

The Shanghai Surprise

When comparing the performance of Chinese and U.S. students on international tests, take cultural and political considerations into account before drawing conclusions

When the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results were released in December, the big surprise was the world-leading performance by Shanghai. One commentator, former Reagan administration education official Chester Finn, likened the results to Sputnik, the Soviet satellite that beat the U. S. into space in the 1950s.

School board members are likely to hear many dire predictions about the rise of China and the decline of the U.S. Some of these assertions, however, deserve closer scrutiny.

Shanghai is not China

Shanghai—the largest city in China, with more than 30 million people—gleams with illumination at night that would overpower Times Square on New Year’s Eve. The overwhelming impression that most visitors have is one dominated by skyscrapers, shopping malls, luxury brands, and avid consumerism.

A visitor willing to travel less than an hour’s drive outside of Shanghai will find the other China, the rural areas that continue to make up more than 70 percent of the country’s 1.3 billion population. While education in Shanghai is certainly making progress, the city is a magnet for talent from business, medicine, and education. Living conditions and salaries are far higher than those in the rest of the country.

Therefore, generalizing from the PISA results that “China is leading the world” is as valid as taking the scores from the wealthiest U.S. suburbs and claiming that those results represent the entire nation.

Respect for teaching and learning

While Shanghai’s success may not be generalized to the whole of China, we should not be sanguine about the future of American schools compared to those in the world’s most populous nation.

I taught in China and have published

research there, so I might offer some different observations about its education system that apply both to the more advantaged urban areas, such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Nanjing, and to rural areas.

The most profound difference between our cultures is the respect provided to teachers. In wealthy areas, that respect is evidenced by the fact that teaching is a well-paid and competitive job. In rural areas, teachers earn less than \$100 a month and sometimes sleep eight to a room.

Regardless of their compensation, however, teachers are treated with enormous respect by students, parents, and the general public.

That respect for learning is a lifelong endeavor, as the growing number of “Old People’s Universities” attests. These universities provide a place for retired people to congregate, play music, create art, perform plays, dance, study, lecture, and otherwise remain active and vibrant.

Student attitudes

In *The World is Flat*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Thomas Friedman described an “ambition gap” between the U.S. and China. Their students, he concluded, simply worked harder than ours.

My observation is that the core issue is much deeper. When I judged 44 third-through eighth-grade Chinese students in an English speaking competition, the assigned subject was “my most admired person.” Given the country’s heavy-handed political cant, one might expect them to use Mao or other political or historical icons as the topic for their speech. But, in 43 out of 44 speeches,



the most admired person was a teacher.

After I returned to the U.S., I heard middle school students address the same topic, and the most memorable nominee was “Sex and the City” star Sarah Jessica Parker. Not a single teacher was mentioned. With no disrespect intended for Ms. Parker, who no doubt is an admirable person, it’s worth asking how students in China and the U.S. discern who is “most admired” from who is simply popular.

Academics and the arts

Researchers will devote a good deal of study to the “China surprise” in the months ahead, but I hope we are careful with our generalizations. The day the PISA results were announced, I heard one American school official declare, “That’s just because they go to school for 10 hours a day and never have any music or art.”

That’s simply not the case. Many Chinese students certainly study well, but their school days are typically shorter than those in the U.S. and music, art, and physical education are required parts of the curriculum, along with English (from first grade), math, Mandarin (a second language for many Chinese students), and social studies.

Just as we should not overreact to the new PISA results, we should not dismiss them. The gap between China and the rest of the world will not be closed with new curricula or advanced technology, but with a dramatically changed culture in which teachers, administrators, and even school board members are treated with the dignity and respect that educators receive in the world’s best-educated nations. ■

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