Curriculum Matters

A wide-ranging forum for discussing school curriculum across the subject areas.

Math Across Cultures

The Erikson Institute staged its first-ever international symposium on math education recently. The event brought together speakers who discussed approaches to teaching early-grades math in a number of countries, including Singapore, Japan, Australia, and China. The event was part of Erikson’s Early Mathematics Education Project, which seeks to improve teaching of that subject in Chicago. You can see all of the speakers’ Power Points and presentations here.

The guests at the forum included Lyn English, a professor of mathematics education in the School of Mathematics, Science, and Technology Education at Queensland University of Technology in Australia. She’s also the founding editor of the international journal, Mathematical Thinking and Learning. She spoke about research on early math learning in her country.

Another presenter will be familiar to many readers: Liping Ma, who has compared the skills of elementary math teachers in China against those in the United States, and found the Americans lacking in certain skills. In a book she published about a decade ago, Knowing and Teaching Elementary Mathematics, Ma found that Chinese teachers were far more likely to have developed a “profound understanding of fundamental mathematics.”

I went to China two years ago and found some clear differences between how math is taught in that country and how it’s presented here. Chinese education officials, I should note, found a lot to like about the U.S. curriculum. There are also clear cultural differences in how Chinese students tend to regard math and science—and for that matter, how they think about teaching as a profession.

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