

Foreign Students' Impressions of American High Schools

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Abstract. Every year thousands of successful foreign students attend American high schools, sponsored by many organizations. These students have experienced an education in two countries, so they have a specific, participatory knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of two very different systems. Using a survey designed for this study, the students in this study compared American high schools with the high schools in their home countries. Initially the foreign students rated their home high school higher than their American high school, but by the end of the school year, they rated American high schools higher than their home country high school. The results indicate many strengths of American schools and also indicate areas of improvement needed from this unique perspective of foreign students.

Keywords: Education, foreign students, and American high schools

1 Introduction

As educators, we hear the barrage of comparisons of American schools with those in other countries, with American education usually berated and reported as inferior. Yet, every year thousands of foreign students come to the U.S. to attend an American high school. These students are extremely talented and very academically successful to be eligible to participate in such educational exchanges, due to the rigorous standards of these programs. If American schools are so inferior, why then do foreign students, who are top students in their countries, participate in exchange programs year after year? Why would the parents of these students support their involvement in an exchange program if it adversely affected their child's academic future?

What better way to determine the strengths of American high schools in comparison to foreign high schools than directly asking those most aware, namely the students themselves? These students have experienced an education in both countries, so they have specific, participatory knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of these two different systems.

This article reports the results of surveys of seventeen foreign exchange students from ten different countries that attended private and public high schools in the Seattle area.

What is the biggest surprise? The initial impressions of the students indicated they viewed their home country school as superior to their American school, but, by the end of the school year, they rated their American school as overall superior. In other words, the more they learned and experienced, the more they judged our schools as better.

2 Foreign Students in the Research Group

To become a foreign exchange student, students must participate in programs approved by the U.S. State Department. Each student must not only speak proficient English, as determined on the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), but also they must be a highly successful student as evidenced by their grades, written application materials, and personal interview. One such program, the Aspect Foundation [1], coordinates the placement of hundreds of students throughout the U.S., including the Seattle region.

During the 2007-08 school year, I met with twenty-five students, sponsored by the Aspect Foundation, from sixteen different countries. Students completed a three-page survey, which had been piloted the previous year with a different cohort of students. In addition, some students answered questions in person. The survey focused on school ratings, their coursework, and their ratings of the quality of

instruction they received while in the U.S. They also answered open-ended questions to share their individual impressions. Students completed the surveys at the beginning of the school year, in September, and then in June, before leaving for home.

Of the twenty-five students, only seventeen completed both surveys and are the focus of this article. Some students did not remain for the entire school year, some did not complete the program due to their behavior or grades, and a few did not complete their surveys. The seventeen students in the research group were from ten different countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, Denmark, Georgia, Germany, Hong Kong, Lebanon, Norway, Palestine, Russia). Thus, nine of the students in this group were from European countries; eight of them attended public schools in their home countries.

The seventeen students were placed in sixteen different urban and suburban public high schools within the Seattle area. One attended a private school. Of the nine European students, all were enrolled in public high schools and completed the school year. All students were sixteen years old and above, with most being juniors and seniors. Each student enrolled as a full time student and was required to participate in English courses and American history or related courses, plus electives of their choice.

3 Use of Student Surveys

Many researchers have utilized student surveys to capture the opinions of students for enhancing school improvement and student life. The purposes have ranged widely from providing ideas for safe and civil schools, to school belongingness, to future college success.

Some researchers in the U.S. and abroad have focused on student surveys specifically to promote school reform or improve classroom instruction. In 2007, Noguera [2] obtained surveys from 150 10th-grade students who attended ten high schools in Boston and conducted interviews with them to determine their perspectives for strengthening school reform efforts. Cheng [3] completed in 2007 a survey of 7,063 Hong Kong students to investigate the students' views of student-centered teaching and their active learning. The purpose was to contribute to improving instructional approaches.

This article focuses on a unique source of feedback for school improvement—foreign students. This is an especially important direction, since these students, who are already extremely successful in their countries, have seen quality instruction and know how to judge it. They are bright, articulate, and astute observers of education, as evidenced by their own success. They are experienced “student” observers of the quality of schools and can provide us worthwhile advice.

