

The impact of culture on education

Can we introduce best practices in education across countries?

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As a result of globalization, many people are becoming interested in ranking systems which show how their own countries compare with others on a variety of measures. The World Economic Forum publishes an annual ranking of countries on economic competitiveness; the United Nations a ranking on human development; the OECD publishes comparisons on the quality of healthcare systems. Even a ranking system for “happiness” can be found.

In this paper we will explore the outcome of ranking countries on the quality of education. In particular we will focus on a recent report “The Learning Curve” (2013) published by The Economist Magazine’s Intelligence Unit. In this report an attempt was made to look for “best practices” – approaches that systematically lead to higher quality education thereby enabling policy makers and practitioners in other countries to simply “copy and paste” and work towards educational reforms that have proven effective in raising educational achievement in some countries. The surprising conclusion from this report, however, is that almost no practices were found that could be implemented globally. The authors explain that while the inputs to education – like money, school choice, years in school, and teacher-pupil ratio’s – can be identified; and outputs can be compared looking at ranking systems on measures of literacy, numeracy, and educational attainment; what happens between input and output is very much a local issue. They describe this country-specific process as a “black box”, implying that there is no systematic way to describe how the differences in the teaching/learning process transforms inputs into outputs.

We will show that well-researched systematic differences in value preferences across countries are vital for understanding the way teaching/learning processes are handled. Using the seminal work of Geert Hofstede on cultural differences, we will show that the five culture dimensions he found provides an analytical tool for understanding the local differences in educational policy and teaching methods in school systems. Based on this cross-cultural framework, we ask a fundamental question: is it possible to find best practices that work worldwide in spite of these value differences?

In short this article attempts to:

Summarize recent rankings of educational performance across countries and the influence of culture on these ranking systems.

- Describe what culture is and how it influences the way we educate and learn.
- Analyze "best practices", i.e. can we export practices across cultures. Can we learn from each other while being so different?
- Enlarge the discussion of some key issues in education by incorporating a cultural perspective.

I. Ranking educational systems worldwide

In the field of education there are several systems used to compare educational quality across countries, including: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS); Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS); and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).(*1) These approaches focus on benchmarking the factors leading to achievement and, more specifically, trying to identify what specific factors differentiate the highest achievers. As professor Schleicher (OECD) (*2) says: "education debates are no longer about the improvement by national standards. Best performing countries now set the tone".

Recently the Economist Intelligence Unit of the Economist Magazine published a new ranking system: the Learning Curve Data Bank LCDB: country performance in education.(*3) This report outlines the main findings from a large body of internationally comparable education data. In the report they provide an overall ranking (column 1) by comparing cognitive skills attainment (column 2) which combines the results from the PIRLS, TIMSS and Pisa systems, and scores of countries on the highest degree of education individuals complete: "educational attainment" (column 3) (*4).

The top 20 countries are shown below:

	<u>Overall score</u>	<u>Cognitive Skills</u>	<u>Educational attainment</u>
Finland	[Rank 1]1.26	[Rank 1]1.50	[Rank 3]0.79
South Korea	[Rank 2]1.23	[Rank 4]1.24	[Rank 1]1.21
Hong Kong-China	[Rank 3]0.90	[Rank 3]1.26	[Rank 17]0.20*
Japan	[Rank 4]0.89	[Rank 5]1.04	[Rank 8]0.59
Singapore	[Rank 5]0.84	[Rank 2]1.39	[Rank 33]-0.26*
United Kingdom	[Rank 6]0.60	[Rank 12]0.50	[Rank 2]0.81
Netherlands	[Rank 7]0.59	[Rank 7]0.72	[Rank 11]0.32*
New Zealand	[Rank 8]0.56	[Rank 9]0.61	[Rank 9]0.47*
Switzerland	[Rank 9]0.55	[Rank 8]0.71	[Rank 13]0.22
Canada	[Rank 10]0.54	[Rank 6]0.72	[Rank 20]0.18
Ireland	[Rank 11]0.53	[Rank 16]0.42	[Rank 5]0.74
Denmark	[Rank 12]0.50	[Rank 17]0.41	[Rank 6]0.68
Australia	[Rank 13]0.46	[Rank 11]0.54	[Rank 12]0.31
Poland	[Rank 14]0.43	[Rank 20]0.26	[Rank 4]0.77
Germany	[Rank 15]0.41	[Rank 10]0.56	[Rank 23]0.12
Belgium	[Rank 16]0.35	[Rank 15]0.43	[Rank 17]0.20*
United States	[Rank 17]0.35	[Rank 14]0.44	[Rank 21]0.16
Hungary	[Rank 18]0.33	[Rank 13]0.46	[Rank 25]0.07
Slovakia	[Rank 19]0.32	[Rank 25]0.16	[Rank 7]0.65
Russia	[Rank 20]0.26	[Rank 19]0.29	[Rank 19]0.20*

