

**Valuing Difference:  
A comparison of  
Australian and Hong Kong School Education**  
A Personal Reflection to add to the Asian Knowledge Base on  
Educational Leadership

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## **Abstract**

If the PISA results are accepted as an indicator of the relative worth of nation's school education systems, than HK would be considered to be far ahead of Australia. Australia is certainly a developed nation with an advanced and worthy education system, so why does HK education significantly outperform Australian education in all aspects of PISA? This paper provides insight into the differences between both, from the perspective of a school leader who has the unique credentials of having being a successful principal in both Australia and Hong Kong. The paper rebukes the belief that the highest performing countries, like Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, etc, are somehow successful because they are Asian countries with inherent cultures that emphasize authoritarianism, collective obedience and submission of the individual to the state. Instead, this paper argues that the reason for the difference is to be found in comparing school practices and educational beliefs, and that understanding this is important because it will lead to improving student outcomes in both Australia and Hong Kong. This paper describes the key points of difference between Australian and Hong Kong school education to add to the Asian knowledge base in educational leadership.

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## **Introduction**

This paper is a narrative, so let's begin with a story. Recently I was meeting with five other Hong Kong principals on a HK Principal's Institute matter, when one whom I know well, cheekily asked me, "How do you do lesson observations of your Chinese teachers?" You see they know I am Australian, that I don't speak Chinese and mine is a local school. I answered, "Well yes, I personally do lesson observations on all 65 of our teachers and that includes those teaching in Chinese. I have found over the 6 years I have been here, that in fact it's better to do a lesson observation when you don't get caught up in what the teacher is saying. I look at the interactions, at how much time is spent in teacher centred & explicit instruction, how much time students spend in active and engaged learning, the amount of feedback sought by students, the on-task behaviour of

students, the movements of the teacher, the variety of teaching strategies & use of digital learning strategies (not just PPT.), the richness of the classroom learning ecosystem, and so on. If you had asked me back when I was a principal in Australia if it was possible to do lesson observations in Chinese, I guess I would have laughed.”

I am proudly principal of JCTIC, a secondary school of approximately 1,000 students in Hong Kong. Ours is not an International school, but an Aided Secondary ‘local’ school that teaches to the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education. All our students are native Cantonese speakers and Hong Kong residents. Our school is an English Medium of Instruction school, which means we teach all subjects in English (except Chinese, Chinese History and Life Education) this makes us a school of 100% English Second Language (ESL) students. Before coming to HK in 2009 to take up this principalship, I was an educator in Australia for 34 years and a principal for 6 of those.

In this paper I will explore the question; “Australia is a developed nation with an advanced and excellent education system, so why does HK education significantly outperform Australia in all aspects of PISA?” PISA is not the only (or necessarily the best) way to evaluate an education system, and in regards to other criteria Australian Education does much better than Hong Kong, but PISA results cannot not be ignored. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a three-year international study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that assesses the reading, mathematical and scientific literacy in the mother tongue of 15-year-old students. It is widely adopted as a global educational indicator and the 2012 PISA was endorsed by 65 countries.

An interesting piece about Australian education and PISA was published in 2012, entitled “Gronski review: time for a new vision for Australian education” (Zyngier 2012). In this paper the author says of the PISA results (2006), “In the highest performing countries, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Finland, there is a more overall evenness of achievement between students. While there are many things we could learn from Asian countries, their cultures, values and history are very different to ours with an emphasis on authoritarianism, collective obedience and submission of the individual to the state. Finland, on the other hand, is much more like Australia with a tradition of social welfare and egalitarian

values, a history of migration and has more recently become a country that has adopted multicultural community.”

In regards to Hong Kong, there are many (like myself) who would disagree with this analysis of its socio political state (Fong 2013). As evidence, consider the actions of the many thousands who took to the streets in the “Umbrella Revolution” of 2014/15. It is not a nation with an emphasis on authoritarianism, collective obedience and submission of the individual to the state and it does have an education system that Australia can learn from. Hong Kong’s education was closely modeled on the education system of the UK, as Hong Kong was administered by Britain from 1841 to 1997. Since 1997, the education system has undergone a series of major changes, particularly in 2009/10 with the introduction of the New Secondary School Curriculum (NSSC) and the New Academic Structure (NAS), the new model can be considered to be more aligned with those found in the USA. There are of course differences between Hong Kong and Australian education, but these are differences we can learn a great deal from and we should not ignore them because of supposed cultural or socio-political beliefs.

Dinham (2013) suggests that comparisons seem hardly fair, “When we consider the emerging Asian 'PISA powerhouses', a number of things become apparent. The first is that, in the main they are not nations at all, but cities, city states and in the case of South Korea, arguably half a country. They are also predominantly authoritarian in their governance, have a tradition of rote learning, cramming and testing and all have placed a major premium on improving their PISA rankings. On that measure, they have been successful” (pp. 92)

Hong Kong is not a nation with an emphasis on authoritarianism and collective obedience, but even if it was, why should this mean better PISA scores? PISA is designed to broadly measure literacy, without a link to any curriculum frameworks or mastery of specific knowledge, skills, and concepts. “PISA tests critical thinking in math, science, and reading to 15 year olds. The test questions do not measure memorization of facts, but rather demand that students draw on knowledge and real-world problem solving skills.” (PISA, as quoted in National Centre for Educational Statistics NCES 2014).

