Culture and educational outcomes in “Confucian heritage” societies in Asia

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Asia does not exist. There is no such sensible entity. When we speak of, model, and try to make comparisons with education in Asia, are we referring to Singapore or Sri Lanka? To Shanghai or Xinjiang – two regions of China about as far apart figuratively as they are literally? To Kyrgyzstan or Korea – and of course, which Korea? Comparison of incomparable entities makes little sense, as does the inference of a model that is not immediately banal from a region as diverse as Asia. In recognising that numerous attempts at such modelling of, and comparison with, education in Asia go on nevertheless, the organisers of this conference have wisely started by asking, “Which ‘Asias’ are we referring to?”, noting “the various Asian education systems, of which there are a number of specific variants”.

That said, my brief is to offer “a general comparative presentation of Asian education systems, … trying to identify common ground among the various systems and examine whether there exists one model or many”. The answer to the last is short. There are surely as many models as there are systems within each of the educational jurisdictions in Asia. In fact, there are probably more, given the extent of diversity in countries as large as India and China.

But might there be “a general model common to [at least some of] the various Asian education systems”? There could be, and I wish to focus my remarks in this regard on those countries that are said to be characterized in some significant respects as ‘Confucian heritage cultures’ – not least because I have spent the last 15 years of my professional life in Hong Kong, having been able to bring to bear on that experience a comparative perspective built on at least a dozen years’ professional experience in Africa.

The latest PISA results (2012) might be a good place to start. The top seven performers in mathematics were Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Macau, and Japan. The top five in reading: Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and South Korea, with Taiwan coming in in eighth place. The top four in science: Shanghai, Hong Kong,
Singapore, and Japan, with South Korea and Vietnam in seventh and eighth place respectively. These are all territories described as “Confucian heritage cultures”, and it is highly probable that there is a culturally related explanation for these excellent performances. It may be related to the wealth of each of these territories or to the socioeconomic status (SES) of the families from which the students come, but Vietnam would be something of an anomaly in such a hypothesis, and many other of the wealthiest countries are not present at the top of the rankings. If there is a cultural explanation, it is likely that it has to do with the commonly described attributes of students in Confucian heritage cultures, which include: a high regard for education and a belief that it plays a significant role in upward mobility; the holding, at a deeply personal level, of Confucian values to do with the cultivation of the self; a strong work ethic that gives practical expression both to this high regard for education and to this commitment to the cultivation of the self; a belief, generally more widespread than might be the case in other societies, that success depends more on effort than on innate capacity, and hence that everyone can succeed, provided that he or she works hard enough; a commitment to repetitive drilling and to apparently rote learning in an acceptance of the effort needed to succeed; and a sense of respect for teachers that is understood in more hierarchical and authoritarian terms than might be the case in, say, many Western societies. Systemic consequences of all of this include the proliferation of a "shadow education system" in which students pay for privately provided additional tuition – to the extent that, as Mark Bray (2009) has reported, families in South Korea spend more on the shadow education system than the state does in the provision of public education.

It is immediately important to note, however, that the “rote learning” of students in Confucian heritage cultures is not merely the shallow memorisation it might appear to be. In The Chinese Learner, David Watkins and John Biggs (1996) show that this is a process of learning by induction, or the generation of concepts and the inference of higher-level principles through repeated observation, practising and memorisation of empirical examples. While inductive reasoning might not be as epistemologically sound as deduction, in that it does not preserve truth as well as the latter (one black swan is all it takes to falsify the hypothesis that all swans observed thus far are white), it has been shown to be very effective pedagogically: learners make meaning by generalising concepts from and in relation to what they already know, or what they have observed. If there is an “Asian” model to be extrapolated here, it has to do with the effectiveness of inductive pedagogy. Certainly, deductively elaborated content helps greatly in the organisation and structuring of material to be learnt (as in the basic principles of Euclidean geometry) – or, better, in the organisation and structuring of material that has been learnt. But initiation into concepts is probably best done inductively – as teachers fortunate enough to have access to a science laboratory well know.

