

Paper presented at the Conference on Celebrating and
Promoting International Education and Exchange
Sponsored by the United States Department of
State's International Education Week 2004 Program
Convened at Shaw University, Raleigh, North Carolina
November 15-19, 2004

Differing Standards of Education and Their Impact on International Exchanges: A Comparison of the United States and South Africa

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Abstract

With the rise of globalization, education has become increasingly important throughout the world. It is through education that most children develop vital social and mental skills that help them later in life to become successful in the working world. The way a country runs its affairs and how it relates to other countries are based largely on how its youth are educated. Most people realize the need for education; but as long as they see a school building with teachers, they think something productive is happening behind the building walls. This is not always the case. Education varies throughout the world, and the differences in educational standards do more to explain cultural differences than anything else. Thus, the differing standards of education in the United States and South Africa call for a need to standardize the education curricula internationally. This paper shows, through qualitative analysis, what specific differences in standards of education cause people in various countries to act as they do in functioning in the global system. Through archival research of data sources on the educational systems in South Africa and the United States, and examining how these countries act toward others, a relationship between education standards and intercultural communication is shown. This helps to explain how the different standards of education affect international communication.

Keywords: Education, International Exchange, Communication, Globalization.

Introduction

Education is one of the most important aspects of society. It gives human beings the ability to think logically and reasonably. More significantly, education gives people the ability to communicate with others. This is vital not only for individual communication but for global communication as well.

Ways through which people communicate cross culturally vary because education throughout the world diverges greatly. While the differences can show uniqueness in culture, they can at the same time hinder affective cross-cultural communication. For example, South Africa's math standards may require students to know higher levels of math than the United States' standards require. This can cause problems when these states meet to talk about economic policies. Also, it is not uncommon for Americans and South Africans to be found working in the same professional field, under the same roof. How they perform as individuals depends greatly on their education.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to help people get an idea of how important education around the world is and the need for a global standard of education. It then becomes clear how educational standards differ and, more importantly, how they affect cross-cultural communication.

Literature Review

While education is one of today's most researched topics, there is little information available about specific educational standards. The South African and American educational systems have been researched but not nearly to the depth that would give a good idea of what specifics make up their standards of education. Writers such as Steven Zemelman (1998) touched on the idea that American education is more concentrated around the students, with ideas about democracy being highly promoted. Perspectives on education are extremely broad, many focusing on the idea of education itself instead of the specific standards to which states hold themselves.

Works on American education have been suggestive as to what needs to be added to the system. Bennett (1998) states that multicultural education is becoming increasingly important in the United States but not implemented because of lacking societal policies, funds, and understanding. Stasz (1998), on the other hand, contends that there is a need for greater improvements in education to help students deal with an ever changing economy. Still, others like Kohn (1999) promote the idea that the United States educational system is moving towards tougher standards coinciding with accountability while upholding traditions.

As research on the United States tends to support the overall idea of building an already established system, research on South African education shows a need for a foundation. Nkomo, in *Student Culture and Activism in Black South African Universities* (1984), explains the need for resolution in the South African segregated educational system, split between black and white because of the residues of the Apartheid system. Nkabinde (1997) approaches a post-Apartheid era of education by stating a need for planning and developing ways of effective teaching.

After reviewing the preceding studies, it is apparent that the relationship between education and the way states, particularly South Africa and the United States, communicate cross culturally is not a topic that has been clearly explored. Thus, it is the purpose of this study to clearly define the relationship of education to intercultural communication.

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

The theoretical framework of this study hinges on the proposition that the way a country is run and how it relates to other countries are based largely on how its youth are educated. This proposition suggests that education varies throughout the world, and the differences in educational standards do more to explain our cultural differences than anything else. Bennett (1998) supports this postulate by addressing the need for multicultural education in the United States. Use of this theory will bring together information about educational standards and cross-cultural communication to show that education is critical to globalization.

This study also uses the qualitative case study method. It is qualitative in the sense that numerical values are ineffective in systematically analyzing the data. The research hypothesis of this study is that the different educational systems in South Africa and the United States cause these two states to have difficulty in effectively communicating cross culturally.

