest sense unanswerable at current. To say that “only time will tell” feels to be a vacant ending, but in reality, it is the most accurate given the facts and the general consensus of scholarly opinion. Until the future decides to reveal itself in due time, one may look at the present and notice that, even with their often opposing viewpoints, both nations are still working towards the same goal: creating an education system that is free of gaps, failure, and inequality, that will help students compete in the world.

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