4 Survey Results—Overall School Ratings by All Foreign Students

As Table 1 below indicates, the overall ratings of American schools improved during the school year. In September, the first week of school, the students rated their impressions of their American high school and their home school, on a ten point Likert scale (10 as high), and then repeated this rating in June. In September, the foreign students rated their home country high school as higher than their U.S. high school (7.67 mean rating to 6.71 mean rating). However, by June, their ratings had changed, with their home country school ratings decreasing (to a 7.40 mean rating) while their American high school had improved (to a 7.10 mean rating).

5 European Students' Ratings

More importantly, the subgroup of nine European students in this cohort (from Denmark, Germany, and Norway) changed their ratings the most of any group (see Table I). In September, they had rated their American high school as inferior to their home country school (6.89 to 7.27 mean rating). However, by June, they rated their U.S. school above their home country school (7.61 to 7.38 mean rating). The American school was now rated even higher than their home school even upon their arrival in the U.S. The difference in the rating was much higher—an improvement of .72 mean rating—than any other rating change.

Table 1. Foreign students' ratings of American high school versus home country high school

Group of Students	Scale	September (1-10)	June (1-10)	Difference (1-10)
All Foreign Students' Ratings (N=17)	Home Country's High School	7.67 (mean)	7.40 (mean)	-.27
	American High School	6.71 (mean)	7.10 (mean)	+.39
European Students' Ratings (N=9)	Home Country's High School	7.27 (mean)	7.38 (mean)	+.11
	American High School	6.89 (mean)	7.61 (mean)	+.72

Why view the surveys of the European students separately from the entire group? Educational systems in Europe are often used for comparison with American education. European countries are viewed as some of our closest competitors (Tienken, 2008)[4]. Further, our countries are both Westernized, and our cultures are more closely related than those in other countries, so it is more appropriate to compare developed countries. Lastly, education systems in Denmark, Germany, and Norway are sometimes rated better than the U.S. on many international comparisons of test data (*Education at a Glance*, 2009)[5].

6 Survey Results—Additional Comparisons

Besides the overall rating comparisons, the students responded to twenty items, such as class size, hours of homework, and impressions of teachers in the U.S.

The European students indicated that class sizes in the U.S. were larger than in their countries, and only one student commented that special education students were included in their home country school's classrooms. (They did not realize that in the U.S. in most high school classrooms, there are 2-3 special education students within our larger class sizes.) For example, a student from Denmark remarked his high school class sizes averaged 19 students, while in the U.S. his largest class had 38 students, which he indicated he had never observed at any time in Denmark.

Table 2 illustrates the results of selected responses in June by all the foreign students, after they had experienced a full year in their American high school. Table 3 illustrates the selected responses in June by just the European students, a subgroup of the sample.

Table 2. All foreign students' selected responses in June (N=17)

Topics	Responses
Any class sizes ever as big at home as in U.S. high school	6 (35%) said "yes"
Hours of homework in the U.S.	1.25 hrs. per school night
Hours of homework at home	2.56 hrs. per school night
Students with disabilities in classes at home	2 (18%) said "yes"
Students excluded from school at home due to poor grades	9 (53%) said "yes"
Ratings of U.S. Teachers	
Teachers demand quality work	5.75 mean rating
Teachers as caring individuals	7.06 mean rating
Teachers are great instructors	6.15 mean rating

Table 3. European students' selected responses in June (subgroup of above)(N=9)

Topics	Responses
Any class sizes ever as big at home as in U.S. high school	1 (11%) said "yes"
Hours of homework in the U.S.	1.5 hours per school night
Hours of homework at home	2.39 hours per school night
Students with disabilities in classes at home	1 (11%) said "yes"
Students excluded from school at home due to poor grades	8 (89%) said "yes"
Ratings of U.S. Teachers	
Teachers demand quality work	6.11 mean rating
Teachers as caring individuals	8.22 mean rating
Teachers are great instructors	6.44 mean rating

As Tables 2 and 3 indicate, the hours of homework required were higher in their home countries than in the U.S. for all students. This is surprising, since the students had to complete work in English, which was challenging. Given that challenge, we can assume that American high schools provide less homework.