It can be agreed that Shanghai (that has done exceptionally well in the last two PISA rankings) is not China, it is a large and unique city, but to ignore the educational achievements of Hong Kong or Singapore, as just 'city states', seems a limited approach to comparative education as both have their own and very independent education systems. Most empathetically I cannot agree that Hong Kong's educational results are due to "authoritarian governance or a tradition of rote learning and cramming and all have placed a major premium on improving PISA rankings." (Dinham 2013, pp. 92). I can say categorically as a HK school principal, that from my observation and experience, principals have NOT placed such emphasis on either rote learning or on PISA preparation.

In HK 'local' schools are randomly selected by the organisation conducting PISA, and for principals, being chosen as a PISA school, is seen as more of an inconvenience than anything. As about 80% of all secondary schools are Aided schools (not Government Public Schools), they have the right to refuse to participate. Due the 'luck of the draw' my school has been twice chosen as a PISA school and both times we have participated without putting in place any special programs or practices to prepare students before hand.

So if the differences between HK and Australian in PISA performance is *not* due to cultural differences, than what are the factors that can possibly account for the differences in results? In this paper I would offer some possible reasons, based on my personal experience of leading schools in Australia and in Hong Kong, I have grouped these under the headings; the Socio-economic Gap, Student Ranking and School Banding, the PISA "Happiness Ranking", Student Behaviour, Class Size, Curriculum and Compulsory studies and School Governance. But to begin let us examine the differences between PISA 2006 and PISA 2012 results in terms of Reading, Science and Mathematical illiteracies for Hong Kong and Australia.

## PISA comparisons

Consistently over the three assessments, Hong Kong achieved enviable scores that placed her in the top 3 or 4 rankings of all participating countries and overall showed a consistent improvement in student achievements. In reading literacy, Hong Kong went from fourth in PISA 2009 to second in PISA 2012. The mean score for 15 year old students in PISA 2012 was 545. This was significantly higher than the mean scores of previous studies in PISA 2009 (533) and PISA 2006 (536). In mathematical literacy, Hong Kong's ranking was maintained as third in both PISA 2009 and PISA 2012. The mean score in PISA 2012 was 561. This was higher than the mean score of 2009 (555) and significantly higher than the mean score of PISA 2006 (547). In scientific literacy, Hong Kong's ranking progressed from third in PISA 2009 to second in PISA 2012. The mean score for 15-year-old students in PISA 2012 was 555. This was higher than the mean score of PISA 2009 (549) and significantly higher than the mean scores in PISA 2006 (542).

*Figure 1: Hong Kong PISA results 2006, 2009, 2012.*

2006 Reading	2006 Science	2006 Maths	2009 Reading	2009 Science	2009 Maths	2012 Reading	2012 Science	2012 Maths	Rank level
Sth Korea 556	Finland 563	C. Taipei 549	Shanghai 556	Shanghai 575	Shanghai 600	Shanghai 570	Shanghai 570	Shanghai 613	1
Finland 547	HK 542	Finland 548	Sth Korea 539	Finland 554	Singapore 562	HK 545 (+2.3)	HK 545 (+2.1)	Singapore 573	2
HK 536	Canada 534	HK 547	Finland 536	HK 549	HK 555	Singapore 542	Singapore 542	HK 561 (+1.3)	3
Canada 527	C. Taipei 532	Korea 547	HK 533	Singapore 542	Sth Korea 546	Japan 538	Japan 538	C. Taipei 560	4

For Australia, unfortunately, the PISA results for 2006, 2009 and 2012 have not been as encouraging. As noted in the ACER report (Thompson et al, 2012), Australia's mean mathematical literacy performance declined significantly between PISA 2003 and PISA 2012, such that it was the equivalent of students in 2012 being about half a year behind similar students in 2003. Australia's ranking fell from 8<sup>th</sup> in PISA 2006 to 19<sup>th</sup> in PISA 2012.

There was also a decline in Australia's reading literacy performance between PISA 2000 and PISA 2012, a fall equivalent to around half a year of schooling. Australia's ranking fell from 6<sup>th</sup> in PISA 2006 to 13<sup>th</sup> in PISA 2012.

In science illiteracy the fall in performance for 15 year olds from PISA 2006 (527) to PISA 2012 (521) is not as drastic as for mathematical or reading illiteracies, but overall in terms of science literacy, Australia fell from 8<sup>th</sup> position in PISA 2006 to 15<sup>th</sup> position in PISA 2012.

Besides the overall rankings, another issue is the gap that seems to be growing between the proportion of low performing students (5<sup>th</sup> percentile) and high performing students (95<sup>th</sup> percentile) in PISA mathematical and reading illiteracies. Put another way, the proportion of Australian low performers significantly increased (by 5%) and the proportion of Australian top performers significantly decreased (by 5%) (Thompson et al 2012).