The most interesting result of the analyses, as summarized in this report, is “how few correlations there are”. In order to explain this result, one observation is that in any number of surveys researchers measure what is measurable. Usually inputs are identified more than

outputs because they are simpler and easier to measure. However, the “softer” inputs of education tend to be left out. The authors conclude: “These inputs, however can be crucial, such as the cultural context in which education occurs.” The difficulty the writers admit is: “how do you disentangle deeply embedded cultural values from social and educational policies?” The quality and approach of teachers plays a big role in this. Teachers are key transmitters of cultural values. Much research has focused on: “what education systems can do to ensure that they find teachers who add value”. But even here the report concludes that “the rules tend to be country specific.”

The how and what of education is very much connected to the culture of the country at hand. A lot of different ideas exist about the role and position of the teacher as well as expectations around the “right” behavior of students. These key elements again are highly linked to cultural values. In the Economist report culture is discussed only in a very generic way. Education remains, in the words of The Economist, “**a black box (*5)** in which inputs are turned into outputs in ways that are difficult to predict or quantify consistently.

Input ---->	?	----> Output
Spending per pupil	The Black Box of Education is <i>Culture</i>	PIRLS
class size		TIMMS
start age		PISA
school choice		Graduation rates
years in school		Literacy, employment, etc.

Looking at the black box above, we believe that it can be opened. We will outline how culture can be used as the key. Culture, however, is a vague term and is used in very different ways.

II. What is culture? How does culture influence the learning process?

a. About culture: the research of Geert Hofstede

We will first delve a little bit deeper in this notion of "culture". As a starting point we take the results of the scientific research by professor Geert Hofstede. Hofstede is widely recognized as the one who did the most fundamental research on cultural differences(*6,7,8,9). He defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others". Hofstede carried out fundamental research into the dominant values of countries and the way in which they influence behavior in organizations. Original data were based on an extensive IBM database for which 116,000 questionnaires were used in 72 countries and in 20 languages.

The results of his research were validated against about 40 cross-cultural studies from a variety of disciplines. Analyzing his data, Hofstede found five value clusters (or "dimensions") being the most fundamental in understanding and explaining the differences in answers to the single questions in his questionnaires. He measured the differences and calculated scores for 56 countries on these 5 dimensions. Later research, partly done by others have extended this to about a 100 countries. The combined scores for each country explain variations in behavior of people and organizations. The scores indicate the relative differences between cultures.

The five dimensions of national culture identified by Hofstede are:

- Power Distance Index (PDI)
- Individualism vs. collectivism (IDV)
- Masculinity vs. femininity (MAS)
- Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)
- Long Term Orientation (LTO)

Country scores on each dimension are ranked from low to high, i.e. from 0 to 100. Please note that the score of a country is not meant to imply that everyone in a particular society is programmed in exactly the same way. There are considerable individual differences. But when fundamental values of various societies are compared, 'majority preferences' are found to exist, which occur again and again as a result of the way children are brought up by their parents and the educational system. And when we

