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ABSTRACT

The 1983 report "A Nation At Risk" catapulted teaching and learning issues to the forefront of public concern. However, In spite of the findings of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, U.S. students and college graduates continue to fare well when their knowledge is tested postgraduation, and there is no evidence of a direct economic impact of the purportedly declining standardized test scores for U.S. students and adults. Adult Americans continue to fare well when their scores on tests of literacy are matched against those of other industrialized countries. Minority populations continue to gain strength in standardized test scores on reading and mathematics. The paper reviews the research on education and the relationship between economics and education, and looks at several studies, including the International Adult Literacy Survey and a report by the Council of Economic Advisors (1998). The evidence shows that in regard to education, literacy, and economics, the United States never was a nation at risk. (Contains 6 tables and 49 references.) (SLD)

Never A Nation at Risk: Exorcising the Ghost of Education Past.

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Abstract

"Never a Nation at Risk: Exorcising the Ghost of Education Past."

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The 1983 report *A Nation At Risk* catapulted teaching and learning issues into the consciousness and educational foreground of every parent, teacher, administrator and legislator in America. There are many lessons learned from the hundreds of articles, books, and studies generated by the controversial work and methods of the Excellence Commission on Education.

However, in spite of the findings of the Excellence Commission, American students and college graduates continue to fare well when their knowledge is tested post-graduation, and is there is no evidence of a direct economic impact due to the purportedly declining standardized U.S student and adult test scores. Adult American's continue to fare well when their scores on tests of literacy are pitted against other industrialized nations. Demographically, the minority populations continue to gain strength in standardized test scores of reading, prose and mathematics.

This paper analyzes the research on education and the relationship between economics and education. This paper firmly establishes that in regards to education, literacy and economics, the United States was never a nation at risk.

Keywords: Literacy, standardized test, tacit knowledge, economics,

Introduction

> Our purpose has been to help define the problems afflicting American education and to provide solutions, not search for scapegoats. We addressed the main issues as we saw them, but have not attempted to treat the subordinate matters in any detail. We were forthright in our discussions and have been candid in our report regarding both the strengths and weaknesses of American education. (David Pierpoint Gardner's letter of transmittal to Terrel H. Bell, then Secretary of Education, on April 26, 1983, the preface to *A Nation at Risk*, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p.1).

The directions given to the National Commission on Excellence in Education rang out as clear as the clanging of an iron school bell. On August 26, 1981, the Excellence Commission as it was called, was directed to present a report on the quality of education in America to the Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell and to the American people by April of 1983. A select group of the brightest minds in America worked tirelessly for 20 months on a concise document that stated unequivocally;

> ...that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and as a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur: others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. (*Commission on Excellence*, 1983, p. 4).

The paper is well-written, but dark and dreary. The narrator seems embarrassed by the Commissions' findings, and the papers authors cannot repress the shock and disappointment implicit in the tone of this documents narrative. The Excellence Commission states that the data, including standardized test scores, indicated a failure of the educational system in America and revealed rampant illiteracy in American children and adults. The narrative is haunting, and the reader feels shadowed by a sinister, Dickensian figure of the ghost of Education Past, pointing a

cold and bony finger at the education system, *our* education system. The acrid stench of malaise, complacency and missed opportunity fills the surrounding room. A dark, shadowy figure demands that we read each painful page of the report, and through clenched jaws and jagged, rotten teeth the apparition whispers in our ear *"You and your system ...are a failure!*

How negative were the findings contained in the report and how thorough were the members of the Commission in their research? The Commission's research method seems straightforward: they held committee meetings, delegated responsibility to the members, performed countless open-forums, interviews, round-tables, and focus groups in the field, and then toured school and education-related facilities in large metropolitan cities like Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Denver, Houston, and the San Francisco Bay area. The list of participants includes hundreds of concerned teachers, administrators, and citizens. There is even a footnote that mentions one forum held in the Kentucky mountains concerning excellence in rural education. The list of participants of the hearing testimony is impressive and reads like a *Who's Who* of agriculture, astronomy, business, economics, education, industry, medicine, physics, politics, science and technology in the early 1980's. The list of invited participants attests to the Commission's keen eye for talent, and it includes the best persons of that era in many fields, all capable of innovation and seemingly willing and able to reinvent primary, secondary, post-secondary, and higher education if necessary.

The topics discussed in the 1983 Hearing Testimony would still be considered critical issues if presented at a staff meeting today: the courses and topics discussed included science, mathematics, technology education, language and literacy, teaching and teacher education, college admission and the transition to post-secondary education, education for a productive role in a productive society, and education for the gifted and talented. The conflicting

demands placed upon teachers and the schools (such as disintegrating family structure, one-parent families, school violence, etc.) are recognized and mentioned in the body of the report's narrative, but not addressed in the solutions posed by the Commission. The reader, eager to investigate these proceedings, will be dismayed to find that there are no credits, citations, dates, times, or annotations of significant activities or outcomes of the meetings mentioned in the text.

There are no bibliographic references for quotes, and there is no ownership of statements (in fact, many of the quotations in the body of the report are made by persons who remain anonymous because they are not listed in the membership of the commission nor listed as focus group participants). In spite of the aberrant structure of the report and unscholarly format used in presenting their research paper, the Commission was able to bullet 13 indicators that allegedly indicated a downturn in academic performance; specifically they noted the declining U. S. standardized test scores versus international scores, disparate gifted student ability on tests versus real academic achievement, functional literacy or illiteracy of young people and adults, declining College Board achievement test scores and Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) scores. The Commission substantiates these points by noting that "(the) ... educational dimensions of the risk...have been amply documented in testimony received by the Commission." (*Commission on Excellence*, 1983, p. 6). Further, an analyst not listed as a participant in the hearing testimony, Mr. Paul Copperman, is quoted as glumly stating that:

> Each generation of Americans has outstripped its parents in education, in literacy, and in economic attainment. For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents. (*Commission on Excellence*, 1983, p.6).

The narrative of the Commission's report then defines what is meant by excellence in education, the Commission's belief in the goal of creating a learning society, and their

belief in the public's support for education reform. Citing the 1982 Gallup Poll on *The Public's Attitudes Towards the Public Schools,* the Commission states that;

> They (the American public participating in the Gallup poll) even considered education more important than developing the best industrial system or the strongest military force, perhaps because they understood education is at the cornerstone of both. They also held that education is "extremely important" to one's future success, and that public education should be the top priority for additional Federal funds. Education occupied first place among 12 funding categories considered in the (Gallup) survey, above health care, welfare, and military defense, with 55 percent selecting public education as one of their first three choices. (*Commission on Excellence*, 1983, p.11).

The Commission concludes its report with praise for teachers and advice for students, emphasizing it's disdain for the lowly status of academics in America, particularly when compared to other industrialized nations, and the subsequent decline of America as a world leader. The report caused over sixty major papers and books to be published that either support or rebut the Commission's claims. The report is sometimes viewed as a call-to-arms for educators, but others cast the report as a clever political contrivance that put educational issues into the foreground of Washington bureaucrats.

The educator, prospective educator, administrator, or concerned parent pause after their reading of the report and pensively glance over their shoulder to reassure themselves that the acerbic spirit of the Excellence Commission is not present. The authors of this paper do not believe in ghosts; however, we evaluated the accuracy and precision of the Commission's bleak forecast regarding the state of literacy and the economy in America sixteen years after the Excellence Commission's paper. Is the ghost of education past an ethereal messenger who was capable of accurately depicting the failure of the U.S. economy? Was it just a bad dream, a bit of indigestible paper and ink that caused a national outbreak of pedagogical

dyspepsia, or is the educational system and its end product, a United States public school and college graduate, as intellectually impoverished as depicted in *A Nation At Risk*?