The table in Figure 2: Comparison of PISA Result HK and Australia 2006 – 2012, illustrates that while Australia has always been able to achieve at higher than the OECD mean in all three areas, it has nevertheless fallen below Hong Kong in the global comparisons. Further, while Hong Kong has maintained an impressive level of achievement from PISA 2006 to PISA 2012, Australia has faltered and results in all three literacies have declined.

**Figure 2: Table of PISA results comparing HK and Australia 2006-2012**

2006 Reading	2006 Science	2006 Maths	2009 Reading	2009 Science	2009 Maths	2012 Reading	2012 Science	2012 Maths	Rank level
Sth Korea 556	Finland 563	C. Taipei 549	Shanghai 556	Shanghai 575	Shanghai 600	Shanghai 570	Shanghai 570	Shanghai 613	1
Finland 547	HK 542	Finland 548	Sth Korea 539	Finland 554	Singapore 562	HK 545 (+2.3)	HK 545 (+2.1)	Singapore 573	2
HK 536	Canada 534	HK 547	Finland 536	HK 549	HK 555	Singapore 542	Singapore 542	HK 561 (+1.3)	3
Canada 527	C. Taipei 532	Korea 547	HK 533	Singapore 542	Sth Korea 546	Japan 538	Japan 538	C. Taipei 560	4
									5
Australia 513									6
									7
	Australia 527	Australia 520							8
		Belgium 520	Australia 515						9
				Australia 527					10
									11
									12
						Australia 512 (-1.4)			13
									14
					Australia 514		Australia 521 (-0.9)		15
									16
								Australia 504 (-2.2)	19
	OECD Mean 508	OECD Mean 498	OECD Mean 493	OECD Mean 501	OECD Mean 496	OECD Mean 496	OECD Mean 501	OECD Mean 494	

Let us now explore some of the differences between Australian and Hong Kong School Education that might throw some light on these differences in PISA results.



## **Socio Economic Gap**

In Australia, according to ACER reports (Thompson, 2012) the gap between students in the highest and lowest quartiles is equivalent to around 2 ½ years schooling. Twenty seven percent of students in the highest socio-economic status (SES) quartile were top performers compared to five percent in the lowest. Eight percent of students in the highest quartile were low performers while thirty three percent in the lowest quartile were low performers. One way of interpreting these results is that the quality of a student's education is heavily impacted by social and economic backgrounds of their school context. As Dinham (2013) suggests, students enrolled in a school with a high average socioeconomic background tend to perform better than when they are enrolled in a school with a low-average socioeconomic background.

Analysis of PISA results suggests that this is not the case in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong government says that "Students' socio-economic status seems to have less effect on their performance as compared with the situation in other participating countries/regions. Generally speaking, students from various socio-economic backgrounds perform equally well in Hong Kong. PISA studies suggest that Hong Kong has done relatively well in providing education opportunity with relatively high quality and high equity for all students." (2013).

A word about socio-economic differences, there is a much larger discrepancy in Hong Kong between the 'rich and poor' than there is in Australia, as measured by the Gini Coefficient.

In 2011 Hong Kong had the relatively high Gini Coefficient of 0.57, this means a relatively high inequality rating indicating unevenly distributed income (HK Census and Statistics Department 2011); basically there is a large gap between 'rich' and 'poor'. The Gini Coefficient is a measure of income disparity based on original household income. As noted in Forbes magazine; while 1.3 million of Hong Kong residents live under poverty line, the top 1% of the population is getting richer and richer (Chen 2014).

In Australia, by comparison, the Gini Coefficient for 2011 was 0.320 (ABS 2013). This is much lower than Hong Kong and suggests that there is much less of a gap and less inequality in regards to distributed income. This is not to deny that there is a growing disparity between the 'haves' and 'have nots' in Australia, particularly it must be recognized that evidence clearly demonstrates an inequity between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. "In general, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to experience disadvantage in terms of education, health education, unemployment, inadequate housing and infrastructure than other Australians" (ABS, 2010).

### **Student Ranking & School Banding**

In Australia, in most large population cities, it is known that a key selling point of residential housing is whether it is located in suburbs that are in 'feeder zones' for top level public schools (Duffy, 2015). It would seem that in Australia, 'local' schools (including public school, Independent Public Schools, Catholic Education Schools, etc) can be separated by reputation into different categories, some are considered to be top level schools while others are considered to be of a lower category. In some Australian states this has been deliberately created through such programs as "selective entry high school" in Victoria (DET, 2015).

But how do Australian parents know which schools are the top schools? The various state educational agencies do not publish lists that rank schools, but publishing school results 'online' has had the inadvertent impact of creating so called 'league tables' whereby parents and organisations such as real estate companies can create a list of top performing public schools "The Western Australian Curriculum and Standards Authority's latest league tables list the top performing public schools as: ..." (Duffy, 2015). At the national level, the advent of "My School", the national online information system that provides comparative data on school performance, is one way that parents are able to distinguish between schools.

