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# Reflection on US Education and Democracy

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I have spent six weeks in studying American Education and Democracy in America. The learning process is very inspiring and overwhelming in comprehending a lot of things which are very “luxurious” in my academic sense. I prefer to present my report in the form of reflection due to my personal matter. I have strong impression that reflection is the most essential phase in internalizing all process of learning. Through reflection, I have a big room to develop my ownership of learning. This reflection is essential to me and I eager to share with you in order to have better sensibility in dealing our national education and democratic life. Hopefully, we can learn from all Americans best practices.

## **Educational system**

In studying the educational system in USA, the Academy has provided me with the intensive exposure to the various providers of the United States secondary education, including visits to public schools (Amherst Regional High School, Amherst Regional Middle school, and Fort River Elementary School), a public vocational/technical high school (Smith Vocational Agricultural High

School), Amherst supplementary education institution (Leisure Services and Supplemental Education), and charter school (Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter School).

These observations are actually to support our lecturing class about US educational system and some theoretical frameworks pertained to teaching and learning activities. Some lecturing classes shared about English Language Learning (Reading and Writing literacy) especially for non native students, Classroom management, and leadership instruction for the students. In addition, I have met with a variety of secondary teachers and teacher educators on topics ranging from student assessment, community service learning, character development education, special needs, English as a Second Language, and student-centered active-learning pedagogy. The indoor classroom activities and outdoor observation are impressed me to have a very positive testimony. These observations particularly help me to know in depth about the real classroom activities. I have seen them. I have observed them. And I have learned about them.

In America, there is a clear distribution of role among federal, states and districts. The federal level gives the standards on achievement, assessment, and accountability. The state level develops curriculum frameworks. And the district level makes a

curriculum map and lesson plan models. All about this system can be easily and transparently surfed and downloaded from their website ([www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov) at federal level, [www.doe.mass.edu](http://www.doe.mass.edu) at the state of Massachusetts level, and [www.arps.org](http://www.arps.org) at the district of Amherst level)

At Fort River Elementary School, I have got the excitement of the learning and teaching process there. The teachers seemed mastered with the application of teaching and learning principle for nursery and young learners. It was full of enthusiasm and every teacher teaches with great dedication to student's learning. The lower grades could really learn with enjoyment. The music class particularly was making all of the students and me really "learn and play the music".

### **Classroom atmosphere**

The American classrooms are very familiar with implementation of active learning principles. The students have a real "autonomy" in reconstructing their own understanding. The teacher eagerly facilitates their learning activities. The "Active learning" suggests that students must do more than just listen: They must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems. Most important, to be actively involved, students must engage in such higher-order thinking tasks as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Within this context, that strategies promoting active learning has been defined and well implemented as instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing.

Use of these techniques in the classroom is vital because of their powerful impact upon students' learning. It's shown that students prefer strategies promoting active learning to traditional lectures. Teacher should engage in self-reflection, exploring his or her personal willingness to experiment with alternative approaches to instruction.

I am also interesting with what so called Project Based Learning (PBL) conducted in the teacher of world civilization history class by Simon Leutz, Amherst Regional High School. I found that their projects in history of civilization classrooms encourage changes in the culture and structure of class atmosphere. Schools are under increasing spirit to raise standards, improve climate, and personalize learning. This technique can contribute to the learning process by encouraging student collaboration, motivating students to achieve, using the tools and language of project management, and helping to incorporate class-wide learning outcomes into the curriculum. In particular, PBL fits well with efforts to create a high-performance school culture that values both rigor and relevance. In addition, projects are a great way to involve parents and community members in the educational process, a result that often leads to more support for the school and a better understanding of the needs of students. The collaborative nature of the investigation enhances all of these valuable experiences as well as promotes a greater appreciation for social responsibility.

It is also clear that PBL teaches students complex processes and procedures



such as planning and communicating. Accomplishing these goals, however, requires time for both teachers and students to master the behaviors and strategies necessary for successful PBL. In addition to research, convincing reports have come from teachers that PBL is a rigorous, relevant, and engaging instructional model that supports authentic inquiry and autonomous learning for students. Along with encouraging academic proficiency and meeting the traditional goals of education, PBL has important benefits for today's students. Schultz said that PBL:

- Supports students in learning and practicing skills in problem solving, communication, and self-management.
- Overcomes the dichotomy between knowledge and thinking, helping students to both “know” and “do.”
- Encourages the development of habits of mind associated with lifelong learning, civic responsibility, and personal or career success.
- Assesses performance on content and skills using criteria similar to those in the work world, thus encouraging accountability, goal setting, and improved performance.
- Engages and motivates bored or indifferent students.

One thing that I would like to share with you is the existence of what is called charter school. Charter schools are nonsectarian public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. The “charter” establishing each such school is a

performance contract detailing the school's mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success. The length of time for which charters are granted varies, but most are granted for 3-5 years. At the end of the term, the entity granting the charter may renew the school's contract. Charter schools are accountable to their sponsor— usually a state or local school board— to produce positive academic results and adhere to the charter contract. The basic concept of charter schools is that they exercise increased autonomy in return for this accountability. They are accountable for both academic results and fiscal practices to several groups: the sponsor that grants them, the parents who choose them, and the public that funds them.

### **Education reform**

I have learned the US education reform since A NATION AT RISK (Ronald Reagan era) till NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND (George W. Bush era). It's really amazing how they have the spirit of seriousness dealing with education development.

On August 26, 1981, T. H. Bell, The Secretary of Education, U.S. Department of Education, created the National Commission on Excellence in Education and directed it to present a report on the quality of education in America to the American people by April of 1983. The first paragraph of the report is struck my consciousness. It is very inspiring and intriguing that:

“Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation

is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments”.

