

# The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### *Teaching Students to Struggle*

The Post did education a service by covering the international study that videotaped actual math lessons in sample countries and caught on camera the real story behind our problems in education ["U.S. Struggles to Solve Its Math Problem," Jan. 23, front page]. American lessons were found to be "strikingly consistent," with teachers emphasizing rote procedures—creating drills and asking questions that allow students success so they can be praised.

Our teachers were "very uncomfortable with having students confused for even a little while." They were seen rushing over to show a student how to solve a problem rather than allowing the student to struggle with the work. This was not the case in the countries (such as Japan) that succeed in teaching mathematics at a deeper level. The Post's article did not mention that this study interviewed teachers and found by and large that American teachers believe they *are* teaching students to achieve a deep level of

conceptual understanding, though the videotapes prove otherwise.

I believe our problems in education will not go away as long as teachers remain uncomfortable watching students struggle with their work. The understanding that is achieved when teachers present material is never as deep as when students develop it or at least reconstruct it on their own. American teachers often illustrate a math problem and then give students problems of the same type to solve. This requires less understanding than having students try a variety of problems in one lesson, including some where they must apply what they've learned or recall things that were previously taught.

I am sympathetic with the concern that pushing for greater mastery may be hard on the weaker students. But I believe the measures that help our most able students will likewise bring out the best in our weaker students and will benefit them all in the long run.

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