

Teacher Quality and its Cultural Contexts: What Can the West Learn from the East?

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Research on teacher quality is derived from a Western model of education that is obsessed with student achievement. Often comparisons with student achievement in East Asian societies leave Western policymakers asking: “why aren’t our students as good as theirs?” The answer is often that improvements in teacher quality are the key variable in enhancing student achievement and much policy effort is spent on identifying the links between the two variables. Qualifications, licensing arrangements, teacher education, salary incentives, instructional style and teacher efficacy have all been nominated as likely ingredients in this elusive construct of ‘teacher quality’. This paper has a different starting point and a different set of questions.

Since student achievement in East Asian societies is acknowledged to be at the forefront in terms of international comparisons what is it about teachers in these societies that can help to account for these results? Furthermore, are teacher variables the only ones that need to be taken into consideration when trying to account for student achievement? Finally, is student achievement the best measure of the success of an education system or should policymakers look beyond achievement to other qualities that any society would like to see in its future citizens? These are the issues to be addressed in this paper.

Teaching is not like other professions. Medicine, law and dentistry, for example, attract elite students, are viewed as prestigious by the community, contain multiple career development pathways and provide significant financial rewards with ever increasing trajectories. Teaching, on the other hand, is a mass profession catering for the needs of the world’s children seeking intellectual, emotional and social development. The mass nature of the teaching profession should not be underestimated. UNESCO (2009, p.14), for example, has indicated that if teacher supply is to be maintained globally, “1.3 million teachers will be needed per year between 2007 and 2015 amounting to a global total of \$10.3 million over the eight year period”. If these numbers can be maintained, UNESCO’s goal of universal primary education (UPE) could have a chance of being reached in 2015, although it is now recognized for other reasons that UPE will not be achieved by this date. Nevertheless, it is teachers who are at the centre of this objective and without teachers, UPE can never be achieved. Yet finding over 10 million new teachers by 2015 is a very big challenge. More importantly, however, finding 10 million high quality teachers is not just a challenge – it may well be impossibility. Quantity is one thing – and it is easy to define. Quality is something else. It is not easy to define but it is necessary to achieve. The numbers will mean nothing if education authorities – whether they be in Dakar or Tokyo, Taipei or Mumbai – cannot guarantee quality. This of course, raises two questions: what is teacher quality and how can we ensure that we produce high quality teachers?” This paper will take a regional perspective that will involve a slightly different way of looking at the issue. There will be three main sections in the paper:

- First, the ‘teacher quality’ debate will be located in a policy discourse that originated in the West and is often accepted uncritically in the East. The ‘teacher quality’ debate is politically constructed and therefore needs to be carefully evaluated.
- Second, ‘teacher quality’ will be examined in East Asia, for example in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Eastern and Western conceptions of ‘teacher quality’ will be compared.
- Third, an assessment will be made of what it would take to come up with 10 million teachers by 2015 and to make this a high quality teacher workforce.

Western debates on ‘teacher quality’ – ‘new’ teachers for ‘new’ times

‘Economic competitiveness’ has been a common discourse in most developed countries at least since the 1980s. As the global community sought to recover from the oil crisis and the stop/ start economic cycles that characterized post World War II economic development efforts were placed on developing creative and innovative talent that could enhance economic development. This was a new form of human capital theory that focused not just on education as an externality of the economic system but viewed human talent itself as the chief driver of economic development (Kennedy, 2005; Kennedy & Lee, 2008). This fundamental change in thinking put a new focus on education that was placed centre stage in educational reform internationally but particularly in the Asia Pacific region. Inevitably this focus on education led to a focus on teachers. Policymakers charged with responsibility for educational reform inevitably addressed the issue of whether teachers were ready to perform a key role in promoting an innovative workforce that could bring new ideas, new thinking and new directions to economic development..

