Does culture matter? Education reforms in East Asia

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Introduction

1 PISA 2009 started a global movement of cross-national learning about policies and practices in basic education. It all started with Shanghai coming top in the international comparison, the first time China was ever represented in PISA.

2 Basic education has traditionally been a national undertaking that seldom crossed borders. Indeed, teachers of basic education seldom know what is going on in other education systems. Policies on basic education are often determined by domestic needs or political pressures. Hence, the post-PISA 2009 movement is almost unprecedented. In hindsight, it could be seen that cross-national study is an expected part of the process of globalization, albeit, in a way, as a late-comer.

Three East Asian cities

3 PISA 2009 has also attracted global attention to the East Asian systems of education, namely Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea, Japan, and now, after PISA 2012, Taiwan and Vietnam. It is natural to think that there must be something in these “chopstick cultures” that has led to the “high performance” in PISA. In what follows, I will present my observations in three “layers”.

Layer 1

4 It is a cultural heritage that education is highly valued in the East Asian societies.

5 In the year 603 CE, China began selecting officials through a civil examination. That started the centuries-long tradition of equating examination preparation with
“education”, and education as the only path for upward social mobility. It also created a culture that placed a high value on education, something that continues to characterize present-day China and affects all the Chinese communities and territories that were once affiliated to China. The civil examination was soon copied in Japan and Korea, where similar cultures have developed.

Education in the “chopstick cultures” carries a few distinct features. First, education is regarded as a key to social mobility, which is quite different from mainstream Western culture, where education is for acquiring knowledge and skills. Second, as a consequence, educational motivations are largely extrinsic in nature (social pressures, family expectations, etc.) rather than intrinsic (real interest in learning). Third, the folklore follows, that, regardless of family background and individuals’ innate ability, efforts pay off (“Diligence can compensate for stupidity”). Fourth, education is for the selection of the elite, hence competition is expected. Fifth, the elite is about having comprehensive attributes, hence the emphasis on education’s “moral” dimensions.

In practice, two factors are relevant: seriousness about formal education, and seriousness about sit-down examinations. Both are essential in international comparisons such as PISA and IEA studies.

Layer 2

Most of the East Asian systems have undertaken serious and overhauling reforms in education in the past 10 to 15 years.

I hereby briefly introduce the cases of Singapore, Shanghai and Hong Kong, three major cities in the “chopstick cultures”.

Singapore, Shanghai and Hong Kong all launched comprehensive reforms in education which are comprehensive, overhauling and long-lasting.

Singapore

Singapore has launched perhaps the most persistent and consistent reform since the 1980s. Because of continuous reforms, education in Singapore has been transformed from a very elitist selective system to a system with basically equitable opportunities for all young people, and from a system that emphasizes almost purely national development to one that has increasingly shifted towards individual development.

From the outset, there has been a general shift from teaching to learning. “Learning society, thinking schools”, was the slogan that reflects the general philosophy of education reform. This comprehensive reform mobilizes society-wide support. The reforms cover all stages and all aspects of education: curriculum; school leadership; teacher preparation; technical and vocational education and training (TVET); and so forth. There is a strong sense of modernization. Singapore was among the first to intensify the use of ICT in schools. It has included biochemistry, and more recently programming, in its secondary-school curriculum.

Shanghai

Shanghai was also among the early systems to introduce comprehensive reform in secondary education with learning as the central theme. It is part of the national
curriculum reform under the concept of “Learning to Learn”, which was introduced in 2000. The national reform is an echo of the nationwide concern about “quality education”, with the prime target goal of improving student lives against examination-cramming. In this way, the national system has been undergoing continuous reforms in all aspects.

However, Shanghai is perhaps more thorough than any other parts of the nation in locating education reform in the upstream battle against “exam-oriented education”. Under the slogan of “First-Class City, First-Class Education”, Shanghai has launched very comprehensive reforms encompassing pedagogy, assessment, school leadership, and teachers’ professional development. The leadership of the reforms went across different sessions of the government, with strong technical support from the 400-member-strong Municipal Academy of Educational Research. What is most impressive is Shanghai’s efforts to “convert” poor-performing schools to stronger schools, by various strategies such as asking strong schools to lead weaker schools, forming consortia of school clusters comprising schools of varying standards, and sending stronger teachers to weaker schools.

**Hong Kong**

Hong Kong launched its comprehensive education reform in 1999. Fundamental to the reform was addressing the challenges of a changed society. The reform started with a year-long revisiting of the aims of education. It purposefully moved away from an economic discourse to a learning discourse, from GDP growth and global competitiveness to “Lifelong learning, learning for life”.

The overhauling reform started with a restructuring of the education system, from a 6+5+2+2+3 British tradition to a 6+3+3+4 system, thereby reducing three public assessments down to one in the 12 years of schooling. The most dramatic part of the reform was the introduction of a new curriculum for senior secondary schools where, under the notion of “Learning to Learn”, traditional “subjects” were replaced by “Key Learning Areas”. The traditional formal subjects were compressed, so as to give room to other learning experiences, such as sports and aesthetics, workplace experience, and other experiences (such as learning abroad or in rural China). A non-syllabus-based “Liberal Studies” was also introduced. The highly school-based curriculum reform was accompanied by schemes for teachers’ continuing professional development (CPD) and induction, all school-based under a common framework.

