

Reading Achievement, International Comparisons, and Moral Panic: Do International Reading Test Scores Matter?

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Moral panic about reading achievement appears to afflict most English-speaking nations from time to time, and when this occurs, stories of a decline in achievement appear regularly in the media. Referring to the first skills survey by the OECD, *The New Yorker* asserted, “In basic literacy,...younger Americans are at or near the bottom of the standings among advanced countries” (Cassidy, 2013, para. 1). In the United Kingdom, *The Guardian* newspaper told a similar story: “England’s young people near bottom of global league table for basic skills” (Ramesh, 2013). Australian students apparently fared no better, even with an emphasis on basic skills: “Focus on basic skills blamed for decline in reading standards” (Patty, 2010). In case you’re wondering whether achievement levels are higher in New Zealand, the birthplace of Reading Recovery, Radio New Zealand (2013) reported, “New Zealand’s scores in reading, maths and science examined by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2012 have fallen since the previous test in 2009” (para. 4). So, have reading achievement levels really fallen in all of these countries, and if they have, what should be done? These are the questions that will be addressed in this column.

Reading Achievement Levels Matter

Reading achievement levels matter to governments, to employers, to teachers, and to parents, and concerns about national achievement levels are not new. The first international study of reading was Thorndike’s (1973) *Reading Comprehension Education in Fifteen Countries: An Empirical Study*, which was funded by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), and the IEA’s groundbreaking work laid the foundations for today’s surveys,

of which PISA and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) attract the most attention. Why are such studies needed? The most common rationale is threefold: improving literacy, improving a nation’s economy, and improving schooling. As the a past executive director of the IEA put it in a PIRLS report, “Central to a nation’s pursuit of its social, political, and economic goals is a literate and well-educated population” (Wagemaker, 2009, p. 1).

Few would argue against this, although it is interesting to note from the outset that a causal link is being suggested between a nation’s reading achievement and its economic goals. A further element of the rationale relates to improving not only a nation’s literacy but also its education system. The website of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which oversees PISA, suggests that its data can answer such policy questions as “Are some kinds of teaching and schools more effective than others?” (OECD, n.d., para. 4). Learning from other nations about how to improve reading may be a laudable goal, but I want to suggest that it is far from straightforward to do this and that there are many reasons for proceeding with great caution before attempting to implement wholesale changes at the system level.

Can the Results of International Reading Assessments Tell Us How to Improve Our Education System?

In the mid-2000s, education specialists from all over the world descended on Finland, the nation whose 15-year-olds had come top in the world in PISA reading scores. What did these experts learn? They learned that in Finland, formal schooling doesn’t begin until age 7,

that there are free school meals for all, that class sizes are generally 15–20 students, that there is no tracking or streaming, that homework is minimal, that teachers are free to choose their own textbooks, and that there are no tests, examinations, or formal assessments of learning until the final year of high school (Sandy, 2007). To many teachers in English-speaking countries, this might sound like heaven. But even if a nation decided to sweep away its mandated curriculum and testing and double the spending on education, would this bring about an improvement in reading? Almost certainly not, if much of that national achievement is attributable to other factors.

One of those factors could well be the value placed on education in the culture of the country. Out of the 35 wealthier nations that make up the OECD, Finland has the greatest per capita expenditure on education (7% of its gross domestic product; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.). Yet, this isn't the only cultural difference. In Finland, only 5% of applicants for teacher training are accepted, and they have to complete a master's degree before being allowed to teach solo. Teachers in Finland are held in high esteem, and as well as being given autonomy, they instill autonomy in their learners. There is very little rote learning. Instead, the Finns emphasize creativity, exploration, and intellectual curiosity (P.-O. Rönnholm, personal communication, May 16, 2007). However, even this is only part of the story.

To understand why literacy achievement levels in Finland are so high, we need to look at the preschool policies that predispose toddlers to become readers. As soon as a Finnish child is born, the parents are given a maternity package that includes three books. From the age of 8 months, each baby is offered five years of free daycare, in which the emphasis is on fun, friendship, and learning. The curriculum foregrounds learning through play, exploring the environment, and enhancing language development through mathematics, natural sciences, fairy tales, history, art, music, and religion. The teacher-student ratio is 1:4 initially, and it goes no higher than 1:15 in elementary school. Parents are not only active partners in their child's learning but also invited to help shape the curriculum in response to local conditions (Finnish National Board of Education, 2004).

