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Cross-national comparisons of mathematics curriculum materials: what might we learn?

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Summary: In most of the world, there is a broad public interest in cross-national comparisons. Despite the myriad difficulties inherent in such comparisons, and despite the fact that most studies explicitly acknowledge limited generalizability, news media representatives, policy makers, politicians and educators often take the findings at face value as providing solid scientific evidence of the achievement of students in the countries studied. This often leads in turn to superficial commentaries and unhelpful recommendations. Our task as scholars of mathematics education is to demonstrate the nuanced complexity of such comparisons. The papers in this issue of ZDM succeed in this regard. Using a range of scholarly perspectives (mathematical, psychological and socio-cultural), the authors offer many insightful observations regarding curriculum and curriculum materials in East Asian countries (especially China) and the USA, with careful attention to the central role of curriculum in the teaching and learning of mathematics in schools. In this commentary study I discuss a few of these insights and develop one illustrative example of how cross-national comparative analyses such as these could be used to sensibly inform policy discussions related to changes in mathematics curriculum, teaching, or teacher preparation.

Classification: D10 D30

Keywords: comparative studies; curriculum; China; USA

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