In Hong Kong just like Australia, it is known that some schools are better than others. While the Education Bureau does not publish a list, families and

teachers know that there are Band 1, Band 2 and Band 3 level schools (both secondary and primary). Enrolment in a Band 1 level School is highly desired by families. While there is no explicit list of 'Band 1' Secondary Schools they constitute approximately a third of all local secondary schools. In addition, there are just over 114 English Medium of Instruction Secondary Schools in Hong Kong, all 100% EMI schools would generally be considered to be Band 1 schools (under the 2009 'Fine Tuning' policy the identification EMI schools has changed so technically this list also no longer exists). Various Chinese Medium of Instruction (CMI) schools are also considered to be Band 1 schools.

In Hong Kong, there is the additional feature called the Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA) of the Education Bureau (EDB). In HK when a student completes primary education (Primary years 1 to 6) in a 'local' school, they would usually apply for a position in a 'local' secondary school through the allocation system. In this system, all primary school students are given a Rank Order based on their academic performance in their primary school (including internally developed primary school examinations) modulated by the 'ranking' of their primary school (based on the previous performance of the school's students in Attainment Tests in Chinese, English and Maths when they enter secondary school).

A secondary school is provided with a rank order list of the primary school students intake for its first year secondary intake (called Form 1, or Secondary 1), from the lowest to the highest performing student. All primary school students in Hong Kong are 'ranked', based on their primary school assessment scores and on the 'level' of their primary school (moderation), students are determined to have a rank order (for example, of the 800 students who applied for JCTIC, this child falls into the ranking of 289). This information is confidential and not usually released to parents from the Education Bureau or the school.

Through this system, 'Band 1' schools may choose to only enroll the 'top' students of primary rank, whilst the lesser ranked students may be taken up by Band 2 or Band 3 schools. This rank order list is highly confidential and parents are not informed of their child's rank order by EDB or the receiving schools. For most Hong Kong secondary schools 70% of places are allocated by the EDB

system and 30% are 'discretionary places' where they can choose students, but the allocation of all Band 1 students will be processed first, followed by the allocation of Band 2 and then Band 3 students. The proportion of each Band of students is approximately one third. Within the Band 1 category (Band 2 & Band 3), the order of allocation is according to a computer 'randomly assigned number'. As those Band 1 secondary schools are more 'popular' to parents. Parents tend to put these schools at top priority. So under this system, there is a greater demand than supply for these schools. Thus those 70% places of popular schools are usually filled up by 'Band 1' students.

In summary, the secondary schools in both Australia and Hong Kong are ranked, although the process in Hong Kong is more clearly delineated into Band 1, Band 2, and Band 3 schools (not formally recognized as such by EDB) because of an allocation system that includes the rank ordering of all primary students according to their academic performance in their primary school and the moderating factor of the 'quality' of the primary school they attended. This ranking of students and schools may have some impact on PISA results, in terms of the motivation of students to do well academically in primary school in order to gain a place in Band 1 schools.

### **Private tuition**

A difference between Australia and Hong Kong education, that can be observed on the streets, due to huge advertising signs, are the private tutor schools. In Hong Kong there are many private tuition centres that offer outside school hour courses for both primary and secondary students. The private education industry has various forms, from one-to-one tutoring to lecture style video classes. Comparisons can be drawn with the franchised fast-food industry. Take as one example, Hong Kong Education Investments Limited (HKEI), formerly known as Modern Education, which was floated on the Hong Kong bourse in July 2011. For the six months ending on December 31, 2013, the company's secondary tutoring services raked in HK\$97.13 million in revenues according to its annual report. Such commercial success has led to tutors being held in high esteem, successful tutors gain celebrity status in Hong Kong, for instance "Tony Chow, whose bigger-than-life image engulfs ads on billboards, websites and in

newspapers across Hong Kong. Touted as one of the city’s “tutor kings”, Chow commands a following among high-school students that could rival that of rock stars and teenage heartthrobs” (Chang 2014).

Australian visitors to Hong Kong are usually amazed by this phenomenon, because in Australia, while there are private tutors, franchised tutorial businesses (such as Kumon) and private tutoring does certainly happen, it is clearly not as extensive a phenomenon as it is in Hong Kong. There seems to be a dearth of studies into private tuition in Australia, but Kenny & Faunce (2004) suggest from a study of ‘Yellow Pages’ that there is certainly a growth of private academic tutors advertising services, but nevertheless it is nothing like on the scale of Hong Kong. In Hong Kong some 61.2% of Secondary students attend tutorial centres weekly while 72.2% of primary school students also attend tuition, the average amount of time is 4.9 hours per week and costs range between HK\$500 – HK\$1,000 per week (Cheung, 2013).

This level of investment in private academic tuition is not because parents are concerned that the school education system is poor or somehow lacking, but is indicative of a difference in family beliefs between Australia and Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, like many parts of Asia (such as Shanghai, Korea and Taiwan), academic achievement is *not* considered to be the sole responsibility of schools. As Thomson writes, “Signaling that high academic achievement is not just the responsibility of schools, in high-performing Shanghai-China and Singapore 71 per cent and 68 per cent of students respectively reported attending out-of-school mathematics lessons, compared to only 27 per cent of Australian students” (Thomson et al 2012 ACER Report).

