**We Should Cherish Our Children's Freedom to Think**

Kie Ho

*Kie Ho, who grew up in Indonesia and is now a Southern California business executive, argues in the following article that the educational system in the United States is the best in the world because it teaches students to think and to experiment with ideas. The author criticizes educational systems that rely solely on memorization and rote learning, because those methods stifle creative impulses. As you rend the article, compare or contrast the educational system of your country with that of the United States.*

Americans who remember “the good old days” are not alone in complaining about the educational system in this country. Immigrants, too, complain, and with more up-to-date comparisons. Lately I have heard a Polish refugee express dismay that his daughter's high school has not taught her the difference between Belgrade and Prague. A German friend was furious when he learned that the mathematics test given to his son on his first day as a freshman included multiplication and division. A Lebanese boasts that the average high-school graduate in his homeland can speak fluently in Arabic, French and English. Japanese businessmen in Los Angeles sent their children to private schools staffed by teachers imported from Japan to learn mathematics at Japanese levels, generally considered at least a year more advanced than the level here.

But I wonder, if American education is so tragically inferior, why is it that this is still the country of innovation?

I think I found the answer on an excursion to the Laguna beach Museum of Art, where the work of school children was on exhibit. Equipped only with colorful yarns, foil paper, felt pens and crayons, they had transformed simple paper lunch bags into, among other things, a waterfall with flying fish, Broom Hilda the witch and a house with a woman in a skimpy bikini hiding behind a swinging door. Their public school had provided these children with opportunities and directions to fulfill their creativity, something that people tend to dismiss or take for granted.

When I was 12 in Indonesia, where education followed the Dutch system, I had to memorize the names of all the world’s major cities, from Kabul to Karachi. At the same age, my son, who was brought up a Californian, thought that Buenos Aires was Spanish for good food—a plate of tacos and burritos, perhaps. However, unlike his counterparts in Asia and Europe, my son had studied creative geography. When he was only 6, he drew a map of the route that he traveled to get to school, including the streets and their names, the buildings and traffic signs and the houses that he passed.

Disgruntled American parents forget that in this country their children are able to experiment freely with ideas; without this they will not really be able to think or to believe in themselves.

In my high school years, we were models of dedication and obedience; we sat to listen, to answer only when asked, and to give the only correct answer. Even when studying word forms, there were no alternatives. In similes, pretty lips were always as red as sliced pomegranates, and beautiful eyebrows were always like a parade of black clouds. Like children in many other countries in the world, I simply did not have a chance to choose, to make decisions. My son, on the contrary, told me that he got a good laugh—and an A—from his teacher for concocting “the man was as nervous as Richard Pryor at a Ku Klux Klan convention.”

There’s no doubt that American education does not meet high standards in such basic skills as mathematics and language. And we realize that our youngsters are ignorant of Latin, put Mussolini in the same category as Dostoevski, cannot recite the periodic Table by heart. Would we, however, prefer to stuff the developing little heads of our children with hundreds of geometry problems, the names of rivers in Brazil and 50 lines from “The Canterbury Tales”? Do we really want to retard their impulses, frustrate their opportunities for self expression?

When I was 8, I had to memorize Hamlet's “To be or not to be” soliloquy flawlessly. In his English class, my son was assigned to write a love letter to Juliet, either in Shakespearean jargon or in modern lingo. (He picked the latter, his Romeo would take Juliet to an arcade for a game of Donkey Kong.)

Where else but in America can a history student take the role of Lyndon Johnson in an open debate against another student playing HoChi Minh? It is unthinkable that a youngster in Japan would dare to do the same regarding the role of Hirohito in World War II.

Critics of American education cannot grasp one thing, something that they don't truly understand because they are never deprived of it: freedom.

This most important measurement has been omitted in the studies of the quality of education in this century, the only one, I think, that extends even to children the license to freely speak, write and be creative. Our public education certainly is not perfect, but it is a great deal better than any other.

**Comprehension Questions**

1. What are some of the complaints of immigrants about the educational system in the Unites States? What do parents want their children to learn?

2. What kinds of innovation did the author observe on a visit to an art museum? Why were the exhibits important?

3. What educational techniques were stressed in Indonesia? How did they differ from American educational methods?

4. What happens to children who are not able to experiment freely with ideas? How important is choice in the educational system?

5. The author concedes that “American education does not meet high standards in such basic skills as mathematics and language,” but states that “it is a great deal better than any other” How can you explain this?

**Topics for Critical Analysis, Discussion, and Writing**

1. How well-qualified is the author to evaluate the educational system of the United States in relation to those of other countries?

2. Identify the four points of argument in the article. Are any of them combined? What is the result?

3. Discuss the evidence (the visit to the museum, the author's own and his son's childhood experiences, examples from literature and other cultures) given in support of the thesis. What do they suggest about the author?.

4. Argue for or against the following statement:

**The American educational system is better than any other for preparing students to enter colleges and universities.**

Make up a study sheet comparing and contrasting the American system with your own. Based on your findings, take a position and defend your thesis.

5. A critical thinker is able to see an individual problem within a broader context. Does Ho do this? Explain.,

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