

COMPARATIVE EDUCATION, PISA, POLITICS AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM: A CAUTIONARY NOTE.

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Since its emergence as a field of study, Comparative Education has served a number of purposes, including: explaining why and how systems change; describing the structures and processes of other systems; understanding other systems so as to better understand one's own; and identifying features/models in other systems which work and can be borrowed to improve schooling. The latter function has emerged as paramount over the last thirty years, though both the policy areas attracting interest and the countries held up as models of best practise have shifted significantly over time. In England, policy makers' interests have variously focussed on system structures, vocational education, curricula, pedagogy and, most recently, the causes of pupil achievement; and, the source of best practice has ranged from Germany, Japan, Finland, Sweden, East Asia and recently more generic comparators have been used (e.g. high performing systems/nations) .

The contemporary version of the policy oriented form of Comparative Education is distinctive in a number of respects. It is highly pragmatic, driven by the quest to identify and promote best practice; portrayed as non-ideological, evidence based, objective and scientific; largely desk based and reliant on data produced by transnational agencies such as OECD/PISA and IEA; and, it is being 'done' by a large network of consultancies, think tanks and academics, who use the data to highlight the need for reform and to advocate specific policies (Auld and Morris 2013).

The logic underpinning such policy advocacy usually asserts a strong connection between economic performance, competition/survival in the global/knowledge economy and the quality of schooling, as measured by international testing regimes. The basic logic can be stated thus:

(a)Country A has a high-performing economy which is largely the result of the educational system producing workers with the required skills as evidenced by International tests;

(b)Country B has the opposite features; and ...

(c) if B adopts the critical features of the educational system of A it will improve both pupil performance and the state of the economy.

The logic has been promoted and reinforced, along with a strong injection of crisis rhetoric, by the global network of knowledge brokers (e.g. Pearson, McKinsey) and policy entrepreneurs that advocate education policy solutions, though their vested interests are generally not declared.

This logic, whilst persuasively presented and providing policy makers with a clear logic for reform, is premised on a number of interrelated assumptions which are rarely made explicit. The major assumptions are that: (1) Economic success in nation states is primarily

a function of schooling within that nation (the development of human capital); (2) tests of pupil achievement such as PISA provide a reliable proxy for a nation's stock of human capital and therefore future economic competitiveness; (3) the tests are valid and reliable; (4) the causes of pupil performance lie primarily within the school system; (5) the cause(s) of high performance can be isolated and policies based on those causes can be transplanted into a different context; and (6), the evidence is faithfully and consistently considered; and the policies advocated are coherent insofar as they are validly derived from that evidence.

Each of the above has spawned a large body of literature. Though a substantive analysis is beyond the scope of this short paper, it is possible to highlight some key issues associated with these assumptions. For example, the focus of the first key assumption tends to ignore the influence of other factors (such as economic policies, capital investment and natural resources) and, as Lauder (see following article) argues, it does not recognise the global nature of modern labour markets. This is readily evident in Singapore, which has relied heavily on imported labour and has a low level of labour productivity. Further, Hong Kong's economic success is driven by its housing market and Japan's economic stagnation from the 1980's cannot readily be explained by earlier changes to its high-performing education system. It is also not clear that the competencies measured by PISA are those that employers seek in their employees. Below I focus briefly on the fourth, fifth and sixth assumptions.

The debate as to whether student outcomes are primarily a result of the impact of schooling or of factors outside school (e.g. Culture, parental expectations, private tutoring) is longstanding and central to the fourth assumption. Whilst those advocating educational policies often acknowledge the latter they tend to subsequently ignore its significance as they promote their own preferred policy solutions. The performance of populations of pupils from one culture schooled in another provides a basis for considering these claims. In all cross national studies of academic achievement Chinese pupils (from HK, Singapore, Taiwan and Shanghai) have been ranked amongst the top performers and these societies have been portrayed in England as an education utopia. Studies by Jerrim (forthcoming) and Feniger and Lefstein (2014) have examined the performance of Chinese students who have been born and schooled in Australia and New Zealand respectively. They found that Chinese immigrant students performed at a significantly higher level than pupils who were natives of those countries. This would suggest that influences outside the school have a powerful impact on performance.

The fifth assumption is critical. Unless a causal relationship can be established between the factor selected and pupil performance then any claim to have identified 'what works' lacks a strong foundation. Yet attempts to promote policy interventions are often based on loose correlations, or even confirmatory observations. These claims regarding *what is* in selected high-performing systems must then be used to deliver prescriptions regarding *what should be* elsewhere. Further, many of the claims, such as good teachers produce high levels of pupil performance, are analytical claims (i.e. they are necessarily connected) and not empirical claims. The network which uses PISA data to identify and advocate

reforms have developed a sophisticated range of strategies to mask the often weak basis of their claims as to what works (Auld and Morris, forthcoming).

The last assumption as to the faithful use of data is especially pertinent in England where policy makers have used pupil performance data extensively to justify reform in ways which often seem to be highly selective or a distortion of the evidence (Morris 2012). In terms of selectivity, there has been a marked tendency for policy makers, the media and the network of policy advocates to focus on reports which are negative and serve to portray schooling in England as an educational dystopia in need of urgent and radical reform. Even when England's results show a slight improvement in its ranking or no significant change in the level of pupil performance this has been characterised in the media and policy discourse as a decline in standards or at best stagnation. In contrast, reports which indicate relatively good performance in England, such as the 2007 TIMMS Report and the 2013 OECD Report (2012) on Problem Solving received comparatively little attention.

The response in England to the 2013 PIACC Report was also illustrative of a tendency to interpret data selectively. England scored poorly on the tests of the literacy and numeracy skills of adults and the OECD associated this with the impact of social class and the low skilled nature of much work in England. However in the subsequent public discussion of the results by politicians, the media and the policy network, these factors were ignored and the following were proposed as the cause of the low performance: low curriculum standards; low standards of teaching; a dumbed down curriculum; and, the absence of performance related pay for teachers.

The linkage in England between the specific policies promoted and the comparative evidence on which they are derived has often been, at best, tenuous. For example, the reforms promoted in the 2010 White Paper were primarily justified on the grounds that they were derived from the best practices of high-performing (i.e. primarily East Asian) systems. However, many of the policies promoted, for example the establishment of Free schools; multiple and shortened routes into Teacher education; the recruitment of untrained teachers; and a national curriculum that was optional for Academies and Free Schools are not characteristics of those school systems in East Asia which topped the PISA league tables. Similarly neither the PISA data, as interpreted by the OECD, nor the prevailing systems of school governance prevailing in East Asia provide a rationale to justify the form of school autonomy promoted in England since 2010 (Yun You 2014). Further, the direction of educational reform in many East Asian states is towards reducing the prevalence of the specific features (direct instruction; exam orientation and a focus on academic achievement) that English politicians admire and seek to emulate (Forrestier and Crossley 2014)

Overall the use of PISA-type data as the basis of a pragmatic and evidence based form of Comparative education has, especially in England, become a highly expedient and opportunistic enterprise which has been used as a façade to legitimate a preferred set of policy actions. Novoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003) succinctly identify the implications for the field:

“The problem is that the term comparison is being mainly used as a flag of convenience, intended to attract international interest and money and to entail the need to assess national policies with reference to world scales and hierarchies. The result is a ‘soft comparison’ lacking any solid theoretical or methodological grounds.”

If Comparative Education as a field is to avoid being defined by the quest to answer the question: “what works?” it will need to continue to interrogate and deconstruct the claims of those who provide simple answers to complex questions.

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