One of the most telling differences between our American high schools and those in other countries was that students could be excluded from their home country schools based upon their grades. This was especially true of the European students (89%) (see Table 3).

The poorest ratings of American teachers pertained to teachers not demanding enough quality work. This category (5.75 mean rating by all students, and 6.11 mean rating by the European students) was the lowest of all the measures. Students commented that here teachers often extended deadlines for assignments, and were very accommodating to too many students, and sometimes they felt the teachers were not demanding enough of their work, thus they did not improve their English and other skills as much as they wanted. To emphasize these points, a student from the Middle East stated his home country school "is much more academic and rigorous," while a student from Europe stated, "the academic level is lower here."

Further, the next lowest rating was that their American teachers were not "great instructors" (6.15 mean rating by all students, versus 6.44 mean rating by the European students). Some students remarked that their teachers did not provide enough time and guidance to them as foreign students. Some remarked that their teachers at home were far more demanding than American teachers. Some of these foreign students struggled in class here, and they had never had such an experience during their previous history. (On their report cards, students mostly had A's and B's, but some obtained C's evidently for the first time in their lives.) However, others remarked that they had the best teachers here, since the teachers were creative and employed teaching strategies that they had never observed in their home country school.

7 Further Comments from Students

Other prominent differences between U.S. and foreign country schools were indicated by the students' comments. The most frequent comment made by students on their surveys was that they appreciated the electives and wide range of choices in American schools, as evidenced by a comment by one student, "I love having choices." Most reported in their home country schools everyone followed the same sequence of classes. In the U.S., they selected many subjects they never dreamed they would enjoy. For example, a student from the Middle East discovered her talent in drawing, and in photography. Numerous students remarked that they were able to enroll in subjects that they thought they might follow as a career with some deciding to change career goals based upon their American experience.

The major obstacle to students for full enjoyment of their American education was the lack of friends. Some made friends easier than others, and some even commented that in June they downgraded their

American school based upon the lack of friendships.

A number of students criticized the behavior of American students. They felt that many students disrupted the classrooms, did not complete their work, and they did not value the education they were receiving. One student from the Middle East remarked, "It is as if the teacher has to beg some students to pay attention," while another emphasized, "Our students have a better attitude towards their education than in the U.S."

8 Conclusions and Recommendations for American Education

What can we conclude as a result of these surveys? We have cause for celebrating the uniqueness and strengths of American education! Even given our larger class sizes, loss of friends, the integration of special needs' students, and concerns about the quality of instruction, these students, after one year, rated our schools better than theirs, especially the European students. That is an amazing endorsement! Our American educational system is truly unique, and it is noteworthy these students recognize the merit of our system after one year's attendance.

Why such positive ratings? The students from all the countries valued the choices within American high schools. They also rated our teachers as very caring. And, they provided this rating within American schools that did not have exclusion policies, which meant they interacted with a different range of students than in their home countries. These conclusions also match well with the unique American focus on the whole child, which is also promoted by the U.S. Department of Education.

What else can we conclude? The results indicate the necessity of our continued focus on improving instruction and the demand for quality work from all students. Could it be that the uniqueness of our system, with a wider range of students within our large classrooms, has led to a less demanding environment? It could be so. The ratings by students, less homework, and the comments of students indicate the need for further research about foreign students' impressions, and our ongoing efforts to improve instruction and lower class size.

Some of the information gathered causes me great worry. Do we ever want to exclude students from our public schools in order to develop an educational model similar to Europe? Do we want to abandon integrating our diverse student population, including special education and ELL students, to develop an assessment system that is utilized to exclude students? Do we want to homogenize our schools by offering fewer choices to provide just the basics to raise test scores? As American educators, we have already said "no" in answer to these questions. The students who participated in both systems seem to be saying "no" as well.

Two students stated it well. One from Norway remarked, "I think we should combine the best of my home country system with the best in U.S. system." While a German student noted, "In America, all students have a chance."

References

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