What can teachers and policymakers learn from all of this? First, it would be a massive undertaking to try to emulate what the Finns are doing. Even if there were a will to do so, it would take at least a generation to restructure the education system and to retrain and reeducate every teacher, parent, childcare worker,

teacher educator, employer, and administrator in the values and practices of the Finnish system. Could we even imagine our current governments being ready to significantly increase taxation, give back autonomy to teachers, and face the wrath of those think tank commentators who already believe that education is going downhill because of a failure to instill enough core knowledge and rote learning? Perhaps not.

Yet, there is one vitally important lesson that we can learn from the Finns, one that was highlighted in the very first international study of reading achievement (Thorndike, 1973): What happens before formal education begins is a massively important determinant of future literacy achievement.

Finland's Success Emphasizes the Importance of Free, Universal Childcare

A significant finding in Thorndike's (1973) study was that both individual reading achievement and the average achievement of the whole school could be predicted simply on the basis of home and family background. Factors such as mothers' educational level or even a simple count of books in the home were accurate predictors of a child's literacy achievement. In contrast, there was very little evidence that the variables that policymakers often want to focus on, such as school or teacher factors, had anywhere near as much influence (Thorndike, 1973). Perhaps the main reason for Finland's success in reading, therefore, is that their birth-to-kindergarten provision for every child, together with support for parents to encourage literacy practices at home, was able to eradicate the differences that in most nations are attributable to very uneven distributions of economic resources.

Good News for the "Core Knowledge" Campaigners: Far East Nations Top in Reading in 2012

As many readers of this journal know, Finland did not stay top in PISA reading scores. More recently, nations in the Far East have risen to the top, and Finland dropped from third in 2009 to sixth in 2012, behind Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and Korea. This put many policymakers into a difficult position. Should they continue with attempting to bring in changes that followed the Finnish model, or should they abandon these and follow the Chinese model, bringing in a more rigorous test-driven, high-homework regimen?

Why Did the Far Eastern Economies Come Top in Reading, and Should We Emulate Them?

There are at least two reasons for being extremely cautious about bringing in reforms that match the Far Eastern model. The first is that there have been growing concerns about the PISA sampling in some Far East nations. Reports have emerged that in Shanghai, students from schools in the poorest districts were not sampled, and this suspicion seemed to be confirmed when it emerged that according to Chinese census data, only 5% of the adult population of Shanghai were in the occupational group for managers, but of the students who took the PISA tests, 16% had parents in that group (Zhao, 2014). Similarly, in Singapore, 48% of those taking the tests had parents in the groups for managers, professionals, and technicians, but only a small proportion had parents in manual jobs. The reason for this is that in Singapore, over half a million migrant workers leave their wives and children hundreds of miles away to work in the city. These workers live in basic dormitory accommodations and send their salary back to their families; therefore, many of the children of the poor are not educated in Singapore (Wong, 2013). What this means is that the PISA scores of Singapore may be no more representative of literacy levels across China as a whole than would a survey of reading scores of children from the Upper East Side of Manhattan. By contrast, it has been suggested that PISA sampling in the United States has overrepresented high-poverty schools and that when this is taken into account, the achievement of U.S. students is not a cause for undue concern (Rabinovitz, 2013).

Be Careful What You Wish For

The second reason for caution relates to the nature of schooling in China. The Chinese system is unremittingly elitist, and although the government is trying to improve it, the deep principles are medieval. The primary focus in class and in the countless hours of homework is rote learning, memorization, and testing, which lead in the final year of high school to the dreaded *Gaokao* exam, a nine-hour test of knowledge that determines whether a student can go to university, and then on to a well-paid job. The 9 million students who take this test “will spend most of their waking moments [in the final year of high school] studying prior to the exam” (National Higher Education Entrance Examination, 2016, para. 21), but the pressure to perform well on tests begins much earlier in students’ schooling careers. A

recent study showed that an average school day runs from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., with many schools ignoring the requirement that students have a two-hour rest period in the middle of the day. In cities, most then go to “cramming school” for a further two hours and then spend three hours when they get home finishing homework. All students, including those in elementary school, are expected to do at least two hours of homework every day (including during the holidays), which their parents have to check and return to the school. The average 12-year-old spends 13 hours a day in the classroom or doing homework (OECD, 2014), and Children’s Day is welcomed because it is the only day in the year with no homework.