The Question of Literacy and Knowing in America.

> An outstanding personality can still triumph over that blind antipathy to virtue which is a defect of all states, small and great alike. In the past, however, the road to memorable achievement was not so uphill or so beset with obstacles that the task of recording it failed to attract men of genius. There was no question of partiality or self-seeking. The consciousness of an honourable aim was reward enough. (Tacitus, Cornelius, *The Agricola*, A.D.98 in Handford, S. A., 1970, p. 51).

The presentation of new learning, or the review and restatement of existing knowledge assumes that the scientist has viewed all aspects of the project through the crystal clear lens of objectivity: to do any less does not honor a commitment to mankind or science.

The stated goal of the Excellence Commission was to evaluate the existing education system, and then proceed to set a new direction for a learning society. Terrel H. Bell (1993) who was the Secretary of Education in 1983, wrote (in a retrospective memoir) that the Commission's intent was to call attention to the erosion of students' family lives, and not to excoriate teachers. Bell noted that the Commission called for longer school days, more homework, and more days on the school calendar because they believed that reforms affecting only 6 hours of children's daily lives could not succeed. Bell and associates recommended that schools would have to "make parents and child daycare workers proficient at informal teaching" (p.593). The Commission believed that their recommendations would be heeded by the public, allowing parents and teachers to recreate an educational system that would eliminate illiteracy and improve the knowledge of all Americans. The well-meaning Excellence Committee failed to develop a working hypothesis, avoided a clear and concise research

question, and did not define the elusive goal of literacy or it's relationship to the standardized test scores. The Excellence Commission suggested that it had utilized technology, industrial, and monetary indicators to 'prove' that the United States was losing the educational and economic edge that it had historically maintained over the other industrialized nations. Implicit in the recommendations of the Excellence Commission was that there is a direct relationship between economics and educational achievement:

> The world is indeed one global village. We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products, but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. America's position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well trained men and women. It is no longer. (*The Commission on Excellence*, 1983, p. 2).

The final product of the Excellence Commissions' work, the oft-quoted paper *A Nation At Risk*, failed to define literacy nor did they identify literacy as a goal of the learning society. The literature suggests that literacy is more of a moving target, a dynamic and elusive goal that can be defined and achieved in many ways. The U. S. Congress incorporated a definition into the National Literacy Act of 1991, in which literacy was defined as "an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential " (*National Center for Educational Statistics* -1992 National Adult Literacy Survey Overview, p. 2).

The 1992 National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) National Adult Literacy Survey adopted the following similar definition of literacy: Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential. While literacy is not a single skill suited to all types of texts, nor is it a large number

of skills associated with a given type of text or document (*National Center for Educational Statistics* -1992 National Adult Literacy Survey Overview, p. 2). Cocks and associates (1996) note that the definition of literacy should include technological advances in communication:

> ...Being literate in contemporary society means being active, critical, and creative users of print and spoken language as well as the visual language of film and television, commercial and political advertising, photography and more. It also means being able to use an array of technologies to gather information and communicate with others (*Changing Notions of Literacy*, NCTE/IRA, 1996, slide 2).

The 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey evaluated "basic findings of literacy in the measuring of three scales; prose literacy, document literacy, and quantitative literacy, designed to capture an ordered set of information processing skills and strategies that adults use to accomplish a diverse range of literacy tasks" (*National Center for Educational Statistics* –1992, National Adult Literacy Survey Overview, p. 12).

The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) of 1995 went further to clarify literacy and to demonstrate stratification in three literacy levels. The adult sample population in 1995 was approximately 191,000,000 adults, a formidable cohort. The NALS literacy levels are important because "they are to be used by the National Governor's Association and the federal government to track the nation's progress on Education Goal Number 5, making all adults literate by the year 2000" (Nathan, J., The National Education Goals, in *Implementing the National Education Goals*, 1990, p. 30).

The definition of literacy was broken down into 5 levels of categories of proficiency-based scores on the NALS: Level I (scale scores from 0 to 225), Level 2 (scale scores from 226 to 275), Level 3 (scale scores from 276 to 325), Level 4 (scale scores 326 to 375), and Level 5 (scale scores of 376 to 500). When a person scores 200 (averaged across the three literacy domains) and is assigned to one of the levels, Level 1, it means that the person has an 80%

probability of being able to perform the average tasks at that given Level 1. However, this same person would be expected to perform 30 percent of the tasks at Level 2, about 15 percent of the tasks at Level 3, 8 percent of the tasks at Level 4, and about 5 percent of the tasks at Level 5. Persons with skill levels below the difficulty level of an item may be able to perform the item correctly, though with a less than 80 percent probability of a correct response. This is critical, because it may explain why persons with tested skill levels of Level 1 (scale score of 0 to 225), when asked by the 1995 NALS authors 'How well can you read or write?', 66 to 75 percent rated themselves "well" or "very well" (*Adult Literacy in the United States*, 1995, pg. 117)..

When people are assigned to a lower skill level on the NALS, they are able to perform quite a few tasks at higher levels, many tasks at Level 5. The issue is not that they are incapable of performing tasks at higher levels; the probability of performing higher level tasks is less than 20%. By using the method of 'literacy levels' to categorize peoples' literacy skills, one may be led to conclude that people assigned to a given level of skill cannot perform the more demanding types of tasks found at higher levels of skill. Yet, the authors conclude, "that is incorrect and provides an inaccurate indication of the full range of people's literacy skills. Quite possibly, people's perceptions of their literacy ability may be more accurate than the impressions that might be created by the use of the five NALS literacy levels" (*Adult Literacy in the United States*, 1995, pg. 117).

The Excellence Commission also 'found' that over half the population of gifted students do not match their tested ability with comparable achievement in school (*Excellence Commission*, p. 3). Perhaps the least understood component of literacy is knowing, and what theory or definition of knowledge is correct. Michael Polanyi (1966) described the genesis of thought and the seeds of literacy when he noted the following:

> The combination of organismic and mechanical principles is replaced in the mental field by the combination of tacit comprehension with a set of fixed, logical operations. A child starts off with a scanty repertoire of innate mental connections and enriches them rapidly by using his powers of comprehension for establishing further fixed relations of experience. Piaget has described how a child's powers of reasoning are improved by developing increasingly stable rules of logical procedure. Stimulated by the interiorization of language, this development eventually produces the adult mind. I described in my last lecture the tacit process of comprehension by which we take in the meaning of a communication addressed to us; the process of education by which the human mind is brought into existence is a major exercise of these powers of understanding. (Polanyi, M., *The Tacit Dimension*, 1966, p. 45).

Polanyi's comment that "people know more than they can tell" (1966, p. 4) unravels the traditional thoughts and definitions of literacy, and questions the concept that literacy can effectively be compared, contrasted, measured or defined across cultures and between different groups of people. Steven Guthrie (1995) explored contextual literacy, examining tacit knowledge's role in leading and decision making during outdoor leadership activity. Tacit knowledge is a generally unarticulated, preconscious type of knowledge that forms a basis for human judgment and decision making. The author noted that tacit knowledge is acquired primarily through experience and practice, usually vicariously through observation of and working with mentors, experts, or teachers.

