Notes from Asia Pacific, late March 2013

Is effective teaching the same the world over?

Confucian thinking about teaching and learning is centuries old but much discussed today. Indeed, commentators have given aspects of this heritage at least some of the credit for the high performance of youngsters from the likes of Shanghai, Singapore, Korea and Hong Kong in recent rounds of international educational tests. Confucianism values learning, cultivates a model of receiving and polishing knowledge and praises hard work and perseverance, particularly by those who find subjects difficult. "By not giving up, you can change an iron bar into a needle", said educators in the Han Dynasty (3rd century AD) and this philosophy appears to be applied with some success to children who struggle initially with school subjects such as maths and foreign languages.

Central to the tradition is the figure of the teacher – the "laoshi" – who is revered as a source of wisdom and knowledge, not only about the subject being taught but about life. The prefix "lao" has a sense of "old", which is a reason for respect.

In contrast, the West can offer the equally venerable Socratic tradition, in which the teacher is seen as a facilitator, bringing knowledge out of students by asking questions. In the words of Pestalozzi, Socrates "often insisted that he really knew nothing, but his questioning skills allowed others to learn by self-generated understanding". There may have been a level of irony in Socrates' reported self-deprecation – it takes a highly skilled facilitative teacher to ask the right questions – but the Socratic tradition undoubtedly encourages learners to ask questions from the outset. Knowledge is seen as situated in the learner rather than passed on by the wise teacher.

The contrasts between these traditions raise important questions for policy-makers and teachers who are keen to improve their educational outcomes, particularly Western governments who are envious of the educational successes of Shanghai and Singapore. What can we learn from each other? Should the West copy Asian teaching practices despite not sharing the traditional concept of the "laoshi"? And are research findings on what works best in Western schools directly applicable in Asia?

Recently Cambridge ran a seminar in Shanghai, China, entitled "What does research suggest are the most powerful influences on student learning and what does this mean in Asia?" Well over 100 delegates attended in person. Most came from China, but we also welcomed visitors from countries including Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, India and Pakistan. As many again joined online and the debate continues on LinkedIn.

The main presentation was by a Director of Visible Learningplus, based in New Zealand, who has worked extensively with John Hattie, the author of Visible Learning (2009). Visible Learning brings together the findings of over 800 pieces of "meta-analysis" of the reports of thousands of research projects aiming to quantify the effect of particular factors or changes on student achievement. Hattie devises a numerical index measuring the difference which each intervention makes to student achievement. He seeks to identify factors which make a visible difference – beyond the "hinge point" which distinguishes the really effective from activities which have small effects – as almost all educational interventions do.

Hattie concludes that there is little research evidence that changes to the structures of schools and education systems – much beloved of governments – of themselves make much difference. Such factors as class size, streaming or non-streaming, open space versus closed classrooms, single-sex education versus co-education were all found to make little difference, taken in isolation. The visible differences were made by students and teachers -

notably, by students' expectations of their own learning, the quality of teaching and the commitment of teachers. We saw a video of "visible learning" in action in a school in New Zealand, where students and teachers were aware of their learning goals and of their progress and were highly motivated to go further. We saw a five-year-old, Ben, showing his mother how he was getting on with his reading by pointing at a wall-chart with pictures of a bee moving from one hive to the next.

Almost all of the 800+ pieces of meta-analysis cited by Hattie are in English and the majority of the research was carried out in the United States. At the seminar we were helped by an education academic from China to consider the relevance of Hattie's findings to Asia. Most delegates thought that it was very important in their contexts to have access to as many research findings as possible, particularly at a time when many of their governments were asking for evidence-based advice as a matter of urgency. And some of the interventions evaluated by Hattie – including some found to be comparatively ineffective – were described as "hot topics" in China. These included homework, school choice, class size and summer camps.

An even hotter topic in many Asian countries is examinations, which have had a high profile in China for some two thousand years. There was some debate about the relevance in that context of research findings on the limiting effect of too much "teaching to the test" in the USA.

There is no doubt that children across the world share many characteristics and that we can be surprised how quickly they can pick up and use good ideas from other cultures. We went away from the discussion keen to find further research which could add Asian experience to the vast database developed by Hattie. Some attenders at the seminar suspected that there were strengths of the Confucian tradition which the Western research did not pick up.

The translators at the seminar said that there was no obvious way of translating the title of Hattie's book – "Visible Learning" – into Chinese. The presenter told us that visible learning occurs when "teachers see learning through the eyes of the student and students see themselves as their own teachers". Is this a Socratic approach rather than a Confucian one? Does it denigrate the role of the wise "laoshi"? If so, is that a good or a bad thing? Can different teaching approaches have different effects in different cultures? Or is effective teaching the same the world over?