

Towards an Asia-Europe Education Dialogue: Learning Communities for the Future

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Abstract:

Europe and Asia represent between them a significant land mass and population density as well cultural traditions and historical connections that highlight the diversity and the commonalities of their constituent nation states. The European Union has recognized the importance of Asia in its policy priorities and Asian leaders increasingly look to Europe not just for investment opportunities but also cultural contacts with a special focus on encouraging mobility in the field of education. This paper examines the rationale for greater Asia-Europe dialogue especially in the field of education. It locates the basis of dialogue not just in high stakes international assessments of student performance but also cultural traditions that focus on deliberation and cooperative learning.

Keywords: policy, education, dialogue, cooperation.

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1. Introduction

The idea of an “Asia-Europe dialogue” is by no means new. Intergovernmental initiatives such as the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the ASEM Education Hub and, the Singapore –based Asia-Europe Foundation (Schneller, 2009) have been operating for over two decades. They have brought together policymakers from Asia and Europe to focus on issues of special concern to governments. In the education realm, the focus has been on higher education and issues of common concern such as funding, relations with business and general issues of management and administration. Student mobility has also been an important issue of concern in an attempt to provide young people with a broader education experience as they pursue their higher education. The benefits of exchange and cooperation have also been highlighted by the Asia-Europe Classroom Network (2012) sponsored by the Asia Europe Foundation “to provide opportunities for collaborative learning and intercultural exchanges” with a special emphasis on primary and secondary schools. The foundation for Asia-Europe cooperation has been well prepared.

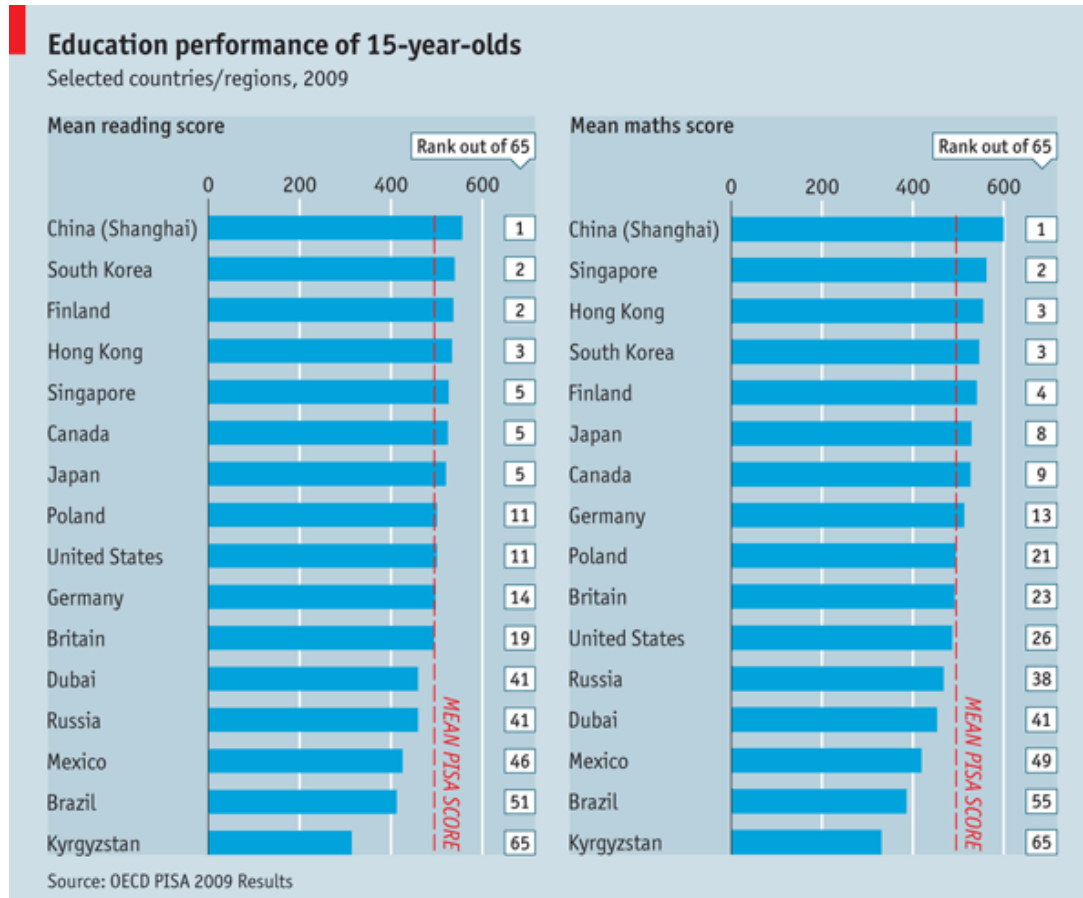
At the same time there has been increasing pressures on education systems in both Asia and Europe to contribute, through human capital formation, to the knowledge economies that are dominating international economic development. One off-shoot of this focus has been the obsession of governments to “measure” the “health” of their education systems through international large scale assessments such as TIMSS, PISA and PIRLS. The purpose has been to provide comparative data that benchmarks student performance across education systems in areas such as mathematics, science and reading. One interesting

