Educational systems around the world are as diverse as the students that fill their classroom seats. The United States has traditionally invested many of its resources into their educational system trying to prove itself as one of the world’s foremost leaders in education. Other countries, specifically Australia and Slovakia, are doing their part to try to gain on the traditional powerhouses in education and prove their worth in the global market. This comparative study will examine these three countries in the following categories: state support for education; curriculum; standard forms of instruction; and finally the aims of the educational system. Through an examination of primary, secondary and tertiary education, I will try to determine the similarities and differences of the educational systems of these three countries.

Each of these three countries have very different economic systems and an equally different view on the amount of money that should be spent on education. As mentioned earlier, the United States, as powerful as we claim to be, is trying to do what they can to prove that we have the strongest education system. According to 2007 data, the United States spent nearly 23% of its annual GDP ($14.62 trillion) towards education. If we look even closer, we can see that there was a strong emphasis placed on the primary (22% of the GDP), and secondary (24.2% of the GDP) age groups (Global Education Database, n.d.). Using the literacy rate as a basis to determine which countries are proving to be leaders and which are not, the United States sits near the top at roughly 99% (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011). We can make a correlation between the distribution of funds going to primary and secondary schools, to the high literacy rate the United States achieves. Globally, the United States spent nearly 28% of the world’s spending for both primary and secondary education. The United States and parts of Western Europe account for 61% of the world’s spending in terms of tertiary education (Pritchard, n.d.) This commitment and distribution of funds shows how important the United States values its educational system and how much the government is willing to provide to continue to ensure students success.

Australia and Slovakia are slightly different in how much help they receive from the state governments. Australia has an annual GDP of $889.6 billion, of which 4.7% is devoted towards education. Primary education receives 33.8%, Secondary 39% and Tertiary 23.8% of the annual GDP (Global Education Database, n.d.). Australia’s literacy rate is 99%, which is very strong given the high number of aborigines who do not receive the quality education that most modernized city dwellers do (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011). Slovakia is in a similar situation as Australia with its government economic assistance. Slovakia has an annual GDP of $121.3 billion, of which 3.6% is devoted towards education. In Slovakia, primary education receives 18.6%, secondary receives 47.1% and tertiary education receives 21.1% of the annual GDP (Global Education Database, n.d.). Slovakia, despite its small assistance from the government, has a very high literacy rate in the global context. The country’s 99.6% literacy rate ranks amongst the top ten in the world in total literacy (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011). This information shows that despite the disparity in economic and state assistance, all three countries are excelling in education.

While state support and economics have a very substantial say in how well a countries education system will perform, it is the curriculum that will ultimately decide how successful students will be. The United States entrusts the curriculum to the governments of each state. According to the U.S. Department of Education, “all states and schools will have challenging and clear standards of achievement and accountability for all children, and effective strategies for reaching those standards.” (EducationWorld, 2011). Every state has a clearly defined curriculum that highlights the knowledge and skills each student should receive from primary though secondary schooling. It is the goal of each state curriculum to prepare students to be able to graduate and enter tertiary education or workforce training programs (EducationWorld, 2011). The U.S. Department of Education outlines six criteria that each state must follow in creating their curriculum standards. These standards: should be aligned with college and work expectations; be clear, understandable and consistent; include rigorous content and the application of knowledge though the use of high order thinking skills; build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards; be evidenced based; and be able to be informed by other top performing countries so that students will be able to succeed in a global market place (EducationWorld, 2011). This freedom of curriculum is carefully monitored however with programs such as The No Child Left Behind Act, and other legislation, that aims to make sure all students, regardless of ability, receive a fair and equitable education.

Similar to the United States, Australia has enabled its states and territories to construct their own curriculum standards. The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (2008), was developed to emphasize the importance of knowledge, understanding and skills of learning areas, general capabilities and cross curriculum priorities as the basis for a curriculum designed to support 21st century learning (Australian Curriculum, n.d.). Of the interesting aspects of the Australian curriculum, as laid out by the Melbourne Declaration, is that they make it a point of saying that they understand the “needs and interest of students will vary” (Australian Curriculum, n.d.). It is the responsibility of the teachers and the state standards to change with their students varying interests to ensure that they are being challenged and continually shaping their lives for the future. The Australian government, with the creation of the Melbourne Declaration, plans to incorporate all of their standards in every aspect of the curriculum. Initially, the achievement standards targeted English, math, science, history and a dozen or so more subjects that will be included in the near future. Each of these subjects need to include eight achievement standards: a statement of rationale and a set of aims; an overview of how the learning is organized; year level descriptions; content descriptions; content elaborations to provide clarity; achievement standards; student work samples that demonstrate mastery of the achievement standards; and a glossary of misunderstood terms (Australian Curriculum, n.d.). Compared to the United States, Australia’s curriculum is almost identical. Both countries strive to prepare their students to become global citizens but allow the curriculum decisions to be handled by the smaller, more specific state governments. There are national standards both countries try to uphold, however, their success comes from the focused, state and district specific content that provides students the best opportunities to succeed.