The belief that schools do not bear the sole responsibility for academic achievement, coupled with the large amount of time (and money) spent in private tuition, maybe key factors in the difference between Hong Kong and Australia in terms of PISA results.

## **English as a Second Language ESL is NOT a disadvantage**

Jockey Club Ti-I College is a local school that is a 100% English Medium of Instruction (EMI). This means that all subjects, with the exception of Chinese Language and Chinese History, are taught solely in English. This is despite the fact that for 100% of the students their mother tongue is Chinese (Gwong Dong Wah). In other works the whole school is ESL, or LBOTE (Language Backgrounds Other Than English) yet it is a Band 1 school and achieves good academic results with over 86% of students going on to tertiary studies. At JCTIC the students are taught/learn all non-Chinese subjects such as Chemistry, Physics, History, Geography, Visual Arts, etc in English (100%) but once outside the classroom, they converse fully in Gwong Dong Wah their 'mother tongue'. For many their level of bilingualism is not great, their English is poor compared to their Chinese, but they still prefer to go to a 100% EMI school despite the fact that learning in Chinese would be much easier for them.

There are over 116 such EMI schools in HK, and they are in very strong demand, with more demand than supply of enrolment places. This is because learning in English (where English is a Second Language) is seen by most to be an advantage not a disadvantage.

In 1997, the Education Bureau in Hong Kong set in place the policy that only 114 secondary schools were to be approved for EMI education, the rest of the HK secondary schools (389) had to use CMI (Chinese as a Medium of Instruction). "This sudden shift of language of instruction in Hong Kong schools readily impressed people as a politically motivated departure from its past. The strongest opposition came from parents who wanted their kids to study in EMI schools instead of CMI schools- in their minds; EMI means quality education and brighter future for their children." (Shiwen 2000, pp 57).

The separation of schools into either EMI or CMI officially ceased in 2010/11 with the implementation of the "Fine Tuning" policy, under this policy all schools can now choose to teach subjects in English as long as they met certain accrediting requirements. This has led to many more schools taking up teaching in English (although maybe not 100% of subjects) although in reality, schools are still clearly

separated into those that are 100% EMI and the rest that are CMI schools.

As stated by the Education Bureau, “The Government’s overall language policy aims at nurturing students to become “bi-literate and tri-lingual”, in order to enrich the language environment within schools, and to increase students’ opportunities to use and be exposed to English in schools.” (EDB, 2009). This means that all students in local schools learn to speak English, Gwong Dong Wah (Cantonese) and Putonghua (Mandarin), and learn to write/read in English and Chinese (same characters apply to both Gwong Dong Wah and Putonghua languages). In the HK DSE (Final year examinations for matriculation to university) all students must pass four core subjects and 2 or 3 electives. The Core subjects are Maths, Liberal Studies, English and Chinese (Gwong Dong Wah in most schools). Being bilingual is considered essential and learning in English (as second language learners) is considered to be an advantage.

This is a marked difference to Australia where a second language is only considered an option (taken up by very few) and students only need to master English to succeed at school. In Australia it is also a common belief that students who are from non-English speaking backgrounds (LBOTE) are a disadvantaged group of learners who are at risk and need special support and alternative educational provision.

Interestingly, this has been supported by the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLaN) data, which indicate that since Australia wide tests began in 2008, at a national level there is little difference between the results of LBOTE and non-LBOTE students on all domains of the test “Test scores in writing, spelling, grammar and numeracy were higher among Year 7 students who come from a language background other than English (LBOTE) in 2013, with stronger results also found in some of those subjects in Years 3, 5 and 9.” (Tovey 2015). The validity of this finding has been questioned by some commentators (Creagh 2014) but the evidence does suggest, rather counter intuitively, that being a second language learner, is not a disadvantage. Certainly the Hong Kong school experience would support this finding. In Hong Kong most parents would consider learning in English (ESL) an advantage not a disadvantage.

## **Happiness Ranking (Are you Happy at School?)**

In addition to the Science, Maths and Reading Literacy results, a key PISA indicator is the “happiness ranking”. The OECD’s PISA 2012 triennial international survey of 65 countries gathered evidence on “Ready to Learn: Students’ Engagement, Drive and Self-belief”. From this information, it is possible to suggest a rank order of the participating nations in terms of ‘happiness’. This is based on the percentage of students who agreed or disagreed with the statement “I feel happy at school.” According to the 2012 PISA results, Hong Kong ranks **21<sup>st</sup>** in the world and Australia ranks **47<sup>th</sup>** of 65 countries. Australia’s ranking unfortunately, falls below the OECD average (but if it’s any consolation Australia is one rank place about the USA).

*Now the findings of PISA 2012 ‘happiness ranking’ are nebulous and would seem to fuel a controversial debate on the relationship between subjective wellbeing and its impact on performance (OECD, 2014 : “PISA 2012: Happiness or Performance?”). Some higher performing countries have a larger share of unhappy students than lower performing countries which indicates that being happy does not ensure better performance. On the other hand, higher achievement does not guarantee happiness amongst students. Interestingly, the PISA 2012 results have also shown that many Asian countries managed to produce high scoring happy students.*

A statistical analyst named Levy (2014) combined the PISA OECD data from the 2012 ‘happiness’ index, with the 2012 students’ data on math, reading, and science literacy assessments, to create a comparative indicator he called “Best schools and happiest students”. In this index, Hong Kong ranks third in the world and Australia ranks 19<sup>th</sup> (out of 65 nations) (Levy 2014).