feature of these kinds of comparisons is the relative placement of Asian and European countries, often displayed as league tables to show performance from best to worst. In PISA 2009, for example, *The Economist* (2010) extracted data from the results to show comparative performance in Reading and Mathematics. It was a very simple and graphic way to show the comparisons using mean scores at the country level. Such a display (see the following page) does highlight Asia/Europe comparisons: six of the top ten countries in Mathematics were from Asia, three from Europe and one from North America. For Reading, there was a similar pattern: four of the top ten were from Asia, 3 from Europe, 2 from Oceania and one from North America. The Science results, not shown below, were similar: six of the top ten were from Asia, two from Europe, two from Oceania and one from North America. But why use these measurements in this way?

One reason to do so is as an incentive for those countries that have not done so well to follow the example of the so called “leading countries”. By using the “league table” approach the comparisons seems stark. So stark, in fact, that the United States Secretary of Education responded to the release of the PISA results in this way (Duncan, 2010):

Today's PISA results show that America needs to urgently accelerate student learning to remain competitive in the global economy of the 21st century. More parents, teachers, and leaders need to recognize the reality that other high-achieving nations are both out-educating us and out-competing us. Our educational system has a long way to go to fulfill the American promise of education as the great equalizer.

This kind of response has given rise to an OECD (2011) publication, *Lessons from PISA for the United States*, in an



Source: *the Economist*, 7 December 2010.

attempt to see how the successes of largely Asian education systems (along with Finland !) might be important for the United States. In describing this phenomena, (Bieber and Martens, 2011, p.3) refer to “ a race to the top — the upward driving effects of policies to improve performance (so that) countries compete for the best performing system try (ing) to improve their education system’s performance by meeting international recommendations”¹. This kind of “race” is driven by the competitive nature of the international economy and the belief that ‘learning’ drives human capital development, skills formation and innovation, the key contributors to modern knowledge economies (Kennedy and Lee, 2010). Is

¹ For studies of how education systems respond to PISA see Bieber & Martens (2011), Ringarp, & Rothland (2010), Rutkowski & Engle(2010) and Bulle,(2011). For a more critical analysis of the influence of PISA see Hopmann (2008).

competition the best way to promote such learning?

While competition through international large scale assessments may be a spur for change, it may not be the best way to create real learning about the contexts and directions for change. I do not want to disagree with the idea international benchmarking itself, but I do want to suggest that the kind of extrapolations made on the basis of these benchmarks can be quite misleading. Ringarp and Rothland (2010), for example, have shown how education systems can move in entirely different policy directions in the ‘race’ to improve student learning outcomes. Bulle (2011) has also argued that the success of Finland is not based on the formal policy framework governing education but on Finnish teachers’ resistance to it. Both of these examples demonstrate that country level achievement scores are a long way from a

correct ‘reading’ of the contexts that produced them. Extrapolations from such simple statistic can be highly problematic.

