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NEWSLETTER

Where is High-Stakes Testing Taking Us?

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By Robert Sun

High-stakes assessment testing, over time, may produce higher test scores. But does it produce better educated students? The kind that can ensure a stronger, more competitive and enlightened society?

No one denies that as a country, we need high-quality subject-matter education. Yet when we institute unilateral standards of measurement—even those that are well intentioned—as our primary national measure of efficacy, we undermine the inquisitiveness, critical thinking and natural curiosity about the world that also make a country "advanced."

Infants are born with an almost insatiable hunger for learning. They burn with it, amply and naturally equipped with curiosity, playfulness, and sociability. Their first years are spent absorbing everything around them: facial cues, sensory experiences, and the nature of cause and effect. Soon they acquire and sharpen their motor skills, begin walking, and move on to dozens of new and exciting lessons every day—lessons powered by their own love of learning.

Once children enter their school years, however, much of the natural appeal of learning is dampened. Teachers do their best to make the school day stimulating. But the process is compromised when much of the interaction is one way: teachers teach, and students receive at their desks. The resulting dynamic is like trying to run a race on one leg; the power to self-direct one's acquisition of knowledge is stifled. Without active nurturing, it is at risk of being lost altogether.

High-stakes testing only reinforces this unfortunate situation. When schools and teachers are judged primarily on how well students do on a written test, other worthy goals do not receive the attention they deserve. The end dictates the means, and classrooms become places pre-occupied with creating high performers, not well-rounded, well-educated young people.

Look at where a reliance on high-stakes testing has gotten other countries. China, India and South Korea are three countries that routinely rank high in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study, a project of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. China in particular, specifically children in Shanghai and Hong Kong, are often at or near the top in PISA rankings. (The U.S., by contrast, ranked 36 out of 65 countries in mathematics proficiency in the most recent PISA report.)

Students in China, India, and South Korea emerge with an enviable degree of academic focus and rigor. They also tend to exhibit a narrow range of skills that currently do not even match the needs of their national economies.

Unemployment among Chinese graduates six months after leaving college is currently around 15% (some Chinese researchers estimate twice that number) despite the fact that a record 7.26 million young people will graduate from the country's many universities this year—a number seven times greater than just 15 years ago.

At the same time, according to the Nikkei Asian Review, an acute shortage of factory workers throughout China is prompting managers to hire students from technical schools as apprentices. Yukon Huang, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, reports that China's non-graduate unemployment is as low as 4%, causing graduates to consider blue-collar jobs despite their college degrees. India is facing similar problems. One in three

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Indian college graduates under the age of 29 is unemployed, according to a November 2013 report issued by the Indian Labour Ministry. Experts report that skill development programs and college education are not compatible with the needs in the manufacturing and service sectors.

Meanwhile, ICEF Monitor, a marketing intelligence provider for the international education industry, reported that South Korea's emphasis on academics is beginning to have diminished returns. Despite education spending that is significantly above the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) average as a percentage of GDP, South Korea's rate of graduate employment among university-educated 25- to 34-year-olds is just 75%, ranking it among the lowest in OECD countries, and well below the average of 82%.

These three societies also rank low on markers for innovation, creativity and independent thought. Among the top 10 economies in the Global Innovation Index (GII), the annual innovation ranking co-published by Cornell University INSEAD and World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), a UN agency, only two are Asian (Singapore at #7 and Hong Kong at #10). Notably, the top five positions are all held by European countries, followed by the U.S. in sixth place. China, on the other hand, is ranked 29th, and India is far down the list at #76.

In the next global economy, countries that foster an educational culture balanced between "hard" and "soft" intellectual skills will win out over those that put their scholastic eggs in one basket. To do this, our schools must give children the chance to explore, imagine, and discover—even re-discover—the innate rewards of learning.

As someone who has spent decades in the pursuit of mathematics proficiency among America's children, I believe that academics are essential to lifetime success. However, we must realize that highstakes academic testing can have a significant, even debilitating, down-side. Finland, a country respected for its academic excellence, believes in a child's holistic development. In fact the Finnish national curriculum dictates that public schools must have a balanced program including art, music, crafts, and physical education—plus sufficient time for self-directed activities.

For America to truly succeed in educating its students for the future, high-stakes testing isn't the magical solution. Global competitiveness is important—but it won't come through a nationalized, computerscored exam.

We cannot be so obsessed with weighing our children that we forget to feed them.

A far more worthy goal would be to create a system wherein the whole individual is addressed, developed, and encouraged to thrive in the pursuit of a better life. Reinforcing the love of learning as well as academics, achieves far more than great assessment scores. Our students—and our whole nation—will be the better for it.

Robert Sun is CEO of Suntex International, and inventor of First In Math, an online program designed for energizing every child to learn, love and live mathematics.