

World View

We All Have a Lot to Learn

BY FAREED ZAKARIA

1 Last week India was hit by a terror attack that unsettled the country. A gunman entered the main conference hall of the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, tossed four grenades into the audience and, when the explosives failed, fired his AK-47 at the crowd. One man, a retired professor of mathematics from one of the Indian Institutes of Technology, was killed. What has worried some about this attack is not its scope or planning or effect — all unimpressive — but 25. The terrorists went after what is increasingly seen as India's core strategic asset for the 21st century: its scientific and technological brain trust. If that becomes insecure, what will become of India's future?

2 This small event says a lot about global competition. Travelling around Asia for most of the past month, I have been struck by the relentless focus on education. It makes sense. Many of these countries have no natural resources, other than their people; making them smarter is the only path for development. China, as always, appears to be moving fastest. When officials there talk about their plans for future growth, they point out that they have increased spending on colleges and universities *almost tenfold* in the past 10 years. Yale's president, Richard Levin, notes that Peking University's



two state-of-the-art semiconductor fabrication lines — each employing a different technology — outshine anything in the United States. East Asian countries top virtually every global ranking of students in science and mathematics.

American kids do better in the real world. Why?

3 But one thing puzzles me about these oft-made comparisons. I talked to Tharman Shanmugaratnam to understand it better. He's the minister of Education of Singapore, the country that is No. 1 in the global science and math rankings for schoolchildren. I asked the minister how to explain the fact that even though Singapore's students do so brilliantly on these tests, when you look at these same students 10 or 20 years later, few of them are worldbeaters anymore. Singapore has few truly top-ranked scientists, entrepreneurs, inventors, business executives or academics.

American kids, by contrast, test much worse in the fourth and eighth grades but seem to do better later in life and in the real world. Why?

4 “We both have meritocracies,” Shanmugaratnam said. “Yours is a talent meritocracy, ours is an exam meritocracy. There are some parts of the intellect that we are not able to test well — like creativity, curiosity, a sense of adventure, ambition. Most of all, America has a culture of learning that challenges conventional wisdom, even if it means challenging authority. These are the areas where Singapore must learn from America.”

5 Shanmugaratnam also pointed out that American universities are unrivaled globally — and are getting better. “You have created a public-private partnership in tertiary education that is amazingly successful. The government provides massive funding, and private and public colleges compete, raising everyone’s standards.” Shanmugaratnam highlighted in particular the role that American foundations play. “Someone in society has to be focused on the long term, on maintaining excellence, on raising quality. You have this array of foundations — in fact, a whole tradition of civic-minded volunteerism — that fulfills this role. For example, you could not imagine American advances in biomedical sciences without the Howard Hughes Foundation.”

6 Singapore is now emphasizing factors other than raw testing skills when selecting its top students. But cultures are hard to change.

A Singaporean friend recently brought his children back from America and put them in his country’s much-heralded schools. He described the difference. “In the American school, when my son would speak up, he was applauded and encouraged. In Singapore, he’s seen as pushy and weird. The culture of making learning something to love and engage in with gusto is totally absent. Here it is a chore. Work hard, memorize and test well.” He took his children out of the Singapore state school and put them into a private, Western-style one.

7 Despite all the praise Shanmugaratnam showered on the States, he said that the U.S. educational system “as a whole has failed.” “Unless you are comfortably middle class or richer,” he explained, “you get an education that is truly second-rate by any standards. Apart from issues of fairness, what this means is that you never really access the talent of poor, bright kids. They don’t go to good schools and, because of teaching methods that focus on bringing everyone along, the bright ones are never pushed. In Singapore we get the poor kid who is very bright and very hungry, and that’s crucial to our success.”

8 “From where I sit, it’s not a flat world,” Shanmugaratnam concluded. “It’s one of peaks and valleys. The good news for America is that the peaks are getting higher. But the valleys are getting deeper, and many of them are also in the United States.”

Newsweek