In what follows I want to suggest an alternative to competition as a means of learning across education systems and the cultures that underpin them. I also want to suggest that there are other issues to be explored than maths, science and reading scores. For example, how are young people from Asia and Europe to live together in the future and how are they to create a world that will be safe and secure for the generations that succeed them? In what follows I want to explore three questions in particular:

- How can learning about educational issues and contexts be stimulated, other than through competitive large scale assessments?
- What should be the focus of such learning?
- How can such learning be facilitated?

2. Learning about Education Issues and Contexts— Prospects and Possibilities

“Dialogue” has been an important cultural practice in both the East and the West. Socrates, through *The Dialogues of Plato*, showed how debate and discussion could be used to clarify key social and philosophical issues and in the *Analects* Confucius’ conversations with his disciples have been reported. Platonic and Confucian dialogues are not exactly the same genre, although they demonstrate that dialogue as pedagogy has cross cultural application stemming from the earliest intellectual efforts in the different cultural contexts. Chen (2011, p.8) has argued that the similarity between Socrates and Confucius was their understanding that knowledge came from within individuals and not from outside and this is what dictated their pedagogy:

The key to Socrates’s art of midwifery is that he did not appear to want to instruct people. Contrarily, he gave the impression that he desired to learn from those with whom he spoke. Thus, instead of lecturing in the manner of a schoolmaster, he discussed and asked questions, mostly in the marketplace of Athens. Similarly, Confucius’s teaching was all dialogical with and among his pupils, asking questions and holding discussions with them in various settings: in courtyards and under trees. This conversational “delivery” of knowledge emphasizes that our learning does not actually transpire when transmission of “preconceived” knowledge is forced on us, especially when we are reluctant to receive it at all. Whenever we truly learn something, it is somehow when we have contributed to it, just as the pregnant woman needs to “push” by herself in order to complete her labor.

Thus in both the Platonic and Confucian traditions learning takes place in dialogue – in asking and answering questions, reflecting and responding and valuing “the other”. According to both Socrates and Confucius, learning does not occur as an isolated experience – it is socially constructed, it is intentional and it is above all moral, or at least directed toward moral purposes. This approach to learning can be seen as an important cross cultural understanding.

“Dialogue” was also the process chosen for the United Nations’ “International Year of the Dialogue among Civilizations 2001” and its follow up, the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations. The purposes were broadly political and as 2001 progressed its purposes became even more important as the events of September 11 seemed to suggest that the ‘clash of civilizations’ had won out over ‘dialogue’. Yet underlining the idea of ‘dialogue’ was the recognition that unless people communicated with each other across cultures, religions, borders and societies the things that divided them would always be more important than their common humanity. As

Afrasiabi (2001) commented “the mere reference to dialogue among civilisations implies a measure of communicativeness and mutual respect, and bears with it a deliberative, democratic and non-violent sociability”. The writer is under no illusions that the world can be ‘cured’ with dialogue; but he sees that without it competition and conflict rather than openness and cooperation will continue to dominate the relationship between cultures and civilizations.

Dialogue, then, can be seen as a tool for learning, for interrogating, for understanding and, in the end, for changing behavior and attitudes. It is a democratic process that opens up possibilities and new ways of looking at things. In an important sense dialogue can also be more than this, as in the work of philosophers such as Martin Buber and Michael Bakhtin where understanding the other is as important as, if not more important than, understanding self. (Sidorkin, 1996). From a somewhat different perspective but with similar intentions, UNESCO (2011) endorsed policy dialogue as an important learning process:

Policy dialogue between countries and across a range of education stakeholders contributes to developing and implementing effective education policies. It is essential that these policies are discussed in the broader political arena and connected to other sectors and policy issues, such as employment, health, finance and family, among others

At global and regional levels, policy dialogue helps countries....learn from each others’ experiences in order to improve their education systems through concrete actions on the ground. At country level, the dialogue between education stakeholders aims at reaching consensus and engaging them on the elaboration and implementation of national education policies and strategies.....