The Chinese students who take the PISA tests do well, but their success comes at a price. Saga Ringmar (2013), a Swedish American woman who attended a high school in Shanghai, wrote, “Chinese children have been taking tests since the arrival of their milk teeth. The system breeds Pisa champions, but it also ruins young lives” (para. 8). She was not exaggerating. Exact data are not easy to obtain, but the international news agency Agence France-Presse (2011) reported that “suicide is the biggest killer among Chinese aged 15–34” (para. 6) and that “extreme pressure to perform well at school and to find employment were the main reasons behind the high rate of suicide among China’s youths” (para. 7).

Is the United States Doing Badly at Reading?

No. The number of Hispanic students in U.S. schools has risen from 19% in 2003 to 25% in 2016 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), and as many teachers know, there are now elementary schools in some U.S. states that have more than 95% Hispanic students, many of whom are from communities with little preschool childcare. Any educational statistics expert would predict that such a massive demographic shift would put enormous strain on the educational system, particularly if many of those entering kindergarten speak very little English. For reading levels to hold steady under such pressure would be an enormous challenge, but this is precisely what U.S. teachers have achieved. The National Assessment of Educational Progress tests in the United States are recognized internationally as rigorous, and these show not only that reading achievement has actually improved over the past decade at all three age groups tested (9, 13, and 17) but also that both black and Hispanic students have made highly significant relative gains since the 1970s (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). In my view, this is a sig-

nificant achievement and a testament not only to the hard work and dedication of teachers but also to a constellation of policies focused on preschool, schooling, parental support, and economic interventions aimed at improving equity.

Is Finland Doomed?

So, has Finland's educational system finally crumbled as a result of decades of left-wing romantic idealism? No. In a recent study of literacy in 200 countries, Finland was ranked as the world's most literate nation (Miller & McKenna, 2016). The study widened the lens, went beyond PISA scores, and looked at each nation's cultural vitality, as expressed through its literacy practices. Perhaps that's what we should do. Ten years ago, Baker (2007), speaking as the president of the American Educational Research Association at the time, suggested that we need to widen our assessment lens and not focus solely on factual learning but on six much wider areas: complex problem solving and reasoning, flexibility and adaptive performance, a rich knowledge base, schema or principle learning, metacognition and self-monitoring, and communication.

Finally, Don't Always Trust the Media on Statistics

I hope it will be clear that even if I've discussed data that relate to the United States, my conclusions and recommendations apply to every nation:

- Don't try to change your culture. It can't be done.
- Improve reading by creating policies that support children and parents from birth.
- Build a love of books and reading that leads to lifelong learning.
- Recruit wonderful people to be teachers, and give them career-long support, recognition, and reward.

And don't worry about reading achievement in England. We're in good shape. In 1990, one month before I was due to take over as the president of the United Kingdom Reading Association, the front-page headline in our national newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*, was "Tests reveal fall in standard of pupils' reading." But that wasn't all; the subheading was even more worrying: "Number below average level doubles" (Clare, 1990, p. 1). This was certainly a shock because now every child in the land was officially below aver-

age! Well, I worked my socks off during my presidential year, and I'm proud to report that under my stewardship, we made excellent progress. By the time I handed over the presidential gavel, England was back on track, and only half the readers in the nation were below average—and we've maintained that proud record ever since.

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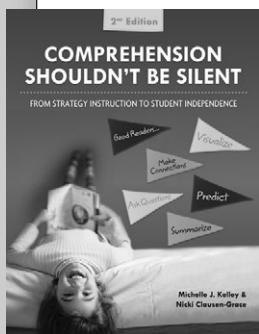
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