This ‘happiness’ index is meaningful when it comes to understanding differences in PISA rankings, because it is an indicator of comparative differences in student motivation towards school learning. If students are happy at school, they are more likely to be motivated, they may have higher attendance rates, and as a result they may do better in learning key illiteracies.



In Australia there is both a state and national level concern to enhance school attendance and records are kept and reported. For Australia in 2011 the attendance rate based on average data of all states and territories, for the PISA age range of 12- 16 years, is a rate of approximately 88% (source ACARA 2013). This data is slightly misleading as each State and Territory system use different definitions and means to collect this information, and attendance rates vary greatly between locations (e.g. remote schools in the Northern Territory and city schools in NSW) but nevertheless the 88% attendance rate is indicative.

In Hong Kong attendance is not an issue of importance. Although school attendance rates are listed as key performance indicators, schools are not required to report the data other than to their Boards, they do not have to include this data in published School Reports (although some do). At present, the EDB does not require schools to report daily attendance for the compilation of the overall student absence rate. Instead, the EDB only requires schools to report non-attendance cases on the seventh day of a student's continuous absence in order to focus its efforts in monitoring the reporting of suspected dropouts. This lack of data reporting is significant in itself, for it means attendance rates are not considered to be a major concern for the system. For Hong Kong, based on my own school's statistics over 20 year averages and drawing upon data collected from a small sample of Hong Kong secondary schools in the Shatin district, I would suggest that an estimate of attendance for 12-16 year olds would be closer to 98%. As in Australia, this may vary greatly in different regions of Hong Kong, but overall, it would be safe to say that overall attendance rates are far higher in Hong Kong than Australia.

The question arises, "Why are students 'happier' at schools in Hong Kong than Australia?" Answering such a question is problematic, and deserving of a full comparative research study, but two hypothesizes can be put to explain the difference.

- That local Hong Kong secondary schools have practices in place that create a stronger 'sense of belonging' for students, than do Australian local schools.
- That culturally, HK parents and community place a higher value on education, and going to school is seen as a privilege not as an imposition.

Creating a sense of belonging, is about deliberate school practices designed to engage students in the corporate life of the school and to provide ‘fun’ and relieve pressures from academic work. It is highly problematic to generalize about ‘all’ Australian or Hong Kong’s school’s, but here are two practices that are common in Hong Kong ‘local’ secondary schools that may or may not be prevalent in Australian government secondary schools.

(1) Student Unions. The students form ‘parties’ and stand for annual election. The elected union organises many activities and events for students, for example; social functions, sports events, policy forums, competitions, games, etc. Lunch time is longer than an hour to enable regular events to be conducted.

(2) Other Learning Experiences (OLE). It is most likely the case that all Australian government secondary schools promote extra-curricula activities, however, perhaps not to the extent of the promotion of Other Learning Experiences in HK local schools. All students in HK schools would be expected to engage in one club or society and also a sport or art (piano, violin, drama, etc) besides their academic work load. “This may reflect increasing competition among students for better placement in further studies or employment, as extra-curricular activities have become a crucial item on the student’s vitae. Parents are especially keen to ensure that their children do not underperform relative to other students.” (Ho Lok Sang 2013). Now while the OLEs create pressure on students, they also build a sense of belonging to the school. Students do not just leave immediately after the final bell, but would usually stay after the last lesson to participate in some activity, club, sport, art, etc. And in each of these they make close associations with other students which lead to bonding or friendships. Thus the students in HK local schools may have more friendship groups coupled to their school, than in Australia where many friendship groups may be locate away from the school.

## **Student Behaviour**

Linked to being 'happy at school', is student behavioural management (as it would be known in Australia) or student discipline (in HK). Basically, 'unhappy' students are likely to be discipline problems, and a school with discipline problems is likely to lead to unhappy students (bullying, etc). Most educators would also link poor student behaviour to poor academic achievement.

Results from PISA 2012 suggest that a school or country's disciplinary climate is reflected in their achievement. Australian students reported a higher frequency of students not listening, noise and disorder, and teachers having to wait for students to quieten down compared to the OECD average, while high-performing Shanghai-China and Hong Kong-China scored well above the OECD average for disciplinary climate (Thompson et al 2012 ACER Report).

Hong Kong 'local' schools have strict discipline codes and all students wear school uniforms. All Hong Kong Schools would have a Discipline Master and a Discipline Committee. The DC is comprised of teachers who take on the role of behaviour management, and the Discipline Master is usually an SGM (Senior Graduated Master) who has time release from class teaching to coordinate behaviour management across the school. This of course means that the principal and vice principals are freed from this role, something which many Australian principals would be envious of.

