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Catching Up or Leading the Way: American Education in the Age of Globalization		
Author:	Yong Zhao (2009)	
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229 pages	9781416608738	\$26.95 USD



Yong Zhao argues in *Catching Up or Leading the Way* that more standardization, increased outcome-based accountability, and testing only a few subjects will not prepare American youth for success in an age of globalization. Zhao does, however, recognize the strengths of American education, and thus puts forth a vision for American schools to promote creativity, talent diversity, plus global and digital competencies. American schools should continue to lead the way, Zhao says, not play catch-up with other countries.

Zhao, who grew up in China but currently lives in the USA, grew more perplexed as he watched his own children attend US schools that became increasingly focused on test scores. Zhao decided to modify his publishing plans, scrapping an original prospectus to investigate China's educational system and instead wrote this book to warn about the damages of increased emphasis on high stakes testing. His goal: Change the current US education discourse.

The book's opening provides an historical account of reform efforts in the USA--a useful overview to help frame an understanding of current reform efforts (No Child Left Behind--NCLB). Subsequently, Zhao offers a glimpse into China's educational system and provides a productive overview of the dangers of centralization, standardization, and testing through a discussion of topics like American glorification of China's education system, the meaning

of a good education (i.e., high test scores do not equal high ability), the myth about there being more English speakers living in China than in the USA, and more.

Later, Zhao devotes a chapter to examples of globalization in occurrence right now and demonstrates why schools need to re-evaluate which skills are necessary for the 21st century. Examples of globalization include fragmentation of production (outsourcing, offshoring, job losses) and free movement of peoples (migration, cheap labor, national identity crisis), and such examples frame the challenges that face schools. He refers to what he calls “death of distance” -- the notion that employers can theoretically find the talent they need from anywhere around the globe by either moving a business to where talent is located, or directly moving the talent to wherever it’s needed. And that, Zhao argues, requires a “global competence” skill set that should be required knowledge in schools.

It should also be noted that Zhao’s treatment of his subject matter--his obvious passion for it--engages the reader. In particular, the Technology chapter, which describes the virtual world as a new world and outlines parallel schoolroom challenges, resonated best with my graduate students taking a course called Assessment and Evaluation of English Language Learners (where the book was required reading). In Technology, Zhao provides examples of virtual worlds in which people can interact, play, and conduct businesses--they can gold-farm, develop virtual property, play e-sports, Google, or update Facebook. He demonstrates how the rules of engagement, the indicators of danger and abuse, the tools used to participate and the consequences of our actions are different from those in the physical world. He questions whether our children are knowledgeable enough to fully participate in this virtual world.

Through feedback, my graduate students enjoyed Zhao’s style--his readability, his interesting facts in support of ideas, and his catchy headings such as *Japanese Toilet Cleaners and American English Teachers: Unique Talents, or Madonna and Soccer: More Customers, More Value. Catching Up or Leading the Way* is more than a criticism of the current NCLB educational reform movement. It’s a major contribution toward understanding the current educational reforms from a global and historical perspective that provides needed insight into the skills and knowledge critical in today’s changing world. It’s highly recommended reading for teachers, future teachers, policymakers, curriculum directors, and school administrators.

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