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Watch that education gap disappear

Americans tend to bemoan the sorry state of their public schools (as, in many instances, they should). Canadians tend to celebrate it. Reasonably enough, we feel better believing our schools are superior (as, in many instances, they are). In fact, though, American schools are not quite as bad as we think, and Canadian schools are not quite as good. Thesis: Adjusted for demographic differences, American schools – K through 12 – do as good a job as Canadian schools at teaching reading, math and science.

For proof, look to the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) – the very evidence cited by Canadians to prove our students are better educated than American students. And, to a degree, rightly so: In its most recent survey of 65 countries and economies, PISA consistently accords higher scores to Canada than to the United States in the reading, math and science skills of 15-year-old students.

This global report card places Canada fifth in reading, the U.S. 16th; Canada ninth in math, the U.S. 29th; and Canada seventh in science, the U.S. 21st. In a comprehensive scoring of reading skills, it gives Canada 524 points (against a perfect 1,000) and the U.S. 500 points. Yet, with those 500 points, the U.S. finished above the average score (493) of the OECD's 34 mostly wealthy countries, marginally behind Switzerland (501) and Norway (503) but marginally ahead of Germany (497), France (496) and Britain (494). Still, the 24-point difference between Canada and the U.S. was enough to place Canada third overall, the U.S. 17th.

This gap disappears entirely, however, when the scores are adjusted for demographic differences between the two countries. As it happens, white American students scored 525, one point higher than Canadian students. Asian-American students scored 541. But black American students scored 466, and Hispanic students 466. These scores reflect (among many other intractable causes) a widespread and lamentable indifference to formal education in the two most significant American subcultures. Blacks make up 12 per cent of the U.S. population, Hispanics 15 per cent. Asians make up only 5 per cent.

Officially, Canada doesn't count people in this way. We count "visible minorities." But our visible minorities are much different than American visible minorities. In this country, blacks account for only 2.5 per cent of the population and aboriginals 4.5 per cent (combined, 7 per cent). Asian Canadians account for 11 per cent. Thus, one high-score demographic more than cancels out one low-score demographic in Canada. New Zealand (PISA score: 521) and Australia (515) are two other mostly white English-speaking countries with essentially identical PISA scores as Canada.

The National Center for Education Statistics, a branch of the U.S. Department of Education, possesses a congressional mandate "to collect, analyze and report full and complete statistics on

the condition of education in the U.S.” In its report of the PISA survey, NCES notes the demographic implications of the U.S. score in straightforward terms: White students and Asian students outscored the OECD average as well as the U.S. average. Black students and Hispanic students underscored the OECD average as well as the U.S. average.

NCES calculated the racial/ethnic difference another way – comparing the difference in scores between mostly black schools (with a high percentage of students who qualified for free lunches) and mostly white schools (with a low percentage of students who qualified for free lunches). The scoring gap ranged from 444 at the free-lunch schools (80 points lower than Canada’s score) to 553 at the schools without free lunches (31 points higher than Canada’s score).

Writing on these issues the other day in *The Washington Post*, economics columnist Robert Samuelson cited Canada – “a country that is almost 85 per cent white” – as an example of the statistical significance of homogeneous populations. “The most pessimistic view of the [PISA] study is that, on average, American schools do as good a job as schools in other wealthy nations” – when educating similar students. On this basis, it’s probable that most U.S. students are doing slightly better than most Canadian students.

Canadians reluctant to analyze the PISA results for demographic enlightenment should keep one other fact in mind: In Canada, most aboriginal youths who live on reserves never really finish high school, and many of them never really start.