

Trading Tricks: A Comparative Look at Comparison-Driven Education Reforms

Proposal for a Special Issue of *Educational Researcher*

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In recent years international comparisons of educational achievements and practices have become increasingly popular as a source of both motivation and strategies for many educational systems in the world. Knowing that other people's children, who are in essence the future competitors of our children, are learning better than our own motivates us to change what we do so as to ensure that our future citizens can compete in an increasingly global economy. In the meantime, seeing how other schools are teaching more effectively gives us ideas about how to change our own practices. What is interesting is that the different educational systems all seem to feel the others are doing better than themselves. For example, while it is popular in the US to think that students in Asian countries have a far more solid mastery of knowledge in mathematics and science, the Asians think their children have been drowned in the sea of facts and lack the ability to create and think independently and critically, unlike their counterparts in the US. Consequently, these nations have begun to abandon their traditional practices and take up new and "foreign" practices, which have often been the traditional practices that are being abandoned by others. Thus, a global look at the educational reform efforts in various nations suggests a massive transnational swapping of educational strategies. A telling example is the treatment of standardized tests in China and the US. In the same year when China, where formal tests originated nearly 2000 years ago and where testing has been an integral part of the society, issued a policy to limit the role and uses of testing after the realization of how testing has driven its schools to test-preparation institutions, the US, which has been looked upon by other nations as one of the most creative societies where students and teachers are encouraged to explore and construct their own ideas freely, without the burden of tests, did just the opposite by elevating testing to an unprecedented status. The *No Child Left Behind* Act has been dubbed as the *No Child Left Untested* Act testifies the new status of testing in the new scheme of educational reform in the US.

As nations move forward with their efforts to replace their traditional practices with new ones or trading their own practices with foreign ones, it is important to keep in mind a number of obvious problems associated with problems with reforms, particularly reforms supported by international comparisons. First, we tend to throw the baby out with the bath water. In the attempt to learn from others, we forget what we have achieved is still worthwhile and abandon our own strengths. Second, we tend to just focus on only the good part of other's achievements, ignoring the negative. Third, we tend to ignore the conditions that enable the achievement of the others, focusing only on borrowing the tricks while ignoring the cultural, social, and systemic contexts that make these tricks effective. Fourth, we tend to look at each strategy and practice in isolation, ignoring the possibility that they may have to interact with each other to produce the desired effects. Lastly, we tend to, actually, have to examine other nations' experiences from our own perspectives, leading to inevitable misinterpretations.

These problems can be only addressed through, paradoxically, international comparisons, but within a new framework, a framework that focuses on both positive and negative, both strategies and their enabling conditions, and both our own interpretations and others'. This special issue of ER is an attempt to do so.

The proposed issue of *ER* plans to include papers grown out of The Asia Pacific Economic Corporation(APEC) educational reform summit to be held in Beijing, China in January 2004. APEC is a geographically defined international organization. Its 21 members are economies separated by the Pacific Ocean, which is also often considered a cultural divide between the two generally accepted dominant traditions of thinking: the East and the West. Although tremendous diversity exists within each tradition and plenty commonalities between the two, the dichotomy of the East and West seems real. Rooted in the Chinese Confucius philosophy, the East seems to be sufficiently different from the West, which has its roots in the thinking of Greek philosophers such as Aristotle. These two traditions have had significant impact on education. Due to their different views of knowledge, the world, and the person, they have resulted in quite different educational practices that epitomize the dichotomies of education, despite the fact that the modern education systems in the East are very much a Western export.

Generally speaking educational systems in the East, where the collective comes before the individual, have traditionally taken the centralized approach with the central government playing the role of developing, designing, and executing policies and standards regarding financing, curriculum, textbooks, assessment, and teachers, while in the West, where a more decentralized approach has been taken, local communities have more autonomy to decide how schools are funded, what students should learn and how they are assessed, and who can become teachers. Likewise, Eastern educational practices, influenced by the belief that knowledge comes before action and that education is to pass on what great minds have already discovered, have historically emphasized knowledge acquisition, while in the West, where individuals are considered capable and responsible agents, educational practices have emphasized the development of ability to think and act as individuals. Thus distinct differences have been observed between eastern and western schooling in terms of how the curricula are structured and how students are taught to behave in schools.

Different practices lead to different outcomes. The Eastern approach seemed to have resulted in more school accountability, better student learning of disciplinary content, and more focus on academics while the Western approach seemed to have produced more autonomous school management, creativity and critical thinking skills among students, and more focus on student non-academic skills. Faced with these results, neither systems feels completely satisfied because they want to achieve more, and ideally both autonomy and accountability, both knowledge and creativity, both academic and social skills. They all want to bring all students up to individually challenging levels of academic performance, while fostering students' ability to creatively apply knowledge to new

learning situations. As a result, many APEC economies have engaged in serious efforts of educational reform.

Thus, in many ways, the APEC region epitomizes reform efforts driven by international comparisons. The APEC summit thus serves as an ideal context for exploring the issues surrounding these kinds of reforms. The APEC summit has commissioned eight scholars to summarize reform efforts in the Asia Pacific region in four areas: math and science education, language education, uses of information technology, and systemic reform. Each topic will be addressed by two scholars, one from an eastern perspective and the other Western.

For the special issue, we envision combining the eight papers into four, each for a topical area and co-authored by the two scholars who prepared the papers for the summit. The issue will also include an introductory paper by the guest editors and a brief concluding paper summarizing the issues.

Although the papers are invited, they will go through the same rigorous peer review process as all submissions to *ER*. We will identify three reviewers for each paper and work with the authors to ensure the high quality expected of *ER*.

The scholars who will contribute to this special issue are:

1. Language education:
 - a. **Allan Luke**/Dean, Center for Research on Pedagogy and Practice, National Institute of Education, Singapore
 - b. **Patricia Duff**, Research Editor/*TESOL Quarterly*, Asc. Prof, UBC
2. Math/Science Ed:
 - a. **Bill Schmidt**, Director, US TIMMS, University Distinguished Professor, Michigan State
 - b. **Kyungmee Park**, associate professor, Department of Mathematics Education, Hongik University, Seoul, Korea
 - c.
3. Technology:
 - a. **Ricki Goldman-Segall**, New Jersey Institute of Technology
 - b. **Jianwei Zhang**, Tsinghua University, China
4. **Systemic Reform**:
 - a. **Brian Caldwell**, Dean/School of Ed, University of Melbourn, Australia
 - b. **Frederick Leung**, Professor, University of Hong Kong