Having noted this structure it might suggest that Hong Kong schools have a discipline problem, far from it. The majority of student misbehaviours in order are; Uniform Infringements, Failing to Hand in Assignments, and Being Late to school. While there is certain peer conflict (e.g. bullying and fighting), teacher-student conflict, and breaking school rules, these are less common occurrences. Suspensions are rare (in 25 years we've never had one at JCTIC), and expulsions are unheard of.

## **Class Size**

Thompson (2012) notes that “Class size is often brought up in debates about how to improve achievement. The average class size reported by Australian students was smaller than the OECD average, ranging from an average of 19 students in the Northern Territory to 24 students in New South Wales. Average class sizes for the high-performing countries were 33 students or larger.” (Ref: Thompson et al 2012 ACER Report)

In Hong Kong Aided Schools (the bulk of all local schools) average class sizes are 27.1 students per class (Primary) and 31 students per class (Secondary). Primary schools are staffed on a ratio of 14.2 students to 1 teacher and secondary schools are staffed at 13.5 students per teacher. This ratio is close to the same in Australia, where barring state jurisdictional differences the average for government schools was approximately 14: 1 for primary and secondary schools (ABS 2012).

Class sizes are reducing, and in 2015-16 school year Hong Kong secondary schools will reduce to maximum class size intakes of 30 students per class. Similarly in Hong Kong Primary schools there is a move to ‘small class teaching’. Overall, however, class sizes in Hong Kong are higher than in Australian schools, but not significantly.

## **Compulsory Studies**

In Hong Kong in 2009 the government brought in major educational reforms. These were to completely restructure education, reducing secondary education from seven to six year, deemphasizing the importance of external examinations, and bringing in the New Secondary School Curriculum (NSSC). Under these reforms, the new three year HK Diploma of Education was established that consists of four core subjects (that all secondary students must pass) and a series of electives (students would usually select two electives). The core subjects are Chinese, English, Maths and Liberal Studies. In essence, these are sometimes explained as the four ‘literacy’s’ that all student need in order to be lifelong and

self-directed learners. Liberal Studies is about the 'literacy' of thinking and media communication.

Ever since nine years of education was made compulsory in 1978, complaints were rampant that the HK curriculum encouraged too much rote learning, stifled creativity and independent thinking, and focused too much on examinations. Under the 2009 reforms the Education Bureau adopted a "reconstructionist" approach, and created the new subject of liberal studies to broaden students' knowledge base, promote social awareness and enable them to acquire the core skills of "critical thinking" and communication. To discourage rote learning, the Education Bureau set no textbooks and no 'content' for Liberal Studies, which covers three broad areas: self and personal development; society and culture; and, science, technology and the environment.

In Hong Kong there has been a shift to reduce centralized curriculum, reverting to more autonomy in school based curriculum development for the junior years, and in the final secondary years of the HKDSE to reduce compulsory studies to just four core areas, dropping the sciences, ICT, history, civics, and all other subjects.

In Australia there may be seen to be the opposite push, with a move to a much greater centralization of curriculum and mandated studies of 'core curriculum' in the junior school area. In 2014, the Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum was implemented in all states and territories of Australia. This Australian Curriculum sets consistent national standards to improve learning outcomes for all school aged students through content descriptions and achievement standards.

Currently in Australia studying maths and science is not compulsory for Year 11 and 12 students in Victoria, NSW and the ACT, while in Queensland and South Australian students must take one maths subject in their final years of school. There is a push by the current Federal Education Minister to ensure all students study maths and science to their final year (Cook, 2015). Apparently Mr Pyne the Federal Minister is concerned that 75% of the areas with fastest-growing jobs will require science, technology, engineering or maths skills - otherwise known as STEM skills, but there are not enough students in Australia studying in these

areas. This is not a concern in Hong Kong where technology and financial service industries are major employers. As noted in Hong Kong the Sciences have been dropped and are no longer core subjects at the school level.

### **School Governance: Aided Schools vs Independent Private Schools.**

In Hong Kong there are 514 secondary schools and 569 primary schools. There are four types of schools. Government Schools that comprise about 4% of secondary and 5% of primary schools; Aided Schools that make up approximately 77% of secondary and 72% of primary schools, Direct Subsidy Schools (DSS) that make up 13% of Secondary and 0.1% of primary schools, and private independent schools (including internationals) that make up 5% of secondary and 7% of primary.

Most HK students attend Aided Schools. Aided Schools are owned and run by independent school boards that are incorporated bodies, they are not government owned or controlled, but they are fully funded by the government. The staff are not government employees but are employed by their Board, the Board members are not paid positions they do not receive Directors fees and the role is purely voluntary. The Board members are not parents, there will usually be one or two parent representatives, one or two teacher representatives but the rest of the 12 -13 members are independent of the school. The schools are governed by a Code of Aid and teach towards the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education and in accordance with curriculum guidelines laid down by the EDB. Entry into Aided primary schools is via a government controlled (Education Bureau) Primary One Admissions system and into Secondary Schools via a Secondary School Places Allocation system (with one exemption which is exception, Jockey Club Ti-I College, that has 100% discretionary places). Aided Schools receive annual grants that in essence provide enough money to conduct and maintain the school, therefore Aided Schools are not permitted to charge school fees (except a small 'tong fai' or amenities fee). Education for the majority of HK students is therefore free.