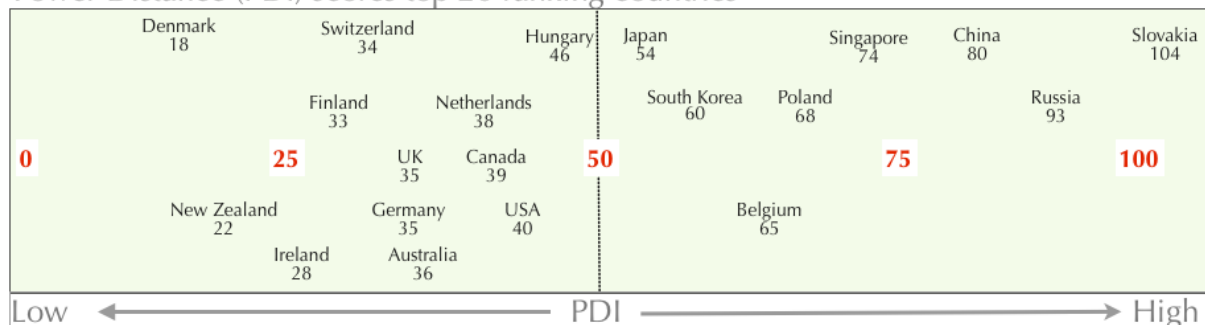
examine how societies organize themselves, these majority preferences turn out to have a modifying influence at all levels. They have an influence on the ways teacher and students are expected to behave. Even the ideas of the objectives of education are stated in different ways. For example in some countries the objective of education is: to develop a critical mind, which in other cultures is viewed as absurd. In these countries students are supposed to try to learn as much as possible from the older generation and only when you are fully initiated you may communicate to have ideas of yourself.

III. The five dimensions and their influence on Education

a. Power Distance Index (PDI)

Power distance is the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept that power is distributed unequally. In high power-distance cultures everybody has his/her rightful place in society. Old age is respected, and status is important. In low power-distance cultures people try to look younger and powerful people try to look less powerful. People in countries like the US, Canada, the UK , all Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands score low on the power-distance index and are more likely to accept ideas like empowerment, matrix management and flat organizations. Business schools around the world tend to base their teachings on low power-distance values. Yet, most countries in the world have a high power-distance index.

Power Distance (PDI) scores top 20 ranking countries

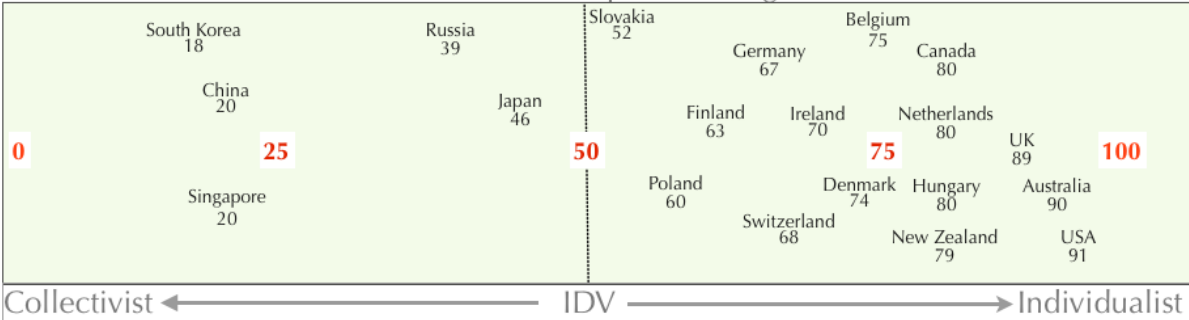


Implications of Power Distance on Teaching	
Low	High
Student centered. <i>Premium on initiative</i>	Teacher centered. <i>Premium on order</i>
Teacher expects student to initiate communication	Student expects teacher to initiate communication
Teacher expects students to find own paths	Student expects teacher to outline paths
Students allowed to contradict & criticize	Teacher never contradicted nor criticized
Effectiveness of learning is a function the amount of two-way communication	Effectiveness of learning is a function of the excellence of teachers

b. Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV)

In **individualistic** cultures, like almost all the rich Western countries, people look after themselves and their immediate family only; in **collectivist** cultures like Asia and Africa people belong to "in-groups" who look after them in exchange for loyalty. In individualist cultures, values are in the person, whereas in collectivist cultures, identity is based on the social network to which one belongs. In individualist cultures there is more explicit, verbal communication. In collectivist cultures communication is more implicit.