Elsewhere, this has been called the “new progressivism” in education policy (Kennedy & Lee, 2008) and it is important to understand. It was designed to blend different progressive traditions in educational thinking – developmentalism, constructivism and social efficiency. We can see this amalgam in the many education reform proposals over the past decade and Taiwan provides a good example. The call was for less textbook and examination driven instruction, more student engagement, more innovative teaching, more student focused classrooms and less teacher direction. Yet the rationale for all this is to create workers for the knowledge economy – creative, innovative, flexible, problem solving workers who could contribute to the information economy in its many manifestations. These are workers who can be self directed, self regulating and critical team players. They might work in service industries, hi-tech industries or industries not yet invented. They might be the entrepreneurs in the new knowledge based economy. Yet what has not been explored in any depth is what kind of teachers are needed for this neo-progressive policy environment. It is an issue that leads directly into a consideration of teacher quality.

As recently as last year the Grattan Institute in Australia released a report on teacher evaluation and key excerpts received a great deal of media coverage (Ferrari, 24 May 2010):

...with an excellent teacher, a student can achieve in half a year what would take a full year with a less effective teacher, and the impact is cumulative. Students with effective teachers for several years in a row outperform students with poor teachers by as much as 50 percentage points over three years...

This perspective gets to the heart of the teacher quality debate. High quality teachers have an impact on student learning. The opposite also applies: poor quality teachers have

less impact on student learning. As the above quote shows, metrics can be used to demonstrate the specifics of that impact. Whether it is OECD (Santiago, 2002), Mc Kinsey and Company (2007) or the academic literature, it is this relationship between teaching and learning that is central. Learning has always been valued by educators but in a neo-progressive policy environment it is also valued by economists. Learning drives the 'new' economy – it is the source of new ideas, innovation and creativity. Quality teachers are those who can 'drive' learning with results that can be publicly demonstrated. Neo-progressive teachers are those who are 'learning oriented' preparing knowledge workers for the uncertainties of the knowledge economy.

It did not take governments long to recognize that results based teaching and learning requires assessment regimes that can provide evidence that learning has taken place. Thus system wide monitoring of student learning has been a key feature of policy development in many Western countries. The United States, Australia and the United Kingdom provide the best examples where national approaches to testing have been implemented in very high stakes environments. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the United States, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in Australia, national curriculum tests in the UK and a range of large scale international assessment programmes have emerged over the past thirty years to document student achievement, and consequently teacher proficiency, in key areas of the school curriculum. In the national examples there is often a legislative basis to the testing programme that outlines the consequences of poor student performance. It has become obvious that teachers are held accountable for the results of their students and in the United States, for example, teachers have been dismissed when their students do not do well.

National testing regimes are not the only ones in place to monitor student learning. Economic competitiveness means that not only should students do well in their own jurisdictions, they must do better than students in other jurisdictions. Thus, the emergence of international testing regimes such as OECD's PISA and IEA's TIMSS, PIRLS and ICCS. I These well known abbreviations highlight how an international assessment discourse has developed. These regimes produce league tables based on complex statistical procedures that rank the performance of education systems across key school subjects such as Mathematics, Science, Literacy and Civics. Not just ranked globally, proficiency levels are often determined to show whether an education system is in the top third of participating systems, middle third bottom third; or so far below even the bottom third that it cannot be ranked.

It is of interest to use a brief case study of one regional country, Indonesia, to show the impact of this kind of international testing on teachers. Indonesia was ranked towards the bottom of the 2007 TIMSS results. Subsequently the government has put in place new requirements for teacher education. All teachers will now be required to undergo a specified professional training course to ensure that they meet the requirements of the new progressivism in educational policy making in order to lift Indonesia from the bottom of the league table. At the same time, when the responsible Minister shared this plan at a recent international conference he also made the point that TIMSS 2007 accounted for only 39% of the Indonesian curriculum. This meant that for Indonesian students 60% of the content of the test was not curriculum related. This maybe a better explanation for student performance than teacher quality but it is the latter that has become the focus of education policy. It is teachers who are seen to be the problem in Indonesia, not the test.

Similar policy directions can be seen on other countries, although not so directly related to international testing. For the last three decades, policy makers in the West have focused their attention on teacher qualifications, teacher licensing, teacher testing and evaluation, performance pay and the development of teaching standards. These variables are

seen to be ways in which the quality of the teaching profession can be improved. It is fair to say, that in many Western countries teachers have been placed centre stage in the elusive chase for national economic competitiveness. Enhancing student learning is seen to be directly related to the quality of the teacher no matter how quality is measured. For example, econometric models have been developed to measure how teacher quality inputs relate to student outcomes.