Thus, as an alternative to the competitive paradigm of international benchmarking, it seems that dialogue is a real possibility.

As a practice, dialogue is well known in both Asia and Europe Learning is a central feature of dialogue and understanding others becomes an important part of any dialogical process. This is not to say that international benchmarking is irrelevant. It can still play an important role in alerting education systems to problems and issues that need to be addressed (for example, low performing groups within countries, influences on learning outcomes, strengths and weakness of different students in different subjects etc). But in seeking solutions to these problems, it is dialogue that can best help to appreciate contexts, lessons that have been learnt and the possibilities for change. Dialogue can become the bridge helping learning to take place between Asia and Europe on key educational issues as the complexities of the twenty first century are encountered and negotiated. But what are the issues? This question will be addressed the following section.

3. What are the key education issues for dialogue between Asia and Europe?

There could be many answers to this question, but a review of international benchmarking studies and reflection on the issues that arise from them suggest for key issues:

- Teachers and teacher education;
- Teaching and classrooms;
- Schools and leadership; and
- Students and citizenship education.

I do not want to treat these topics exhaustively here, since they require deep study and extensive dialogue, but I do want to indicate why they are important and what might be learnt from dialogue.

Teachers and teacher education.

There is no disagreement that teachers are fundamental to student learning and

policy reviews such as those conducted by McKinsey Consulting (Mourshed, Chinezi and Barber, 2011) and OECD (2011) confirm this. Kennedy (in press) has recently argued that given the success of Asian students in large scale international assessments that their teachers need to be given some credit and consequently so too should the teacher education programmes that have produced these teachers. Yet determining the specific teacher characteristics that influence student learning is no easy matter. Often in the West the focus is on enhancing teacher quality through mechanisms such as qualifications, licensing arrangements, teacher testing and evaluation, salary incentives, career ladders etc. Yet in the East these teacher accountability instruments seem less important. Kennedy (in press) talks about “the ‘value-addedness’ of learning in 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.

Teachers in this context must be professionally competent, as the Western accountability instruments require, but they must be more than this. They must appreciate the fundamental importance of learning to families and society as a whole and they must see their role in these broader contexts. Yet exactly how this happens or what teacher education programmes to encourage it remains unexplored. What is important to understand is that culture plays an important role in preparing and

developing a nation’s teachers and it is these deeply cultural understandings that need to be the basis for dialogue. Learning about the cultures in which teachers are embedded may be the most important part of any cross cultural dialogue on teachers and teacher education.

Teaching and classrooms.

What teachers do in classrooms, as distinct from the attributes they bring to the classroom, must play an important role in student learning. Bulle (2011) has recently shown how education systems themselves contain value orientations that influence teaching and learning. Furthermore, she suggests that a mixture of academic and progressive orientations is better than the adoption of either one of these as the sole pedagogical driver. We know, for example, that pedagogies in Asian contexts are likely to be more teacher-centred than in some Western contexts, yet Asian students perform very well on international assessments. Bulle (2011) shows how the adoption of progressivism in the French education systems seems to be related to a decline in student performance but no more so than in Germany where a strong academic orientation has been maintained. These extrapolations from international assessment data cry out for detailed and serious debate and discussion. Why do conservative pedagogies seem to be successful and progressive pedagogies less so?

What do Asian classrooms look like? How do teachers demonstrate their caring attitudes in highly pressurized classroom environments? What does a so called “progressivist” classroom look like? Is an academic orientation to the curriculum and pedagogy always teacher directed? We know little about these things although the very interesting TIMSS classroom videos have begun to provide

some insights into what happens in mathematics classrooms in cross cultural contexts. Understanding these contexts and how they influence teaching is an important priority for the future.

Schools and leadership.