Collectivism vs Individualism (IDV) scores top 20 ranking countries

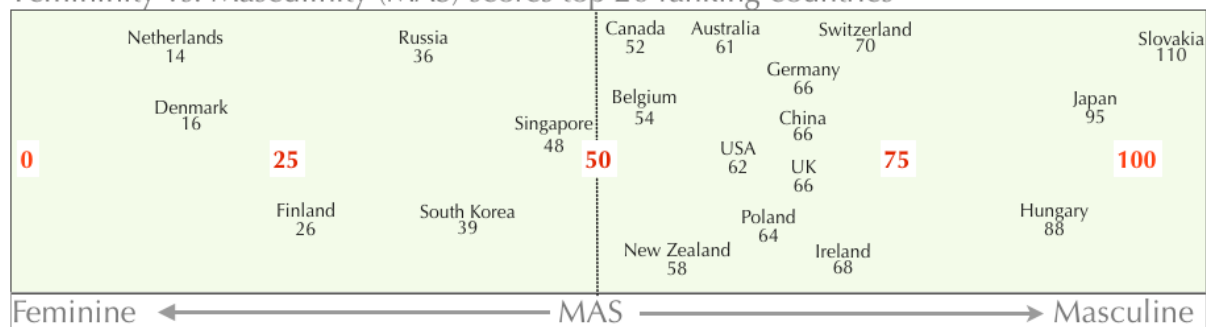


Implications of Collectivism vs. Individualism on Teaching	
Collectivist	Individualist
Students only speak up when called on by the teacher	Students speak up in response to general invitation by the teacher
Individuals only speak up in small groups	Individuals will speak up in large groups
Formal harmony in learning situations should be maintained at all times	Confrontation and challenge in learning situations can be brought into the open
Neither teacher nor student should ever be made to lose face	"Face consciousness" is weak
Teachers expected to give preferential treatment to some, e.g. based on ethnic affiliation or recommendation	Teachers expected to be strictly impartial

c. Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS)

In masculine cultures like USA, UK, Germany, Japan and Italy the dominant values are achievement and success. The dominant values in **feminine** cultures are consensus seeking, caring for others and quality of life. Sympathy is for the underdog. People try to avoid situations distinguishing clear winners and losers. In masculine cultures performance and achievement are important. The sympathy is for the winners. Status is important to show success. Feminine cultures like the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands have a people orientation. Small is beautiful and status is not so important.

Femininity vs. Masculinity (MAS) scores top 20 ranking countries

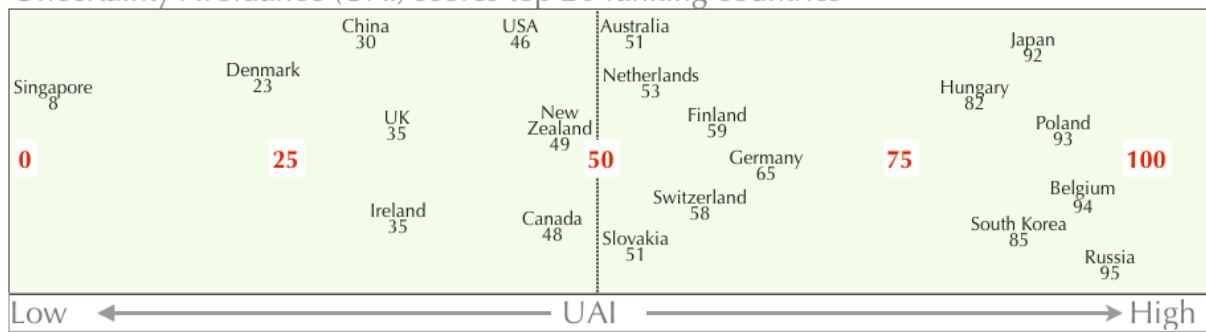


Implications of Femininity vs. Masculinity on Teaching	
Feminine	Masculine
Teachers use average students as norm	Teachers use best students as norm
System rewards students' social adaptation	System rewards academic performance
Student's failure in school a relatively minor accident	Student's failure in school a severe blow to student self image
students try to behave modestly	students try to make themselves visible
Students choose subjects out of interest	Students choose subjects for career reasons

d. Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)