Educators should not be quick to dismiss the student learning-teacher quality nexus. Despite the problems of measuring such relationships, it seems intuitively correct that teachers should have an impact of student learning. Yet measurement experts also identify other things can impact on learning: socioeconomic well being, gender, ethnicity, poverty, the physical conditions of schools, the quality of the school curriculum etc. So it is not just teachers. But in the West, teachers have become a policy focus because in many ways they make an easy target. From a political perspective, governments get a great deal of mileage out of seeking to improve the quality of teachers because there is so much community dissatisfaction with the teaching profession. What is more, it is easier and cheaper than trying to relieve poverty or any of the other structural features of student disadvantage. But this obsession with student achievement cannot be found in East Asia – Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Teacher quality takes on a different dimension when it comes to examining these societies. The following section will take up this issue.

Teacher Quality – A View from the East

The issue of student achievement does not feature so prominently in discussions about education in East Asia largely because students from the region do very well by international standards. Western policymakers often look to the region for answers to their own problems. So, what does this mean for teacher quality? It means a number of things.

First, it means that the variables identified in the West to enhance teacher quality must be taken as baseline rather than value added. Attracting high quality candidates to the profession, ensuring teacher qualifications are relevant and meaningful, licensing, testing and evaluation processes to ensure entrants to the profession meet the required standards and advanced skills and accomplished teaching standards to provide pathways for career growth and development are all important. Yet these are not sufficient to close the achievement gap between students in the East and the West. What are the value added components in the East that might account for the gap?

This leads to the second point – and it is a complex one. There is now a significant range of research that has focused on the characteristics of Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) learners and (Chan & Rao, 2009, Watkins & Biggs, 1996, 2001; Salili, Chiu & Hong, 2001). At the same time there has been a body of work undertaken by psychologists that has focused attention on the unique cultural characteristics of different societies and, in particular, Chinese societies (Bond, 1986, 1996). It is from this substantial body of work, plus much more in a similar vein, that we can start to discern what might be called the ‘value addedness’ of the East. The basic principle is that learning is culturally situated and that if we want to understand why students in East Asia do better than students in the United States, Australia and the UK, then we need to understand the culture in which learning is produced.

This might seem like an obvious statement to make but it is not all obvious to many Western researchers who continue to produce so called ‘generalizations’ when the only samples they ever use are from the West. Neither is it obvious to many Western policymakers who come searching for classroom practices that can easily be transplanted from one cultural context to another without any recognition that ‘culture’ cannot be transplanted. And it is not obvious to many regional policymakers who pick up Western ideas and seek to use them in

local contexts without any idea that local contexts are culturally constructed and contain within them the seeds of resistance to foreign ‘transplants’. The main point made by the body of research which has been referred to above is that culture needs to be respected if we are to understand deeper processes such as learning. So what, then, are the characteristics of cultures in North Asia that affect learning?

This complex question cannot be easily summarized. Perhaps the first point to make is that it should not be assumed that there is one single way that all Chinese students learn – an impression that is often given by phrases like “the Chinese learner”. A second point is that the so called ‘myth’ of the Chinese learner (Watkins and Biggs, 1996) has been well and truly exposed. Memorization strategies can lead to deep learning, passive students are not necessarily disengaged students and teachers in Chinese classrooms have a deep sense of caring for their students. Perhaps more important than all of this, however, is the view that has been advanced by Li (2009, p.49) that for Chinese students “perfecting oneself morally and socially” is a fundamental purpose for learning. It is not the only purpose but it is ranked as the first purpose. This is consistent with Lee’s (1996) description of Confucian learning values in which self perfection plays a very important role. Thus not only does the immediate classroom context support Chinese learners but so too does a tradition that is thousands of years old. Li (2009, p.61) talks about “learning virtues”: “resolve, diligence, endurance of hardship, perseverance and concentration”.

