Are Educational Strategies Failing 21st Century Students?

Dr. Mohammed Al Muhtadi

AUTHORIZED BY AL-NASSER UNIVERSITY'S RESEARCH OFFICE

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the correlation between achieving success in the work environment and educational strategies. The goal is to encourage educators, students and employers to consider how well educational experiences prepare individuals for entrance into the global market place. This is done by reviewing standards, methodologies, global rankings and other factors that suggest the system(s) is failing to adequately prepare students to adjust to rapidly changing technology. Through reviewing potential hindrances and short comings, this paper highlights the necessity for educators around the world to devote their best and brightest to finding solutions to shape educational strategies with a proactive approach designed to improve overall outcomes for success.

Introduction

Throughout the ages, every human society has experienced challenges adjusting to population growth, maintaining structural order and creating channels for future generations. Speaking of physical evolution Charles Darwin said, "It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change." [1] How well a society prepares the next generation for survival is imperative for the society as a whole. One critical element of preparation in the 21st century is the ability to engage other cultures beyond communal borders. At the center of this struggle for growth and prosperity is education. This paper will explore the possibility that current educational strategies are failing to prepare the next generation sufficiently enough to enter the global work force.

Failing to Develop Skillsets

To start the exploration, consider Canada. Canada's educational system has regressed in many aspects according to Kevin Lynch, a highly successful business man with experience across diverse sectors that include academia, government and commerce [2]. Lynch says that although universities can effective train for entrepreneurship; however not many secondary institutions in Canada provide that training. Canadian rankings have fallen in recent years compared to other international educational systems. Lynch and other experts suggest part of the problem is that schools are not providing the proper skill set to improve post-educational outcomes.

Canada slipped from an international rating of 13th to 8th, perhaps because there is a critical shortage in training concentrated on science and math, two core curricula for successfully navigating an ever increasing world dependent on numeracy and rapid technological change. Perhaps, this is an example of clingy to successful strategies that worked in the past, but are not suitable for today.

Failing to Consider Cultural Relevance

Lynch also highlights the fact that colleges in Canada do not require language courses as a mandatory element for graduation, unless the student is in a language program. In the past, most universities in Western countries required at least basic instruction in foreign language as part of every degree granting program. With open boarders, global commerce and easy transport between nations, it is irresponsible for universities to omit this basic requirement.

Some countries embrace the necessity for language acquisition and the role it plays in global prosperity. China, for example, is currently working with a university in South Carolina (USA) to open a learning center for Chinese students in their home country. The ability to speak, read, and write "American English" is becoming more important as virtual borders replace physical boundaries.

The willingness to attempt such a relationship is risky for both countries considering the ideological differences; however, the risks outweigh the potential gain. Unfortunately, not all countries are willing to embrace such volatile experiments and continue to rely on temporary study abroad approaches that parachute students into a foreign country for a few weeks or months in the hope that they will absorb enough to exact change when they return to their mother land. While this is a step in the right direction, this approach is limited unless the school system implements strategies to support further professional develop with advanced language skills instruction.

Failing to Prepare Students to Take Personal Responsibility

There is a secondary aspect of cultural significance. In the United States, the past few decades have seen a remarkable shift in the role that educational systems play. Focus is splintered and fragmented, especially in primary grades. Educators often complain that teaching is secondary to social issues. In an effort to equalize the educational opportunities for every student, initiatives and programs now expend a disproportionate amount of money and effort toward addressing nutritional deficiencies with on-campus meal programs, challenges for parents with after-school entertainment programs and social inequalities with controlled admission selection protocol.

While each of these issues deserves attention, educators often complain they do not have time to teach while policing disruptive students, designing lesson plans that do not include "excessive" homework to avoid reducing recreational time and teaching diversity and tolerance over science and math. Recently, Eric Holder, US Attorney General, issued guidance for schools that suggests school policy enforcement must address racial profiles. When teachers are forced to accept disruptive behavior based on the ratio of ethnic and racial participants, the environment for learning must naturally decline. Some educators suggest this policy will harm the very students it was intended to protect, in the case of the United States these students are Hispanic and African America – two of the top underserved populations most in need of educational excellence and support. This failure limits student

populations from developing the skill set necessary to develop a strong commitment to accept personal responsibility, which limits opportunity in the work force.

Failing to Provide Adequate Technology and Supporting Curricula

According to projections from the United States Bureau of Labor, in less than ten years, the US will experience a debilitating gap between the number of computer science/technology jobs available and skilled people to fill those jobs. (3) Educational facilities are not providing technical training fast enough to keep up with the pace of technological advancement today. Part of the problem is the lack of computer equipment available for hands-on instruction necessary to expand the experiential base. Some experts warn that 90% of schools below collegiate level do not teach any computer science classes. In addition to that shocking number, technology based jobs growth is expected to outpace other sectors two fold.

When you don't expose the student population to technology early, it is impossible to discover which students would naturally excel in the field. Another population that suffers from delayed exposure is the group of students that might choose science and math based on early experiences during critical developmental stages of when perception and self-identification began to emerge. It is important to expose students to technology early so they have time to explore other career options for their future outside of scientific settings and programming fields. If more students understood that gaming, design, security, marketing and other careers hinge on technology, is might be possible to engage a broader range of interest.