According to Australian Bureau of Statistic data (2013), in Australia there are approximately 10,000 schools the majority (71%) of which are government schools fully funded and 'owned' by the state governments. Most have School Councils that operate with varying degrees of autonomy (differing between states) but a common feature is that they are mostly comprised of parents of the school. In addition to the government sector there are about 29% Catholic and Independent schools that received different levels of government funding support and charge different levels of fees. Approximately 59% of all students attend government schools. In Australian school education a recent initiative that is growing rapidly across all states is the rise of Independent Public Schools. The current Australian Federal government (2014) has dedicated A\$70 million to entice a quarter of all government schools to become IPS's by 2017 (Independent Public Schools Fund). Incorporated IPS's are very similar to Hong Kong Aided Schools. This means a strong push to make schools more autonomous, and is based in part on the belief from the PISA 2011 report that *"PISA 2009 finds that: In countries where schools have greater autonomy over what is taught and how students are assessed, students tend to perform better"* (OECD 2011)

Whether this is valid or not is debated by many in Australia, where there is a opposition to the IPS initiative, but in Hong Kong it would have to be said that highly autonomous 'public' schools (Aided Schools) are considered to be highly effective and are well endorsed by the community and education sector as a whole. As noted above only about 5% of schools in HK remain as government run schools the rest are highly autonomous.

Having being a principal in Australia in a public school working under a regional General Manager and also answering to a School Council comprised of parents, and now after 6 years as a principal in an Aided School, it is very clear to me that the Independent Public School initiative has great merit. In brief, from my personal leadership experience, autonomous schools (funded by government) can be much more effective in improving student learning outcomes. The reasons I would suggest, are:

1. Curriculum Autonomy: As principal of an Aided School I do not have to adhere to Education Bureau targets and objectives but strategically, our school is able to pursue our own learning targets much better suited to improving the outcomes of our students and community. As an example, back as a government employee, my last performance management targets were given to me from the Regional Office of Education Department and were: (1) Improve school attendance and (2) Improve results in NAPLAN maths and reading assessment. These were not targets that we as a school we would have set if we were able to engage in a comprehensive strategic planning process involving school data, SWOT analysis and review. To improve attendance we diverted resources, teacher's effort and our educational focus accordingly. To improve national testing result in maths and reading we diverted teachers from pedagogies and practices that would have lead to other learning outcomes (e.g. more explicit teaching and less focus on students as engaged and active learners).
2. Instructional Leadership: As a principal of an Aided School my administration load has greatly reduced in comparison with being a principal of a government school. This is due to a reduction in reporting and complying with bureaucratic requirements of a large Department of Education as an organisation. This has led to much more time available for instructional leadership.
3. Allocation of staff resources. In autonomous schools, there is a much greater possibility to use resources in ways that better target the learning needs of the school's community. In my previous public school we would have to apply for funding for SENS support. Each student was assessed and funds allocated. As an example, our school received 30 minutes support per week for one child, and 2 hours for another. Under the autonomous schools system this is redundant and resources can be allocated in ways which make rational not bureaucratic sense.
4. Parent conflict of interest. As a principal of a public school with a School Council comprised of parents it was clear to me that a clear conflict of interest existed. As an Aided School there is only one elected PTA parent on our Board the rest are autonomous and have no vested interest in the school (no children in the school and no financial interest). This can be



important when it comes to making strategic decisions such as three year plans for investing in school infrastructure or changing school directions in ways that may not immediately benefit the current students of the school but are essential for longer term school development.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has been a personal reflection of someone who has been a principal in both Australia and Hong Kong, the purpose of this narrative has been to dispute the belief that the reasons for Hong Kong's success in PISA is because of some sort of inherent culture that emphasize collectivism or submission of the individual that makes them better students (well in PISA exam terms). Instead, I have suggested that the reason for the difference is to be found in comparing school practices and educational beliefs. This narrative has described a number of ways in which Hong Kong school education is different to Australian school education. We have reflected on the Socio-economic Gap, Student ranking and School banding, the Happiness Ranking, Student Behaviour, Class Size, Curriculum and Compulsory studies and on School Governance.

The better ranking in PISA results does not, in itself, make Hong Kong a better educational jurisdiction than Australia. Hong Kong has recognized the need to change and has engaged in major educational reforms since 2009 (remembering that the 2006 and 2009 PISA results were very highly favourable for Hong Kong) and has set its targets on major changes. The HK reforms many ways better align it with what Australia had achieved in school education, in particular in regards to a thinking curriculum that fosters problem solving and creativity, with less emphasis on learning content towards examinations and a more general education that provides a broad knowledge base.

As we started, so we should finish with a story. When my principal colleagues asked me, how it was that an Australian who does not speak Chinese, could do lesson observations, I replied that was the easy part. The hard bit is email. As do all principals, I receive a great many emails a day, unlike in Australia, about 33% of which are in Chinese. The lesson I would share with you is that you can bin 33% of your emails without reading them and it makes no difference what so ever to your school leadership – just another reflection.

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