Herein lies the ‘value addedness’ of learning in East Asian classrooms. Students come to class with a set of learning virtues and teachers take advantage of them to get the best out of students. There is not much talk here of ability, but more of effort. We hear little about “developing the mind” and more about becoming a “good person”. We hear less about engaging students and more about students’ responsibility to themselves and their families for doing well. We hear less about problems with the teaching profession and more about respect for teachers. That is to say, the values underlying education in East Asia are almost opposite of those in the West. There can be no easy transfer one from the other even though the West seems intent on exporting its own education ideas and practices. We should declare a moratorium on this kind of export activity until we can say confidently what will be the match with local cultural values that have served regional societies so well.

The final section of the will examine the UNESCO targets for teacher supply and demand: over 1 million teachers a year between 2007 and 2015.

Teacher demand and the quality of teachers

The teacher demand targets are very challenging, especially for developing countries. The issue is whether it is better to go for “quantity” or “quality” to meet the educational needs of young people. The research literature points overwhelmingly to the importance of quality – yet quality alone may not be sufficient, as the case of countries such as the United States, Australia and the UK so clearly demonstrates. The local environment also needs to be examined closely to identify what “adds value”, as in the case of the East Asia.

Teacher quality, then, becomes a necessary but not a sufficient condition to enhance student learning. Leu (2004) has drawn together a significant amount of literature to outline what she sees as the basic requirements of a quality teacher:

- Sufficient knowledge of subject matter to teach with confidence;
- Knowledge and skills in a range of appropriate and varied teaching methodologies;
- Knowledge of the language of instruction;
- Knowledge of, sensitivity to, and interest in the young learner;
- Ability to reflect on their teaching practice and children’s responses;

- Ability to make changes in teaching/learning approaches as a result of reflection;
- Ability to create and sustain an effective learning environment;
- Understanding of the curriculum and its purposes, particularly when reform programs and new paradigms of teaching and learning are introduced;
- General professionalism, good morale, and dedication to the goals of teaching;
- Ability to communicate effectively;
- Enthusiasm for learning that can be communicated to students;
- 1. Interest in students as individuals, sense of caring and responsibility for helping them learn and become good people, and a sense of compassion;
- Good character, sense of ethics, and personal discipline; and
- Ability to work with others and to build good relationships within the school and community.

These assume qualifications that cover both the professional areas of teaching such as curriculum, assessment, teaching, learning theory etc as well as a good grounding in the content of the school curriculum. There is also an important moral dimension here so that it is not just about externalities but about who individuals are as human beings. The extent to which education authorities wish to add to these basic qualifications by demanding other quality assurance measures such as teacher tests and evaluation, advanced professional standards, licensing requirements etc would seem to be a local issue. How important are they?

Akiba, Legendre & Scribner (2007, p381) have pointed out as the result of a cross national study of teacher quality that “to reduce the achievement gap between high-SES and low-SES students, narrowing the gap in their access to qualified teachers in terms of their credentials and teaching experience alone is not sufficient”. In addition there is the availability of instructional materials and teachers’ access to professional learning that could “compensate for the initial gap in teacher qualifications”. This is an important issue for developing countries in terms of budget allocation. It means that initial teacher education is just one step in a professional ladder and that funding can be spread over the professional life of teachers. This might be a more important policy objective than demanding “instant” quality on graduation – quality builds up in a life time of professional development. It also means that other front end policy initiatives such as teacher tests and licensing requirements might not be as important as providing funds for ongoing professional development. The wise use of resources in this way is designed to secure the best learning outcomes.

In addition, however, training in itself might not be effective if it is not linked to indigenous knowledge. This is an important lesson from East Asia and it is what the East can teach the West. All learning is contextualized and that is as true in the United States as in Zambia, Bhutan etc. The preparation of teachers outside of the cultural context that influences students, their families and their communities may not achieve the kind of student learning that policymakers want. Of course, there needs to be an integration of different kinds of learning since students have to live in a postmodern world. Yet Chan and Rao (2009) have shown how in Asian contexts these new demands are being integrated with, or at least are sitting side by side with, local cultural values and beliefs. There is much to be learnt from the West, but equally the East has lessons to share as well. In striving for teacher quality both directions need to be examined to see how pathways can be identified to quality that bring Eastern and Western conceptions together. This hybrid approach – using the best in both worlds - may well be the great challenge of the twenty first century if our students and societies are to serve their roles as learning communities in a globalized world.

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