Simosko's statement that "many skills are picked up accidentally" (cited in Pogson and Tennant, 1995, p. 60), supports Guthrie's statement that tacit knowledge is "practical knowledge" usually taken-for-granted by the person who has it, but "observed and described by others as a skill (the ability to do something well), or perceptual ability, that is, gaining knowledge by the use of senses that is not obvious to an inexperienced person" (p.10). Andrew Brooks (1994) states that the importance of tacit knowledge in woods-craft is grossly under-estimated by participants in environmental experiences. Brooks believes that skilled

leaders of outdoor experiences can socialize the participants into the outdoor environment and help them interpret their roles in the cultural dimension of the ecological crisis. The author argues that traditional models of judgment and decision-making assume that experienced leaders recognize a problem and then think through sequential steps to arrive at an appropriate decision. Guthrie (1995) believes that many of these "decisions" of experienced leaders are not consciously made, "but result from preconscious processes or habits that arise from the leader having been in similar condition in a past situation" (p.12) . Guthrie and Brooks' work is in concord with Ehrlich and Soloway (1979), who posited that the "computer literacy advantage that experienced computer programmers have over novice programmers is tacit knowledge" (1995, cited in Tennant and Pogson, p. 60). Guthrie's work suggests that tacit knowledge plays a direct role in leadership and decision making. Andrew Brooks (1994), commenting on the "excessive faith in rationalism and progress" as one of many "environmentally toxic beliefs" that devalue tacit knowledge of the wilderness, found that these beliefs tend to suddenly erode when "one must depend on woods-craft and implicit knowing to survive in the wilderness" (p. 61).

Are people who survived for centuries in the South American rainforests 'literate' in the ways of survival? Guthrie (1995) scoffs at the concepts of literacy that are hallowed by academe when he questions, "When you are lost in the forest, is the person who can survive by woods-craft the most critically literate of the group?"(p. 12). Is the basis of leadership contextually defined by happenstance and the expectation that the leader will help members of the group survive? This concept of literacy is difficult to isolate, and more importantly, extremely difficult to define when contextual definitions are operative in different environments or situations. It is likely true that the 66-75% of persons who answered the question 'How well can you read or write?' and then answered 'Well' or 'Very Well' believe that they are literate

(*Adult Literacy In The United States*, 1995, p. 117) based upon their real world presentation of self in everyday life (Goffman, 1959) and their performances and success in the real world of work and social interaction: agriculture, business, labor, crafts, or other jobs. Real work demands *critical literacy* (Hull, 1986) and talents that are more telling than those pencil marks on paper that are scored as a standardized test. The demonstrable promise of the gifted person, therefore, may be confounding in the sense that the expression of their talent may supercede paper and pencil tests, and their gift may transcend traditional test measurement. To further complicate the matter, "gifted" students in school tend to be good at convergent thought, at learning what is already known, and at short-term accomplishment. Paradoxically, those whom we honor as adults are more likely to exhibit divergent thought, discovery, and long-term, profound achievements. If we take great pains to analyze who is gifted, and then provide enrichment programs that "...only reach the schoolhouse gifted, we may do little or nothing to enhance the accomplishments of our most talented adults" (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 210).

The Commissions' argument that "gifted students do not match their tested ability with comparable achievement in school" is answered by the statement 'Define the gift that you wished to measure'. In actuality, the person doing the analysis may not, in fact, know whether they are testing the gift of prose literacy, quantitative literacy, document literacy, or tacit knowing. These gifts, without question, may be hidden under a netting of 'intellectual camouflage' as they are functionally integrated and interactive, inseparable and linked, one between the other. The person's capability in a science or craft can avoid detection if the individual is never exposed to that science or craft; similarly, the researcher must ask the proper questions to judge knowledge. The members of the Excellence Commission, who viewed knowing and doing through a myopic, neo-analytical lens, failed to acknowledge

that the learner hungers for knowledge, and believes against all odds that it is possible to have a gift of knowing in ways other than that revealed through a score on a standardized test.

Exploring Standardized Test Scores and Literacy.

The *Second Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS) for 1994-1995 reviewed the literacy rates and the economic sequelae of those rates in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Sweden, French- and German- speaking Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This survey showed that low literacy skills are found in a significant proportion of the general adult population in all the countries surveyed (Table 1):

Table One appears
about here.

Approximately 25% of the adults in these countries fail to reach the 3rd of the five IALS levels of literal proficiency. Level 3 (similar or equal to the Level 3 of the NALS referenced earlier) is regarded by many experts as a minimum for coping with the complex demands of everyday life and work in countries such as those in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. While there was very little difference in the United States scores when compared to the world, the within-group disparity between "the Level 1 and Level 4/5 scores for American adults is indicative of a widening of the chasm between very high and very low scores" (*IALS*, 1994-1995, p.3).

In *Achievement in the United States: Progress since a Nation at Risk*, Pascal Forgione (1998) reviewed the progress of academic and demographic indicators highlighted by the Excellence Commission in 1983. He noted that the *dropout rate* has declined from 14

percent to 11 percent overall, and dropped from 18 percent to 13 percent for African-Americans.

The dropout rates remained at 17 percent for first-generation Hispanics, aged 16 to 24 years, who were born in the United States, and 44 percent for non-U.S. born Hispanic immigrants in that age group. In 1982, 51 percent of high school graduates *attended college*, compared to 65 percent in 1996. The *course-taking patterns* also increased; the average Carnegie units taken by high school graduates in 1982 was 2.6 in mathematics and 2.2 units in science, and 1994 graduates had taken 3.4 Carnegie units in mathematics and 3.0 units in science. Foreign language units rose 1.0 to 1.8, and coursework in advance placement (AP) courses, English and Social Studies also increased. The proportion of graduates completing a physics course rose from 14 percent in 1982 to 24 percent in 1994 (Forgione, 1996).

The report of the Council of Economic Advisers (1998) revealed that most students made modest gains in both reading and mathematics between 1986 and 1992 (Table 2):

Table 2 goes
about here.

Most importantly, the content of these reports graphically reveals that the schools were on an improvement track well *before* the Excellence Commission's publication. Further, the results reflect the hard work of students, parents, and teachers in their respective school districts and gives us little evidence that *A Nation At Risk* was contributory in any sense to the real day-to-day work of improving education.

Questioning the Answers.

> "Figures never lie, but liars always figure."
> *Author unknown.*

> "Evidence attracts misinterpretation;
> Misinterpretations attract advocates and scoundrels;
> Advocates and scoundrels attract the press and the multitudes,
> Who far prefer to be told tales than to look at the evidence.
> (*Berliner and Biddle's Evidence Maxim* in Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 172).

Weak curriculum and standardized test scores were issues targeted by the Excellence Commission, but schools, teachers and teacher training took the greatest amount of 'flak' in the narrative of the final report. The Commission said that the evidence indicated that teachers and teacher's training were partly responsible for the decline, noting that among other issues, "Too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students" (*The Excellence Commission*, 1983, p. 3). The sources of evidence for such statements (other than attribution that they were stated in an open forum) could not be found, nor were citations or transcripts available in any form from the Secretary of Education concerning the resources used to create the inferences made in *A Nation At Risk*.

Edirisooriya (1999) noted that the issues surrounding the development of poor policy may go beyond teacher training, and may be linked to inadequate technological training for educators and poor educational administration regarding its utilization and deployment in the modern classroom.

The depth and breadth of teacher training is challenged by the increased technological maturity and the skill and dexterity manifest in our children:

> Imagine a school with children who can read and write, but with teachers
> who cannot; and you have a metaphor of the information age in which we live.
> (Cochrane, P., 1995, cited in Edirisooriya, 1998, p. 271)

Peter Cochrane (1995) notes that a modern challenge to teachers is the level of sophistication of our children. "Our children are exhibiting tremendous willingness and ability to move into the new world of information; they do not present the problem, we do! The challenge has to be the rigid mind-set of the 'over thirty generation' who will have to be weaned off the motor car, physical travel the mass use of paper and dependence on ancient modes of working. In the remaining years of their life these people are likely to see more change for mankind than has been experienced in the previous 100 years. A major challenge will be the finessing of technology to make it wholly acceptable to the greater part of the population. This will require some adept engineering to create new interfaces that are humanised and present a natural mode of immersion for the vast majority of the human population. If it is to work, the technology has to be available and accessible to all people of all ages. This probably represents the major challenge and is a vital one if we are to succeed" (Cochrane, 1995, p.22).