**Layer 3**

The seriousness of the reforms, though going against traditions, nonetheless further reflects the cultural value placed in education

As mentioned above, almost all the reforms in the three systems take as a given the will to overcome the shortcomings of the cultural heritage in education. That is, the overwhelming pressure of public examinations that overshadows the entire school system; the overemphasis on examination scores throughout the school system; the didactic pedagogy which precludes innovations and creativity; and the obsolete focus on manpower-planning in the economy and the narrow employability of individuals for specific jobs.
There are general efforts of shifting the emphasis from knowledge and information to learning, hence examining the process of learning as well as the results. There is therefore a switch from an emphasis on subject knowledge to the ability to use language (which is PISA’s emphasis). There is also a common belief in the necessity of turning a teaching discourse into a learning discourse. Therefore, there is also, subsequently, a very significant increase in education resources and in improving learning environments. On the surface, this could easily be seen as moving away from East Asian traditions of education practice, as perceived by Western observers.

However, the reforms in these three cities have also demonstrated the strengths of education’s cultural heritage in contemporary societies.

First, the very strong value placed on education, and formal education in particular, is realized through synergy among different sectors of society, and through the alliance among different forces in society.

Second, such strengths also pose difficulties in the implementation of the reforms. Parents still look for ways of ensuring their children get high scores, and teachers may very much gauge their teaching in response to expectations about public examinations and university entrance.

Third, the culture of education has placed high expectations on teachers. Professionalism is an expected attribute of teachers. Such professionalism underpins the strong emphasis on teachers’ CPD and professional autonomy.

Fourth, the culture of education also facilitates a redefinition of education, which is now conceived as far more than knowledge and skills, and aims at the comprehensive development of individuals. This has led to the re-emphasis on so-called “non-cognitive learning” in the realm of morality, values, attitudes, ethics, and so forth, which are also what contemporary societies expect.

Global implications

What are the implications for other education systems? There are elements in the three cities’ education reforms that may bear implications for other systems.

First, all three cities do not submit to a “deficit model” for “fixing” the system, but rather, aim to create a vision of education to which practitioners and the whole of society can aspire. This makes a tremendous difference when the entire society looks forward to something new and exciting for the young.

Second, all three systems have always had a very strong sense of looking at the global scene, and hence have profound knowledge of the frontiers of education development around the world. However, they have moved away from the mode of copying from elsewhere and have created their own path for education development.

Third, all three reforms share a strong urge to recognize and address the fundamental changes in society, and hence launched reforms rather than “improvements” of the education as a system. Hence, it is not about doing more and better of what we have been doing in education, but about doing education in a different way. Essentially, rather than regarding education as a closed and isolate system, all the reforms are informed by changes in society.

Fourth, all of the cities felt the burden of the adverse dimensions of their traditions (of exam-cramming), and determined to move away from overemphasis on memory and
storage of information. Yet, they seem all have cautiously preserved the positive side of their cultural traditions. Such considerations perhaps should apply to all cultures in the world. The strengths and weaknesses in a culture should both be taken into consideration vis-à-vis a changing society.

27 Fifth, all three cities based their reform of education around a focus on learning as a strong conceptual framework. This explains the sustainability of the reform after 15 years, because reform exercises are underpinned by these distinctive changes in concept. This is perhaps the essence for any education reform to bear fruit. There are also continuous efforts to follow trends in the science of learning. It is noticeable that many education reforms in the world still cling to the old institution of education, with little attention to the core business of education, which is learning. Without the central theme of learning, reform measures may seem to be consigned to the periphery, or “beating about the bush”.

28 Sixth, in all three cities, education reform has also secured synergetic endorsement from different sectors of society, and indeed different divisions of the government. Strong consensus was also built among education practitioners, either through a strong government (in the case of Singapore), strong organization (Shanghai), or meticulous exercises among diverse groups (Hong Kong).

29 Seventh, rather than tackling only separate components of the system, reform has been taken as a holistic and comprehensive exercise for the entire system. Hence the reforms cover all aspects of education, at all levels, with deliberate strategies.

30 Eighth, as a matter of strategy, all three systems have used curriculum reform as a platform for change, and have built other reforms, such as assessment, teachers' professional development, school leadership, and so forth, upon this platform.

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AUTHOR

KAI-MING CHENG

Kai-ming Cheng is Chair Professor of Education at the University of Hong Kong. He was Dean of Education, Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Senior Advisor to the Vice-Chancellor of the University. Trained as a mathematician, he was a school teacher in Physics and Mathematics and a principal before he pursued doctoral study at the London Institute of Education. He taught at the Harvard Graduate School of Education as Visiting Professor (1996-2006). His research projects are initially about rural education in China, but have moved into reforms in various systems with attention to
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