Most of the schools in Slovakia are run by state funds that are allocated based on enrollment. In primary schools, students go through two stages of education. Stage one is for students ages 6 – 10, and stage two for children aged 10 – 15. In stage one, students have one teacher all day and receive instruction in Slovak language, mathematics, science, homeland studies, religion or ethics, music, drawing and physical education (Slovakia Site, 2011). The students test out of this stage by passing oral and/or written exams. Stage 2 is very similar; however, more specific subjects in sciences and foreign language are introduced. Upon passing an entrance exam, students then continue on to one of four varieties of secondary schools: traditional secondary; vocational secondary; conservatories; and specialized secondary schools (Slovak Site, 2011). Students are presented with different curriculum depending on what specialty they choose to pursue. For instance, conservatories are designed for students who are interested in the arts, whereas a vocational secondary education is the path for students who wish to enter the manual or practical occupations (Slovak Site, 2011). Finally, the curriculum in Slovakia’s tertiary education is based solely on the students’ interest, similar to that of the United States and Australia. Students must pass their secondary exams as well as an entrance exam for the institution of their choice.

Teaching is a profession where one’s individual style is truly reflective in how students learn. We can all remember our favorite teacher from our school days more than likely because of ‘how’ they taught us. Looking at these three countries, one can find very similar approaches to how teachers dispense information to their students in all levels of education. Primary education students in these three countries are commonly taught using three basic instructional techniques. Kinesthetic, small group or supported instruction and shortened lessons (Math and Reading Help, 2011). The research has found that students at this young age learn best when they are active in their learning. Adolescents are less likely to remember material simply explained to them (Math and Reading Help, 2011). When they have the ability to get up and move around, learning hands on, the information is more likely to resonate with the students. This same approach is used when teaching students in a small or supported instructional group. Students, at any level, find it more difficult to learn when they are simply viewed as a number. In primary school, where it is essential to make sure our students master the basic skills they will need at the next level, small or supported instruction enables the teacher to focus in on students needs and provide the assistance they require. Primary teachers need to create shorter lessons, since students attention spans are far less than those at the secondary level, and practice modeling these lessons repeatedly until the students achieve mastery. The students should then receive guided practice with these new concepts and end the instruction by independent practice (Math and Reading Help, 2011). This process helps to ensure students not only learn the material, but also remember and apply it to their previous knowledge.

At the secondary level, students become more self aware and cognizant of their specific learning style. The modes of instruction however, are once again very similar amongst these three countries. Secondary teachers will traditionally use a variety of teaching methods such as direct instruction, cooperative learning, discussion, films and web based learning and independent inquiry. These approaches to teaching are more effective in secondary schools since students are more independent and do not need to rely on repetition and rote memorization (Adprima, 2011). In some vocational secondary schools, again found in all three countries, teachers use more of a kinesthetic approach to teaching since these students are concentrating more on arts and trade professions. In tertiary education, all three countries lend themselves to using a model of direct instruction, lecture and some cooperative learning. At this level, students are expected to be independent enough where they can take notes, read articles and text and complete assignments on their own and without much guidance from instructors. This is ideally the final stage before students enter the real world where it is expected that they can solve problems and reach conclusions independently.

The final component of this analysis rests in the aims, or goals, of these three countries educational systems. The United States, as outlined by President Obama and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, plans to invest a lot in education to both provide jobs now and to lay the foundation for long-term prosperity (Whitehouse.gov, 2011). A considerable amount of money has been invested in such early education programs as Head Start, Early Head Start and childcare (Whitehouse.gov, 2011). An even more substantial amount of money has been set aside to improve our primary and secondary educational systems. The money invested will go towards improving teachers’ effectiveness, progressing towards college and career ready standards, achieving improvements in low performing schools and gathering information to improve student learning, teacher performance and college readiness (Whitehouse.gov, 2011). The United States realizes that in order for our country to be successful, our schools and students need to be successful. Given the recent economical events worldwide, education in our country will prove to be of the utmost importance if we wish to contend with the global leaders. Providing every child with an education, predicated on knowledge and innovation, will enable them to succeed in a global economy (Whitehouse.gov, 2011).

Australia recently revamped their educational goals to try to improve student learning and give them a competitive edge in the global marketplace. The Melbourne Declaration set out two specific educational goals for primary and secondary education for the next ten years (DET Education, 2007). Goal one states that Australian schooling will promote equity and excellence. Goal two established that all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens (DET Education, 2007). This declaration will be accompanied by a four year action plan that will detail how each local government will work together to achieve the national goals (DET Education, 2007). Australia sees itself as a country on the rise, and with economic and political backing, can now work towards their goal of a rigorous education for all of its students. They, similar to the United States, see education as an essential element to economic success.

Finally, Slovakia has also outlined very specific goals for their educational systems that they hope will continue to prove the value and importance they place on education. The Slovakian government considers instruction and education as key factors to further development and a decisive precondition to its successful adaptation with the rest of Europe (Government Office of the Slovak Republic, 2009). Seeing as how Slovakia has only been an independent country for 18 years, many would not be surprised if they had a failing education system. However, from the outset, Slovakia has been determined to prove, that through education, they could be a strong, independent nation of Europe. The scope of the educational goals for Slovakia can be found in the right to receive a high quality education where schools provide an atmosphere of independence, creativity, and modern methods of instruction (Government Office of the Slovak Republic, 2009). With a literacy rate in the top ten worldwide, Slovakia is definitely proving their commitment to education and the success of their vision.

In conclusion, it is easy to see that these three countries, while geographically and politically separate, share similar educational values and beliefs. All three realize that the only way to keep pace in the fast changing, ultra-competitive global marketplace, is to establish a strong educational system that has a clear vision based on student success. While the approaches they take and the support they receive to achieve this level of success may be different, they all understand and are working towards the same vision of educational achievement.

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