In light of the many criticisms of the Commission, the problems facing persons who are training to be teachers are more convoluted and complex than they were in 1983, and the problems facing society are focused and magnified in the classrooms. Jonathan Kozol's (1991) disturbing *Savage Inequalities* looked at teacher frustration, parental despair, and the desperate financial inequality of urban schools as key characteristics impacting on student success.

Patricia McNeil (1994), Assistant Secretary for Vocational and Adult Education, called for school districts to "invest heavily in staff development" at her New American High School Conference (p. 3), but she failed to examine or offer discourse on why "the U.S. national average starting salary for elementary school teachers had risen only from $22,761 in 1972 to $22,830 in 1991, a one percent increase in 19 years" (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p.79). Sadly, the starting

teacher's yearly salary in 1998 (with a 10 month contract) in Texas, with no experience, was $21, 050.00.

The Center for Education Reform, in their restatement of *A Nation Still At Risk: An Education Manifesto* (1998), suggest that a widening chasm is being created between "good schools and bad schools" and that "poor and minority children go to worse schools, have less expected of them, and are taught by less knowledgeable teachers..." (p. 2). They go on to recommend subject-matter qualification for teachers, "private practice" teachers, competition and ingenuity in community education, other "non-certified innovative providers, and alternative certification" (p. 8). While we reject the spirit of their statements, we do agree that teacher training and preparation regarding multiculturalism may be one of the greatest challenges facing teachers-to-be and teachers that currently serve in our schools.

P'erez and associates (1997) feel that most teachers are ill prepared to approach the teaching of reading, writing, and thinking in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms and communities. P'erez suggests that teachers examine every instructional practice from the perspective of the culturally and linguistically diverse learner. They also assume a view of literacy acquisition that can be characterized as constructive within a sociocultural context.

Socioculturalism views the learner and learning as situated in a social plane where learning emerges within cultural practice. Students learn as they interact with and interpret their world within their culture and in their social group. "The student's environment and purpose provide the sociocultural context in which they construct or 'make meaning'" (P'erez, 1997, p. 257). George H. Wood (1992) investigated the impact of reports such as *A Nation At Risk* on teachers and reported:

> ...they (teachers)were tired of the endless stream of reports that not only ignored teachers inputs about schooling but called for reforms that

> were antiteacher, antistudent, and antidemocratic. They knew that children learn by doing, that schools should be child-centered , and that the ultimate aim of education is to develop citizens, not just workers. As one teacher put it, "The list of reforms was the most anti-student list we could imagine. More tests, more homework, more drill, more hours, more days. It's as if we are to just do more of what isn't working now. And the outcome of all this was to go back to the basics. Well, I've been teaching for sixteen years and I don't ever remember leaving the basics. What we feel these reforms really mean is to take control away from us and to turn the kids into little assembly line products...none of us thinking or engaging, just doing what we are told (Wood, G., 1992, *Schools That Work*, cited in deMarais, K.B., LeCompte, M.D., 1995, p. 295)

Teachers, then and today, ask for more innovative programs, more parental support and involvement, more staff development, larger classrooms and up-to-date technology and training. They never asked for the Excellence Commission, or the unfounded fear and suspicion that was stimulated by the findings of the Commission's paper and by other critics of public education within the popular media.

Few people involved in teaching and learning agreed with the fallacious ghost of education past. *The Manufactured Crisis* (Berliner & Biddle, 1995) presents a lucid and finely crafted argument that " simplistic analysis" (p.159), "the use, misuse, and abuse of evidence" (p. 158) and the "suppression of evidence" (p.165-167), particularly the Sandia Laboratories Report, limits the final work of the Excellence Commission to a well-meaning contrivance that launched real and imagined educational-system shortcomings into the hot, bright light of public inquiry.

Bracey (1994) noted that the media assumes that the education system has failed, although when compared to other social institutions, schools perform well. The Excellence Commission predicted a significant declination in future test scores because of the increasingly large population of test-takers, a dilutional contamination of the pool of qualified test-takers by poorly prepared candidates. Berliner and Biddle (1995) found that in spite of increasing

numbers of college graduates taking specialized placement tests, "there is evidence of rising scores on the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT), the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT), Graduate Record Exam (GRE), and Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT)" (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 159).

The issue of an increased number of test-takers is critical; if indeed, the applicant pool is larger than it was in the past, one would expect a new mix of candidates and a subsequent decline in the standardized test scores. In spite of this evidence, Berliner and Biddle note that most critics have continued to charge that "student achievement in American higher education has declined" (p. 39-41).

In the *1992 Fordham University Index of Social Health*, the data that related to the health and welfare of the American people was noted to be on the decline. In this instance, the improvement in "...the dropout rate actually served to raise the cumulative mean of the index" (*Institute for Innovation in Social Policy*, 1992, cited in Bracey, 1994, p. 4).

Bracey (1994) found that the media slips "facts" into the popular culture while it rejects outright any evidence that contradicts it. A "fact" that is often cited is that "one percent of American children perform as well as 50 percent of Japanese children" (p. 4). Bracey investigated and found that the data analysis in the paper responsible for the "fact" could not be reproduced, and that the 1992 International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) studies found that the upper 5 percent of virtually all countries are nearly identical. In some areas, "the American 95th percentile is higher than that of some countries whose average score is higher than those of U.S. kids" (LaPointe, et al, 1992a, 1992b, cited in Bracey, 1994, p. 4). Nonetheless, this " ...'fact' was frequently cited in the popular media, with contradictory work appearing only in the professional literature" (Bracey, 1994, p.4).

In Pascal Forgione's report, we found some of that data that represents the 'good news' of United States educational achievement that is so rarely published (Table 3).

Table 3 appears
about here

We analyzed the data and extrapolated an index of literacy in the selected countries, based upon the most up-to-date Central Intelligence Agency information on population (*CIA, World Factbook, 2000*). The United States had the highest number of persons scoring in the 3 (a 3 score is considered proficient on that survey) 4, or 5 range on the IALS, with a total of 165 million people, or slightly over 50 percent of the U.S. population, age 16 to 65, in those top three categories. This finding accounted for over 25 percent of all test-takers in the world on that particular survey (*Organization for Economic and Cooperation and Development, Canada*, cited in Forgione, 1998, Figure K).

Education and the Economy since 1980.

> "Each generation of Americans has outstripped its parents in education, in literacy, and in economic attainment. For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents."
> (Paul Copperman, *Commission on Excellence*, 1983, p.6).

The discussion on literacy and progress in the schools since 1980 underscores the importance of process improvement in our schools since *A Nation At Risk*. The indicators of the Excellence Commission report were arguably written to improve the knowledge base of our youth and enhance the literacy of a future generation. But is there evidence that the product of the education system in the United States is directly related to the economy? The IALS suggested that what is often not recognized is "the full range of benefits to be derived from a

literate population, for both the economy and for the society" (IALS, p. 7). The impact of people's levels of literary skill on their wages is greatest in the more open and flexible economy, such as that of Canada and the United States. The "wage penalty associated with low performance is large and demonstrable across all countries" (IALS, p. 8). While educational attainment is an important determinant for income, the IALS demonstrates that literacy proficiency has an independent and substantial effect on income in all countries. Even a relatively small increase in national productivity through improved literacy will have a relatively large impact on public revenues. For example, a 2 percent increase in wages and earnings from improvements in national literacy would provide approximately a "1.8 percent increase in revenue in a country that is dependent primarily on value-added tax" (IALS, p. 9). Low-skilled adults have a greater chance of being unemployed than those possessing higher literacy skills, "and this holds true in all the countries studied despite the differences in economic structures and the distribution of literacy skill" (IALS, p. 10).