The document analysis technique was employed to collect the pertinent data required to explore the educational standards in South Africa and the United States. This technique allows for a better understanding of how intercultural communication between the two countries is affected by education. This study is exploratory because it is vital to look at as many data sources as are available to analyze the educational systems in both countries. Yet, it is also explanatory because the information gathered needed to be related to its effect on cross-cultural communication. The units of analysis are the United States and South Africa, leading to a macro level of analysis.

Data Analysis

A major problem inhibiting effective cross-cultural communication is differing educational systems. Each country teaches its children different beliefs and information. When people communicate, it is important for them to have a common understanding of basic ideas. If they do not have this common understanding, then communication will be awkward and unsuccessful. In today's globalized environment, people cannot allow for awkward communication when lives are at stake and important decisions need to be made. Globalization is rooted in efficiency, getting things done quickly and cheaply. The different types of educational systems throughout the world are hindering global communication.

Americans are educated in a way that promotes students to be self-centered and highly democratic. American students believe that democracy is the only way to have a successful government (Zemelman 1998). This leads to a need for Americans to promote democracy around the world. However, developing countries like South Africa with newly created democratic systems are not finding democracy to be as effective as it is in the United States. The reason for this struggle is a lack of education among the majority of the population. The many people who cannot read cannot also easily fill out voting ballots or even understand the issues on which they are to vote. This lack of organized foundation in South African education makes it difficult for its graduates to successfully communicate on the international level (Nkabinde 1997). The United States needs to

understand that democracy, as it is in the United States, is not always as affective abroad. A country like South Africa has developed from a completely different historical background and this makes its governance needs different. The United States' educational system should adopt a program that incorporates a deeper understanding of world cultures.

In the United States, education is advancing upon the traditional system (Kohn 1999). This system entailed promoting individuality and democracy. The traditional system, however, did not in every case allow for bilingual education or cross-cultural education. The need for people to communicate with other cultures was not as vital as it has become today. Lacking societal policies, funds, and understanding have made implementing multicultural education into the United States educational system difficult (Bennett 1998). Yet, the fact that there is recognition of the need for multicultural education in the United States keeps it a step ahead of other countries like South Africa.

The United States is a major actor in international relations. It is influential abroad because it has a strong, organized foundation. The United States, for the most part, has enough man-power, resources, and knowledge to share with other countries and still maintain its own superior performance. South Africans, on the other hand, have had internal conflicts such as segregated classrooms that have hindered its advancement (Nkomo 1984).

These findings are useful in understanding why it is difficult for countries with greatly different educational systems to communicate successfully. South Africa and the United States each focus on instilling different qualities in their students. This is why the goals of these two countries are so different. The United States, with a highly developed educational system, feels the need to move further and spread its knowledge of success. South Africa, on the other hand, is feeding on countries like the United States because its educational foundation is still being pieced together. The internal conflict that existed among South Africans during the apartheid era forced that country to pay greater attention to domestic issues compared to international ones. It was not until the early 1990s, after apartheid was officially ended, that South African schools were desegregated. Before that, the minority population, the whites, had priority over higher education while many of the blacks were left uneducated. South Africa now suffers because of the large number of uneducated people with great amounts of power.

Thus, the theoretical proposition used to guide this study is useful because it shows the importance of education. It also shows that there is dire need for countries to raise their educational standards in order to meet the rising needs of globalization. The world is figuratively getting smaller; and as countries become closer, there is going to be a strong need for similar educational systems. In order for people to communicate more effectively, they will need to have similar understandings through education.

Conclusion

South Africa and the United States clearly have different educational foundations. These different foundations cause communication between the two countries to be ineffective. Diversity in educational standards needs to be taken strongly into consideration before communication between countries can be clearly analyzed.

Before globalization can become fully realized, a more uniform world standard of education needs to be implemented. Peripheral countries' educational standards need to be brought to par with those of the core countries. When this is accomplished, global communication will become more effective and international relations will be stronger.

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