There is another reason that students exit their high-school careers without the necessary training and skill set to excel in the global market place. Many teachers do not possess enough technical training to teach their students efficiently. Schools that are not fully equipped with modern equipment and that do not have educators on staff with advanced computer-centric training do not present a realistic world view for future career options. Administrative and operational executives in educational settings must develop strategies to update teacher skills, recruit the best available educators and funnel money into the most appropriate directions in order to overcome this failure.

Finding The Formula For The Best Teacher Recruitment

While spending money to bring the level of on-campus technology is critical, research shows that spending money on teacher salaries does not produce tangible results for students. Schools like top ranked Finland and South Korea have found that cultural influences weigh heavily in the quest for recruiting teachers that consistently support positive student development. Cultural influences include in-school and out-of-school factors like parental support, governmental involvement and continuity of commitment to educational performance.

There is not a simple formula for success that works within every country. However, experts agree that the best teachers are willing to invest time and energy toward exacting change in the community regarding the importance of education and the impact it has on the future.

Also, the level of engagement with students, administrators, the community and the student ranks high on the list of potential skills for educators.

Studies conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) suggest the success enjoyed by Asian countries is directly correlated to society impact. (4) Bringing about change in any community is difficult at best, but the top educators have a personal vested interest in advocating for that change. Numerous studies have shown that Asian countries have a culture that is more familial-centric than Western countries. This cultural influence naturally transfers into the world of education and career choices. Student performance is directly related to personal responsibility toward family and success is measured collectively, not individually.

Western countries fail to incorporate this cultural influence effectively in many school districts and universities. There is a focus on self-efficacy and empowerment over societal needs and future generations. While this approach does not necessarily translate into higher salaries, it does produce more equipped students for entrance into the work force. The EIU report also suggests that countries that actively promote teaching as a desirable, respectable profession have a larger pool of successful educators. Part of the recruitment process should include seeking out professionals that take their careers seriously over settling into a career with stability and guaranteed salary increases.

Failure to Encourage International Engagement

Even though the numbers have increased in recent years, the percentage of American students that study abroad is minimal, roughly 10%, according to Institute of International Education President Allan Goodman. Goodman believes that it is imperative for students to experience diverse cultures for future career success. More than three-quarters of a million international students traveled to the US to study in one of approximately 4000 institutions of higher learning during the 2012/2013 school year. (5)

Nations that do not encourage international engagement and foreign study seriously hinder graduates' ability to compete in across borders because they lack the cultural understanding and experiential exposure to diverse peoples, business practices and objectives. Both the host country and the country of origin reap substantial rewards when educational facilities promote and support bilateral approach to student exchange.

While external forces outside the educational structure impact these arrangements, it is the responsibility of every educational system to promote programs that encourages students from all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds and at all levels of academic competency to have opportunities for foreign study. The end result will be a more in-depth understanding of other peoples around the globe and a stronger position for career entrance based on exposure to unique perspectives and objectives from a broader swath of cultural and political lenses.

Administrative Shortcomings

The root of many of the shortcomings in educational outcomes stems from administrative imperatives and objectives. Using the United States as an example, it is easy to see that school districts' success rates in preparing students for the future vary widely from state to state and even among individual campuses within a given district or county. Schools with the highest graduation rates, highest grades and other qualitative and quantitative measures always have a strong, objective-based strategy in place that demands students achieve to the best of their capabilities.

It stands to reason, based on anecdotal and fact-based evidence, if all academic institutions globally approached education with a similar mindset. Unfortunately, many schools focus on meeting artificial benchmarks aimed at meeting certain percentages, rather than making the educational experience relevant to today and the future. Administrative teams that fail to provide enough channels for professional development, innovative teaching methods that include on-campus and off-campus learning environments and introduction to courses that promote adaptability and rapid change fail to provide the best environment for educational success that transfers seamlessly into the work force.

Conclusion

A review of educational systems around the globe, from top ranked Finland to Mexico, which falls at the lower end of the top fifty nations, reveals there is room for improvement around the world. In today's environment where technological advancements emerge at the speed of light, careers exist today that were not even imagined just two decades ago.

Academic institutions are struggling to train students today to fill jobs that a critical to the success and prosperity of every nation. However, schools must not focus solely on today, in order to get ahead of the curve, educators must come to grips with the reality that students must receive training that allows them to enter a global community with ever-changing, ever-evolving technologies.

To accomplish these goals, educators, governments, and both community and familial leaders must embrace change immediately. That change should include strategies to engage students earlier with opportunities to explore computer equipment and encourage adaptability and entrepreneurship. Colleges should incorporate language acquisition and cultural exchange through foreign study programs that invite more students into the processes and programs. Teachers must be willing to advocate for more parent involvement and community engagement.

Furthermore, financial resources must be allocated based on outcome for student, not increased salaries for teachers who simply managed to work another year in the system toward retirement. Administrators must make a commitment to recruit and support classroom teachers in myriad ways inside and outside the classroom.

If those in charge of shaping the academic experience fail to address these failures within their educational settings, the consequences could be dire. Not only will students struggle to

find work in the global society, communities and countries will face financial hardships associated a work force incapable of responding to changes that are necessary to stay viable and competitive in the global market place. It is time for educators everywhere to face the reality before it is too late to change course.

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Additional resources:

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