Labor markets reward literacy skills in different ways. In the United States, for example, the net return (or benefit) of skill is large and of the same order as the return to formal educational qualifications. In the Netherlands and Sweden, in contrast, the rewards to both education and literacy skill are comparable to the effect of labor market experience. This rather paradoxical effect may be related to the fact that literacy skill is higher on average and more uniformly distributed in these populations so that "differences in skill are smaller and more difficult for employers to detect, evaluate and reward" (IALS, p. 11). Literacy is directly related to health, as most persons with higher skill maintain better health through their ability to understand and interpret health information. They more often exercise preventive health practices and more easily detect problems, so as to be treated earlier and make choices among

healthcare options. The IALS study argues that raising a country's overall level of literacy requires an interdisciplinary and cross-sectional approach to policy-making. Among factors determining literacy skills in all countries studied are "a person's socioeconomic background and personal/familial educational attainment" (IALS, p. 12). Bracey (1998) noted that, regardless of all of the standardized test information, "literacy and socioeconomic status act as delimiters when comparing stratification's in earnings and the ability of a person to get a high-paying job" (p. 7). The Ohio Literacy Resource Center, for example, noted that women are particularly smitten by the economics of literacy (OLRC, 1992, p.1):

- 75% of female heads of households with less than a high school diploma are living in poverty.
- Young women with incomes below poverty level are 5 ½ times more likely to become teen parents.
- Nearly 40% of female single parents and 35% of displaced homemakers have an eighth grade education or less.
- In 1986, the median income of females with less than an eighth grade education was $10,153.00. For males it was $14,485.00. In 1990, over 67.3% of working women without a high school education earned less than $12, 499.00 per year.
- Literacy levels of children are strongly linked to their parent's level of education.
- The greatest predictor of a child's future academic success is the literacy level of the child's mother.
- One-in-eight women workers has less than a high school education, including 50% of single mothers, 56% of displaced homemakers, 33% of Hispanic women, and 20% of African-American women.
- People with less than a high school education will be able to fill only 14% of the jobs of the future. (*The Economics of Literacy for Women*, 1992, p.1).

The report *Changing America: Indicators of Social and Economic Well Being by Race and Hispanic Origin* (1998) succinctly summarized the socioeconomic changes taking place during the last fifty years:

> The American record for the past 50 years has been of tremendous progress in such areas as education, health and longevity, and economic growth, but deterioration in others, such as incarceration rates, divorce, and the likelihood that a child is born outside of a marriage. Life expectancy at birth increased from 68 years to 76 years between 1950 and 1996, and the infant mortality rate has fallen from 29 per thousand live births to 7 over the same period. Per capita income, adjusted for inflation, has more than doubled since 1950. The proportion of American adults with a high school education increased from 34% in 1950 to 82% in 1996. The fraction of households living in inadequate housing fell from 10.2 percent in 1976 (the first year for which date are available) to 6.5 percent in 1995 *(Changing America: Indicators of Social and Economic Well-Being,* 1998, p. 1).

The economy certainly has not been victimized by the education system. The illusion that American workers are not productive and that the schools are at fault was investigated by Berliner & Biddle (1995). American productivity is frequently used as a benchmark against other industrialized nations, and ranks at least 20 percent greater than the closest competitor and the authors note that "managerial skills learned in school are more important than worker skills in increasing U.S. productivity in the 21st century" (*McKinsey Global Institute*, 1992, cited by Berliner & Biddle, 1995 p. 210).

The fact of the matter is that while education influences each individual's interaction with the economy, it has very little or nothing to do with global markets and the economic status of a nation. Nations who have the products that appeal to consumers will fare well on global markets regardless of the state of their public education system. Sadly, it is more frequently heard that in a booming economy, the industrialized world needs service and production workers, not Ph.D's.

A review of the top 10 economic indicators and 11 coincident and lagging components to the 2nd quarter of Fiscal Year 2000 finds the economy strong and growing (Table 4):

Table 4 appears
about here

The gross domestic product for the 2nd quarter of 1999 was 1.8% against a two-year average of 3.7%, and a 4th quarter 1998 high of 6%. Although the 2nd quarter was revised downward from the advance estimate of 2.3%, demand for goods is strong, inflation is low, and there is no indications that the economy is slowing down" (*Economic Indicators-Gross Domestic Product*, 1999, p.1). The economy's average sustainable growth rate "is historically between 2.5% and 3.0%, and rapid economic expansion, growth in excess of the average sustainable rate can lead to inflation and cause the Federal Reserve to tighten monetary policy in order to slow growth" (*Economic Indicators-Gross Domestic Product*, 1999, p. 1).

"Essentially, Gross Domestic Product includes production within national borders regardless of whether the labor and property inputs are domestically or foreign owned. In contrast, gross national product is the output of labor and property of US nationals regardless of the location of the labor and property. Gross National Product includes income earned by the factors of production (assets and labor) owned by a country's residents but excludes income produced within the country's borders by factors of production owned by nonresidents" (*BrainBank*, 2000, p. 1).

Imports are consistently exceeding exports, a deduction from the GDP. The unemployment rate was 4.3% nationally in July 1999 compared to the yearly average of 4.4%, with jobs growing unexpectedly and increasing the job growth for the past seven months to 223,000 new jobs, increasing the 1999 average past the 1998 average by 6,000 jobs. "Hourly earnings are up 0.5%, the largest increase in the past 6 months, with an average workweek of 34.5 hours" (*Economic Indicators-Employment*, 1999, p. 1).

To evaluate economic trends since 1980, we attached a display of the trended Gross Domestic Product and Gross National Product indicators from 1980 to 2000 where data was available in Table 5.

Tables 5 appears
about here.

The graphic display shows trended Gross Domestic Product and Gross National Product. These trends appear to graphically depict the economic success of our nation. But do Americans believe that the success of the economy is real and do they have enough confidence in the economic future of our nation, enough that is, to spend their money (Table 6)?

Tables 6 appears
about here.

Consumer Price Index (CPI) and Consumer Confidence Index (CCI) echo the consumer's optimistic sentiments; the August 1999 CPI came in with a value of 135.8, above the consensus forecast, although consumer confidence dipped slightly due to the Federal Reserve's recent shift in policy and the June 1999 rate hike. Consumer sentiment is high because of high stock prices, low inflation, and a boost in household permanent income from strong job and wage growth creating more confident households and increased discretionary spending, seen in the dizzying rise in Total Retail Sales tracked from the early 1980's through August of 2000. However, consumers are becoming increasingly more wary due to the Federal Reserve actions, signaling a possible decrease in consumer expectations in the fall of 2000 (*Economic Indicators-Consumer Confidence*, 1999; *Consumer Price Index*, 2000).

Has a poor public education system negatively impacted on the lives and economic well-being of Americans? Please recall that Mr. Copperman was quoted as stating that:

> Each generation of Americans has outstripped its parents in education, in literacy, and in economic attainment. For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents. (*Commission on Excellence*, 1983, p.6).

A review of the evidence presented in this paper would suggest that the education system in the United States is therefore responsible for the robust economy that we are experiencing today. This conclusion is based upon the statements and the certainty of the prognostications of the Excellence Commission that the education system would be responsible for the inevitable collapse of the economic system, as noted in *A Nation At Risk.* The paradox is that we have a strong economy in spite of the myriad of educational shortcomings and the morbid prognosis pronounced by the popular press in the mid-1980's and, specifically, by the Excellence Commission in *A Nation At Risk.*

Our economy (in spite of the minimalist views of Americans on saving money and a trillion-plus dollar trade deficit) is booming. Quoting Bracey (1998), "What has all this economy stuff got to do with the condition of public education in these United States? Precious little..." (p. 7). We believe the evidence supports our contention that the Excellence Commission was in error in 1983: the Excellence Commission and the fallacious ghost of education past are now exorcised from the mindset of American educators. The paper *A Nation At Risk* is revealed as the sensationalistic contrivance that it was in 1983, and is today in 2000.