Today, things have improved. And the government and American people responsible for expanding the Nation’s investment in education. As a result, they now have a much clearer picture of how well American schools and their students are faring. Actually there are many ways to ask the general question “how are they doing?” Policymakers often ask if American students are doing as well as they should or as well as they can. International comparisons present an alternative kind of benchmark for gauging overall performance and are probably the most important indicator to business leaders. Comparisons of academic performance among major economic partners are leading indicators for employers who must compete in a global economy. International comparisons can be drawn primarily from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the International Reading Literacy Study (IRLS) and the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). These data also paint an uneven

picture of American relative educational standing.

Whatever else one might argue is the legacy of *A Nation at Risk*, it clearly signaled the recognition of educational performance as a national concern, an issue of national importance.

For the time being, George W. Bush is dealing with the popular brand new policy which is so called No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Margaret Spellings, the US secretary of education, just said firmly that “Our nation was founded on the ideal that every citizen counts and that every person can achieve the American Dream. We all know the ticket to success is a solid educational foundation. The future of our democracy, our economy and our quality of life depends on it. Every child deserves an advocate—and those advocates are you and me. All of us.”

Massachusetts in particular, The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 calls for dramatic changes in public education over a 7-year period. Among the major improvements are greater and more equitable funding to schools, accountability for student learning, and statewide standards for students, educators, schools and districts. While there is still much to be done to achieve our goals, substantial progress has been made in schools throughout the Commonwealth. Many people have asked for an update on Education Reform at its midpoint, including the Governor and legislative leaders, members of the State Board of Education and local school committees, the Massachusetts Education



Reform Review Commission, advisory councils, and parents.

Some of the major changes in accountability brought about by the Education Reform Act include these requirements: a school council in every school, continuing education for educators, more authority for every principal, better defined roles for school committees, and clear, concise and measurable statewide standards for students and schools. The capstone will be a “high-stakes” test based on the new curriculum standards which every student will need to pass in order to receive a diploma. This is a very exciting and promising time for Massachusetts schools. They are on an aggressive schedule.

I also have an opportunity to meet with various groups and organizations that shape the educational environment in the United States including regional and local school committees, town government, union leaders and school administrators. I have learned about some institution benchmarks (1) for teaching activities and best practices like CFT (center for teaching) of UMass (2) for supervising practitioner like ASCD (Association of Supervisor and Curriculum Development), and (3) for teacher union like MTA (Massachusetts Teacher Association) at the state level and NEA (National Education Association) at the federal level.

### **Democratic Life**

NOT AS SEEN ON MOVIES. I eager to start my reflection on democratic life in USA with this phrase in order to underline my

reversal perspective about America. In this sense, it doesn't mean that America is the best entity in all aspects, what I mind is that America is not as bad as I think previously. It is like one million shots in my experiential array, but this shot really struck my consciousness that WE CAN LEARN FROM AMERICA. We can reach the next best thing in our country, Indonesia. America is NOT super country that can achieve anything easily; they also have trials and errors in many aspects. They have rising and falling times. They also have the golden and hard times. What the excellent thing from them is that they always learn from errors, falls, hardness. Eventually they can accumulate their small pieces of achievements become a huge, aggregative and massive masterpiece. America gives a huge room of creativities, freedoms and expressions, and then manages all success stories to support their great vision as a great country. In their journey they encourage the freedom, transparency, control and accountability to make it sure that all things are on the right track.

Every country has nightmare. And it happens on Americans. They have much bitter experiences of civil war in political life at Abraham Lincoln era, they have hardest time of Black Friday in economic life at Franklin Delano Roosevelt era, and they have horrible time of nine eleven in social life at George W. Bush era. However, they do not afraid in facing the future. They still have ELAN VITAL, spirit, courage, and brevity in doing the best. We have the same experiences in terms of bitter times, and we also still have spirit of life in doing the best. The matter is we should run, run and

run faster and faster to be in line with all advanced countries.

### **Spirit of democracy**

I also have been overwhelmed with a lot of experiences about America. I really want to figure out and digest all experiences in two main personal points.

FREEDOM AND EQUALITY. They are the sacred spirit lied on The Underground Railroad Museum. The Underground Railroad located in Cincinnati, Ohio, was perhaps the most dramatic protest action against slavery in United States history. It was a clandestine operation that began during the colonial period, later became part of organized abolitionist activity in the 19th century, and reached its peak in the period 1830 - 1865. The story of the Underground Railroad is one of individual sacrifice and heroism in the efforts of enslaved people to reach freedom from bondage. This museum actually a dark side of the white American people over the black people. And this is the point that i think very unique. Why these museums become the huge resources for all American to have a better future without raising the hatred feeling? This is the best practice in public education about history for Americans. The message is very clear: **let's make thing better by learning from the past, doing the best in the present, and planning well for the future.** We have the same history for Indonesians pertained to what so called September 30<sup>th</sup> movement. How dare we learn from this courage?

come to the next question; why Americans are so pride to have America? I know then it's because America is very good in educating their people. We can observe all concepts of memorials about Thomas Jefferson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln etc. those memorials can easily remind people about their great persons. The various concepts about their courage in war; Vietnam war monument which is very personal, Korean war which is very visual really acknowledge all people as an hero. And all museums about art, aerospace, holocaust, and many else really educate people about the achievement and lesson learnt which are very valuable for this life.

Those are the loose strands of my reflection on US education and democracy. I myself really want to express my deepest thanks for all your supports. This is very valuable for me. Herewith I've learned from you all how to have a collaboration and good partnership among educators in achieving the best thing in our national education and developing our democratic atmosphere.

Massachusetts, 19 July 2005

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