Teachers and students are embedded in schools the environments of which have the potential to influence teaching and learning. Hallinger and Heck (2010) have recently shown how school leadership can influence student learning although; it is not a direct effect. Rather, they suggest a “values based normative model of leadership” (p.14) that assumes reciprocal rather than direct or mediated effects and that takes into account personal values as well as the specific school context. Such an approach suggests that generalizability is limited and there is no ‘magic’ formula but that the school leader’s values and the context that she/he creates will be powerful determiners of student learning outcomes. But how does this play out in Asian and Western contexts and how are leaders prepared in these contexts. What can be learnt from high performing schools in Asia and is it similar to or different from, say high performing schools in Finland? How can we best understand the cultural contexts influencing school leadership?

Students and citizenship education.

Preparing young citizens for an uncertain future is a key priority for all societies. Yet when the results of international benchmarking studies are taken into account it can be seen that Asian students do as well in studies of civic and citizenship education as they do in reading, mathematics and science (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr and Losito, 2010). How do programmes of civics and citizenship education differ between Asia and Europe and do these differences account for the difference in results? It is well known, for example,

that civic education in Asia is more oriented towards moral education than political education but exactly how this influences student learning is unknown. At the same time the international study showed that there are shared democratic values between Asian and European students despite differences in historical and cultural contexts. Understanding how students acquire these values in different contexts and ensuring that schools and teachers in particular can provide enriching experiences to support the development of students’ democratic values is surely a key priority for the future.

This brief sketch of areas for potential education dialogue between Asia and Europe is not meant to limit other possibilities. There is much to be learnt in other areas such as curriculum development, assessment, treatment of students with special needs, ethnic minority education, gender equity education etc. There is no necessary end to the dialogic process but what is outlined above suggests a beginning to provide greater understanding and to enhance learning across cultures. The final issue to consider is how best to facilitate the learning process.

4. How can such learning be facilitated?

What can facilitate learning?

Despite the competitive nature of international benchmarking, the way forward to create dialogue is cooperation, collaboration and partnership. Working together across borders and cultures is an important way to build trust and create a true learning environment. Most universities have been actively engaging in internationalization over the past decade so that structures already exist for creating formal partnerships. It is on the basis of these formal partnership arrangements between institutions that

dialogue can take place.

Who?

Many different people can be involved in dialogue, but of the purposes of the education dialogues proposed above the involvement of academic staff and students is essential. One reason for this is to encourage cross-generational thinking on major issues – knowledge generation is not confined to academics. Nevertheless, academic debate and discussion will be an important form of dialogue. At the same time it seems important for the future to encourage student to student dialogue so that today's problems don't continue into tomorrow.

How?

Opportunities for staff and student exchange will provide one means by which dialogue can be facilitated. The importance of exchange is that it provides a way for academic staff and students to experience the other culture and indeed experience the 'other' in the most direct way. Seminars and conferences are also important ways of bringing people together around key themes and issues. Out of these kind of experiences, as well as exchange in general, can come important research initiatives designed to address real problems as they are identified. On-going research collaboration, involving both academic staff and students, can be an important by-product of dialogue.

There are no limits to dialogue just as there are no limits to learning. What has been outlined above are simple ways to facilitate both dialogue and learning as educators sit together eager to understand each other and the contexts in which they are embedded. The outcomes may not be known in advance but a commitment to learning and a willingness to change for the better will ensure that dialogue can be used productively and for the common

good.

5. Conclusion

While there is much to divide people in our world today divisions are not inevitable. Dialogue can create communities of thinkers who can address major issues through debate, discussion and a willingness to understand the 'other'. Education is a common value in all societies and while it can be used to divide nations it can also be used to bring them together. Understanding each country's education successes and failures can be an important way to reach a broader understanding of civilizations and cultures that otherwise may appear to be in opposition rather than in harmony. Education serves common purposes irrespective of any particular ideology – it can create pathways for the disadvantaged, new ideas that can lead to innovation, understandings about complex issues and tolerance for groups and individuals. These important outcomes should not be the preserve of a single nation for they serve to advance all nations and individuals within them. If dialogue can help serve this purpose it will play an important role in our current uncertain and unpredictable world.

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