We can now step into a brightly-lit corridor of literacy and knowing, illuminated by the flame of a new spirit, the spirit of education future. We recognize that the United States system of education is not perfect: the mere fact that technological research constantly creates new devices that we need to learn and master, and psychological and educational research are developing new ways to act and reflect, should serve as a challenge to us. We acquiesce that we

have a long way to go, but the spirit of education future is a sanguine entity, and we rejoice in the success of American students, parents and educators and take heart in the fact that, based upon the facts, we were *never a* nation at risk.

This paper reflects the thinking and beliefs of the authors and
in no way represents the policies or practices
at East Tennessee State University.

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	Poland	Ireland	New Zeal	United Kin	United Stat	Switzerlan	Switzerla	Australia	Canada	Germany	Belgium-Fl	Netherlands	Sweden	Totals
Level4/5	2316536	402849	659208	11231553	51801524	223502	745008	3193204	7751587	14775724	1026349	3161528	3208066	100496638
Level 3	6949607	1162542	1171925	18325166	84518276	516849	1815956	7137749	9922031	32834944	2451834	6955362	3475405	177237646
Level 2	11968767	1162542	1062057	15960628	70886296	405098	1350326	5259394	7751587	27088829	1368465	4109987	1693146	150067122
Level 1	17374018	908236	769076	13596090	65433504	251440	745008	3193204	5581142	7387862	855291	1580764	534678	118210313
CalcTotal	38608928	3636169	3662266	59113437	272639600	1396889	4656298	18783551	31006347	82087359	5701939	15807641	8911295	546011719
Total	**38608929**	**3632944**	**3662265**	**59113439**	**272639608**	**1396890**	**4656298**	**18783551**	**31006347**	**82087361**	**5701939**	**15807641**	**8911296**	**546011700**

	POL	IRE	NZ	UK	USA	SW-GR	SW-FR	AUS	CAN	GER	BEL-FL	NETH	SWE	Total
Level4/5	0%	0.07%	0.12%	2.06%	9.50%	0.04%	0.14%	0.58%	1.42%	2.70%	0.19%	0.58%	0.40%	18%
Level3	1%	0%	0.21%	3.36%	15.50%	0.09%	0.33%	1.31%	1.82%	6%	0.45%	1.27%	0.63%	32%
Totals	2%	0.28%	0.33%	5.42%	25.00%	0.13%	0.47%	1.89%	3.24%	8.70%	0.64%	1.85%	1.03%	49.95%

Source: Central Intelligence Agency (2000). World Population, in The World Factbook 2000, and Forgione, P. (1998). Achievement in the United States; Progress Since a 'Nation At Risk'. In, National Center for Educational Statistics, Center for Education Reform and Empower America, Figure K.

Table 1.

IMPROVEMENT IN READING AND MATH SCORES IN THE UNITED STATES STUDENTS AGE 9, 13 AND 17 BETWEEN 1980 AND 1996.

Source: CHANGING AMERICA: Indicators of Social and Economic Well-Being by Race and Hispanic Origin. (Council of Economic Advisers, 1998, Sept)

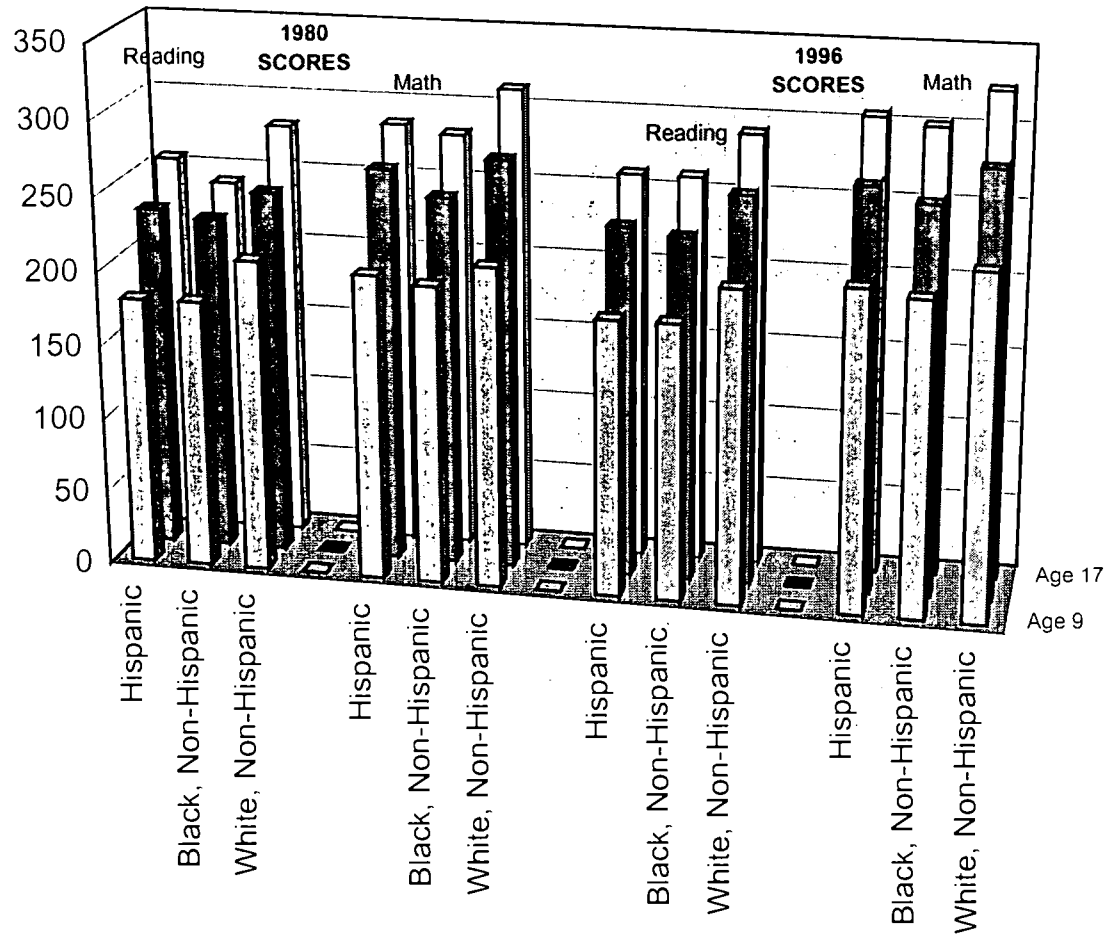


Table 2.

PERCENTAGE OF 3,4,5 SCORES IN THE POPULATION OF A COUNTRY COMPARED TO ALL TEST-TAKERS WHO SCORED 3,4,5 ON INTERNATIONAL ADULT LITERACY SURVEY (IALS).

