WELCOME TO THE NEWSLETTER ABOUT EDUCATION RESEARCH

‘Learning from Success’ is the title of this e-newsletter from IALEI and refers to the reflections of researchers from the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore on what counts as education success as seen from different perspectives.

The National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University is one of the members of the International Alliance of Leading Education Institutes (IALEI), a global educational think thank consisting of ten of the leading educational research institutions worldwide. It aims at producing new insights and recommendations on educational matters, and to move research into policy and practice. (Read more about IALEI’s projects at www.intlalliance.org)

In the future IALEI will provide you with questions and answers, knowledge about and recommendations from the field of education research.

Yours sincerely,

Claus Holm
Editor in Chief and Executive Director of IALEI
LEARNING FROM SUCCESS

Is the education miracle an ‘Asian’ or a ‘Finnish’ miracle? To make the world richer, we must find out what counts as success from diverse perspectives.

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The higher education sector has been affected by the recent emergence of university ranking exercises such as the Times Higher Education’s World University Ranking, QS University World University Rankings, Shanghai Jiaotong Academic Ranking of World Universities and Ranking Web of World Universities (Webometrics). At the school system level, internationally benchmarked tests of student achievement studies, such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have attracted attention worldwide due to the varied performances across countries among students of the same age cohorts. Education policy issues such as equity, quality, effectiveness and efficiency surface again with comparative perspectives in relation to education and/or learning outcomes.

These comparative studies have also turned international attention on Asia, as many East Asian jurisdictions consistently rank top of the league in these studies, in particular Singapore, Hong Kong SAR, South Korea, Japan, Chinese Taipei and recently Shanghai. The success of these East Asian jurisdictions has created education miracles in the 21st century which may be likened to the economic miracles that Asia’s Four Little Tigers (Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea) created back in the 1980s. But in addition to these Asian miracles, Finland has also created the ‘Finnish miracle’, being ranked top consistently in many of these studies, including the most recently released International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) report (Schultz et al., 2010). It is thus intriguing to investigate whether

In Finland, children’s physical health is regarded as an important prerequisite for learning and well-being. Therefore, Finnish schools have good cafeterias that provide free, nutritional meals. It is also considered important for students to get fresh air and exercise during the school day. Almost all schools have obligatory outdoor breaks and in general the outdoor areas and playgrounds are designed to provide play and development opportunities. At this school in Lappeenranta, during winter the students use skis and skates at break time, and parts of the school playground are sprayed with water in order to encourage the pupils to play ice hockey.
Finland is more Asian or whether these top-performing jurisdictions in Asia are more Finn-like, as a possible explanatory factor of success. Interestingly, a factor common to these top-performing jurisdictions, penetrating across Asia to this top-performing European country, is the significance of education as a societal value. The consistent success of this small number of jurisdictions has also raised an interesting question, as they are relatively smaller states compared to the many larger participating countries that have tended to be ranked middle or lower in student achievements. A corollary question is whether ‘small is indeed beautiful’ and whether the size of the countries is a factor that would affect the effectiveness of managing the average success of students nationwide.

The interest in explaining success factors has led to the publication of two McKinsey reports in 2007 and 2010 respectively. A major contribution of the first McKinsey report is its open acknowledgement of the quality of teachers and teacher education as a determinant of the quality of the Finnish school pedagogy is characterised by a high degree of classroom management and community in the classroom. A special feature is the school desk, which is often used as the student’s personal school furniture by children between the ages of 6 and 13. The storage space inside the desk is used to store various teaching materials, pencils, USB sticks, extra mittens, etc. This makes daily life for families with schoolchildren easier, as it does not take so much effort to pack the school bag.
education system – with the clarion call that the performance of the education system can only be as high as the quality of the teachers. Thus, a significant implication for education policy is whether the jurisdictions are able to attract top students of each cohort into teacher education. There seems to be some truth in this, as the successful jurisdictions do attract top performers into teacher education, e.g. the top 5–10% in Finland and South Korea and the top 10%–30% in Singapore and Hong Kong SAR. While the first McKinsey report (Barber and Mourshed, 2007) tried to draw lessons from the top ten education systems, the ambition of the second McKinsey report (Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010) was to further confine itself to the lessons from the top five education systems, and it adopted James Collins’ concept of ‘good to great’ into a systemic analysis, also adding a new category called ‘great to excellent’. As mentioned, the second report also began to look at the leadership of the education system as a possible factor, in terms of the leaders staying in office for at least seven years. This implies a need for determination, commitment and persistence in implementing education reform agendas in the respective jurisdictions.

In addition to the McKinsey reports, the OECD (2010) published a report entitled Strong Performers and Successful Performers in Education: Lessons from PISA for the United States shortly after the publication of the PISA results. Obviously this was a study commissioned by the USA. The Foreword of the report particularly noted Obama’s endeavour in launching one of the world’s most ambitious education reform agendas, namely the ‘Race To The Top’ initiative. For the USA, the middle ranking obtained in the PISA 2010 has created today’s ‘Sputnik’ crisis, another call for emergency since the last emergency call by A Nation At Risk in 1983, raising a question whether the USA is ‘still a nation at risk’.

Today, we are living in a globalised world with an active turnover of information about education performance, which is available for immediate analysis with transparency. We are also living in a world in which multiple agencies can participate in defining educational achievements, such as international research organisations, consultancy companies and non-governmental organisations. We are thus living in a world that is keen to contemplate what counts as success and define success factors, from diverse perspectives. Our joint efforts in offering our lens to look at successful experiences will be essential and helpful for the global community to identify success factors that could be useful for the education development agenda in their nations.

REFERENCES:
INSPIRATION FOR REDEFINING TEACHER EDUCATION

The findings of the first joint IALEI research theme on ‘Transforming Teacher Education’ resulted in the publication of the report Transforming Teacher Education – Redefining Professionals for 21st Century Schools. Download the report here.

This year, the Omani Ministry of Education was granted permission to translate the report into Arabic. The Arabic version has now been published and has been well reviewed in the Middle East. The impact of our joint efforts and work is spreading.

ABOUT THE NEWSLETTER

This newsletter is produced by the IALEI Secretariat with the aim of spreading knowledge and recommendations within the field of education research. The e-newsletter is published a minimum of four times a year.

If you would like to sign up for the newsletter, or to have your name removed from our mailing list, please write to ialei@dpu.dk

For any additional information, please refer to the website www.intlalliance.org