Nevertheless, a greater degree of integration into a globalised economy has contributed to calls, not least from the business sector in many Asian countries, for a greater focus on “critical thinking skills”, on “problem-solving”, on “creativity” and the like, not all of which are seen to be readily compatible with apparently rote styles of learning. Such shifts might be understood as reflecting the influence of “Western” approaches to learning, or as the result of economic developments in many Asian economies.

Are there comparative lessons to be drawn from these Confucian heritage cultures? Yes, and no. A brief look at Finland’s PISA results sheds light on the question. Finland is
probably the country made most famous by PISA, having topped the first PISA tables, in 2000, and having performed consistently well ever since.

The first point to note is that Finland pays great attention to educational equity, which means that their students do not produce a large negatively skewed distribution in the PISA results (as might be the case in the USA, for example). PISA results are ultimately reduced to a mean. Of the three main statistical measures of central tendency, the mean is most susceptible to extreme values (far more so than the mode or the median) – so a heavily negatively skewed distribution will pull the mean down substantially. This means that PISA is just about as much a test of equity as it is of excellence. Elementary statistics tells us that taking care of the weakest performing students will have more effect on a country’s mean than will giving additional attention to students already performing moderately or well. So, paying attention to inequities in the provision of education is one important lesson to be learned – and this is especially the case in China’s good performance as reflected in Shanghai. Were China to enter PISA as a whole country, including the likes of Xinjiang and Gansu provinces along with Shanghai, the consequences for its PISA ranking would be too obvious to state here, except to note that SES effects would outweigh those associated with a Confucian heritage culture.

Is Finland doing well in PISA for reasons other than the fact that it takes better care of educational inequities than most? The second point to note about the country’s performance is related to the well-known finding that children of educated parents perform better in school than children whose parents are illiterate. Continuing my thesis about the importance of culture in learning performance in at least the Confucian heritage cultures in Asia, there is something deeply cultural that is responsible, in my view, for a considerable part of Finland’s PISA success. Finnish children in general have, through centuries of cultural tradition, long respected the ability to read. This is possibly because after the Reformation in northern Europe, it became increasingly acceptable and important for parents to read the Bible to their children (as opposed to the previously dominant Catholic practice that reserved the reading of the Bible for the priesthood). Since the 16th century in Finland, then part of Sweden, literacy has been a prerequisite for receiving the sacraments and contracting a Christian marriage. Children’s reading skills were publicly assessed in the annual kinkerit, in which failure meant public disgrace and the denial of permission to marry (Linnakylä, 2002 :83–85). Given what we now know of the relationship between levels of parental education and the educational achievements of their children, it is easy to see the effect over centuries of a cultural practice that has meant that almost all children in Finland have been raised in families where both parents are literate.

As I have argued elsewhere (Mason 2014), few would deny that cultural factors are associated with and influence many aspects of education. Robin Alexander goes so far as to say that:

Life in schools and classrooms is an aspect of our wider society, not separate from it: a culture does not stop at the school gates. The character and dynamics of school life are shaped by the values that shape other aspects of ... national life.... Culture, in comparative analysis and understanding, and certainly in national systems of education, is all. (2000 : 29–30)

However, when extrapolating models from one or more relevantly similar cultural contexts, or when comparing one culture with another, researchers should tread with caution. They face possible accusations of stereotyping, of treating culture as monolithic,
and of overstating its influence in a hybrid and increasingly globalised world characterised by complex interactions and influences. Most researchers would accordingly flinch from asserting precisely what cultural factors are associated with educational outcomes. Such factors are notoriously difficult to isolate, and such assertions are often tenuous at best. Further, robust inferences from comparative studies depend on comparison between entities that are both identifiable and discrete. If it is from comparison between two cultures that researchers wish to draw robust conclusions, they should be at least to identify each culture, and to be sure about what marks each as distinct from the other. These are cautions we would do well to bear in mind in our deliberations here, and in any attempt to discern the influence that “Asian models” may have had on models abroad, or that European, North American, or any other “models” may have had on Asia.

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