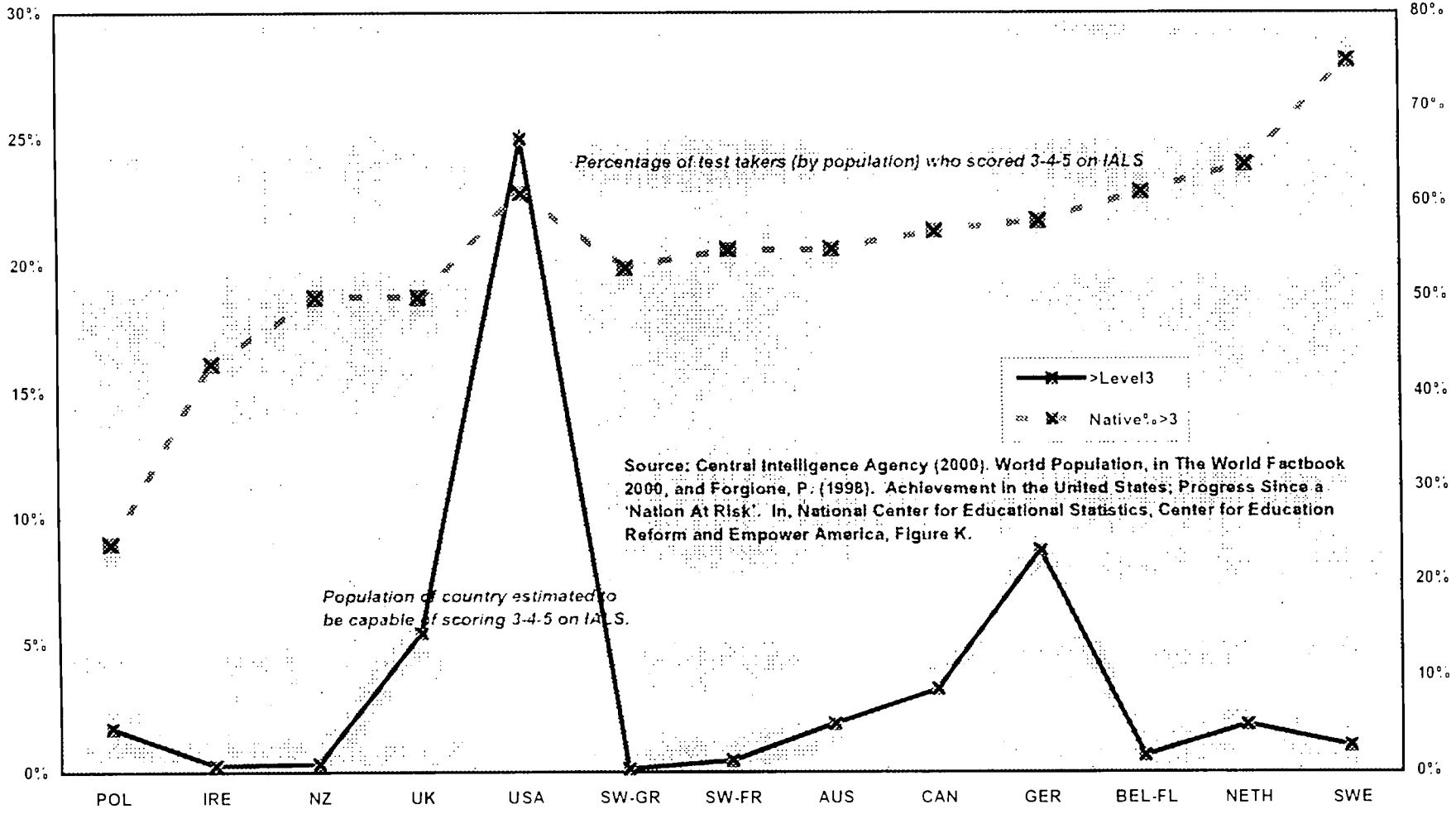


Table 3.

Leading, Lagging and Coincident Economic Indicators 1980 - 2000.

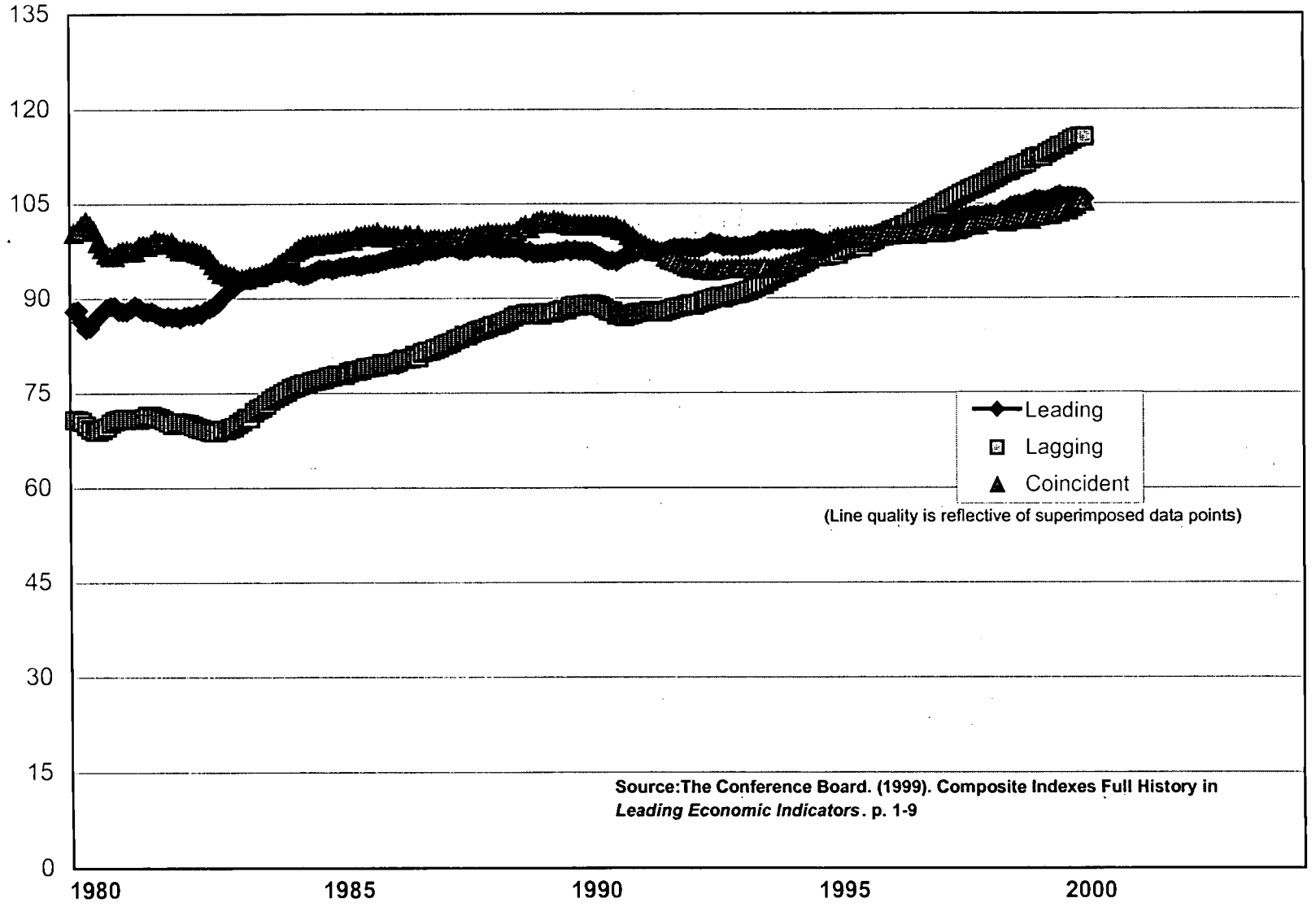
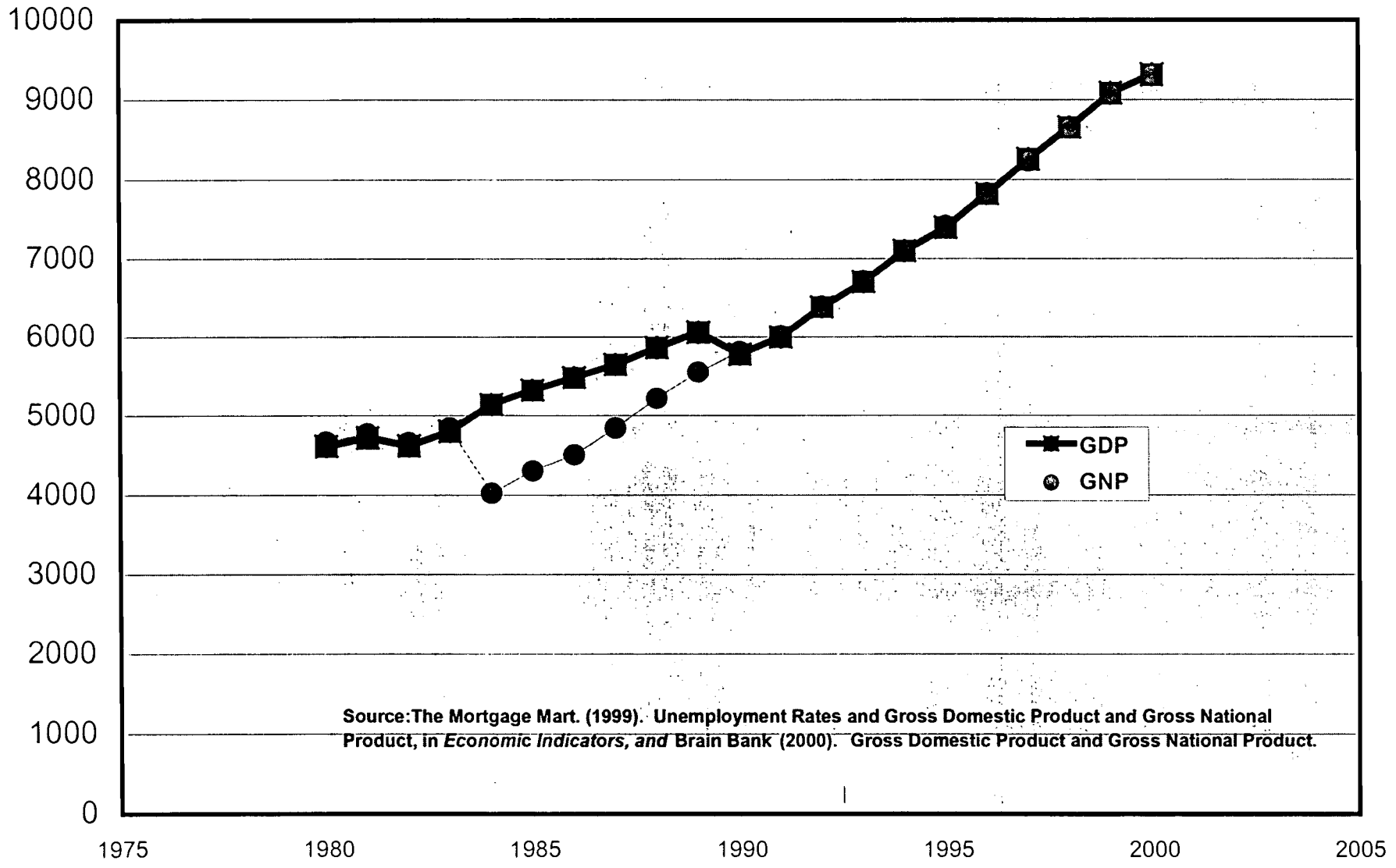


Table 4.

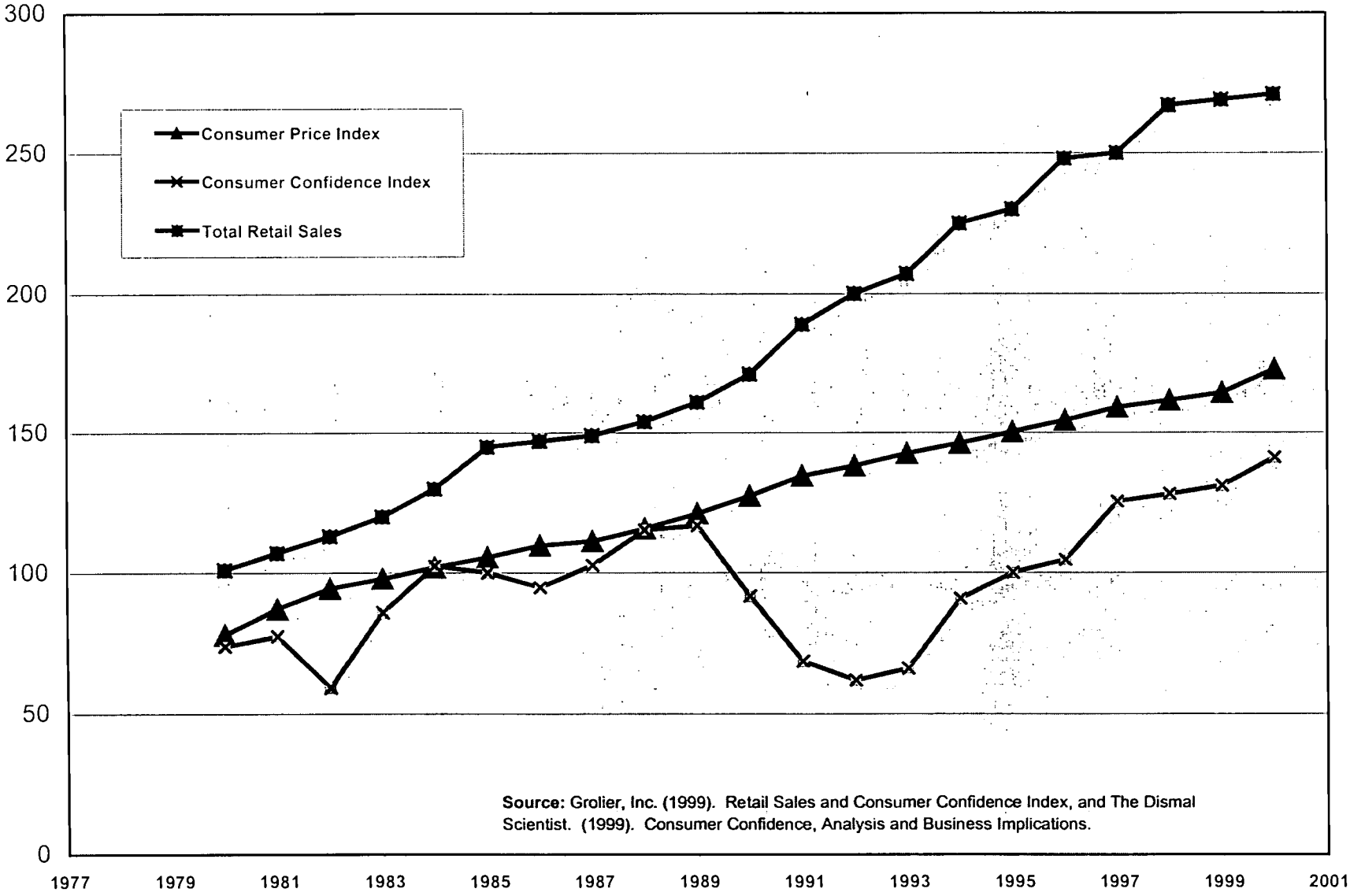
Gross Domestic Product and Gross National Product in the U. S., 1980 - 2000



Source:The Mortgage Mart. (1999). Unemployment Rates and Gross Domestic Product and Gross National Product, in *Economic Indicators, and* Brain Bank (2000). Gross Domestic Product and Gross National Product.

Table 5.

Consumer Price Index, Consumer Confidence Index, Total Retail Sales in U. S. 1980 - 2000



Source: Grolier, Inc. (1999). Retail Sales and Consumer Confidence Index, and The Dismal Scientist. (1999). Consumer Confidence, Analysis and Business Implications.

Table 6.

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