Uncertainty avoidance (or uncertainty control) stands for the extent to which people feel threatened by uncertainty and ambiguity. In cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance, people have a strong emotional need for rules and formality to structure life. The way people think and learn is influenced by this value. In High UAI countries like Korea, Germany, Russia, France, Iran and Brasil, the need is to know about what people in the past and present already said about a certain subject. It is a pre-requisite for "competence." This results in high status of experts, as opposed to weak uncertainty-avoidance cultures, like the UK, the USA, and Denmark in which the views of practitioners are more highly respected.

Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) scores top 20 ranking countries



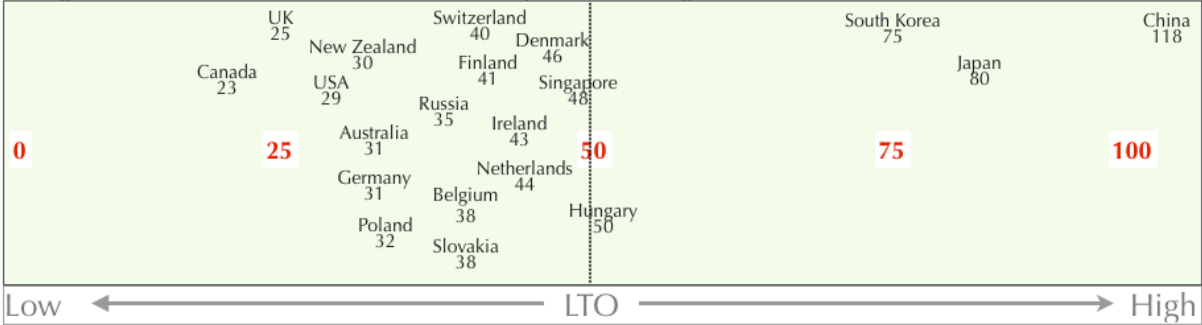
Implications of Uncertainty Avoidance on Teaching	
Low	High
Students comfortable in <u>Un</u> structured learning situations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad assignments • No timetables 	Students comfortable in structured learning situations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Precise instructions • Detailed assignments • Strict timetables
Teachers allowed to say "I don't know"	Teachers expected to have all the answers
Good teachers use plain language	Good teachers use academic language
Students rewarded for innovative approaches	Students rewarded for accuracy
Teachers view intellectual disagreement as stimulating	Teachers view intellectual disagreement as personal disloyalty

e. Long Term Orientation (LTO)

The last element of culture is the **Long Term Orientation** which is the extent to which a society exhibits a future-orientated perspective rather than a near term point of view. Low scoring countries like the USA and West European countries are usually those under the influence of monotheistic religious systems, such as the Christian, Islamic or Jewish systems. People in these countries believe there is an absolute and indivisible truth. In high scoring

countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, for example those practicing Buddhism, Shintoism or Hinduism, people believe truth depends on time, context and situation.

Long Term Orientation (LTO) scores top 20 ranking countries



Implications of Long Term Orientation on Teaching	
Low	High
Focus on asking "Why"?	Focus on asking "How"?
Students want to find the one and only solution	Different answers possible. "Many truths"
	Strong emphasis on education as obligation to parents and society
Stability rated as the most important <i>virtue</i>	Perseverance rated as the most important <i>virtue</i>

IV. Best practices: can we learn from each other?

a. Best practices

In analyzing the results of educational measures, a term being used frequently in the last few years is "**best practices**". As can now be understood from the framework just explained, even this term and approach for country comparison is culturally bound. Focus on

"best practices" is a very Anglo-Saxon approach. All Anglo Saxon cultures score low on Uncertainty Avoidance. This means that the focus is not on theoretical approaches and expert knowledge but on practices and the experience of practitioners, and the thinking style is inductive. As a consequence handbooks on all subjects in these cultures begin with a description of cases taken from practice. These cases are analyzed and lead to a statement about best practices. This approach values practical application over "academic" research. This Anglo Saxon brand of inductive reasoning can be further understood by adding the influence of a high score on MAS: strong action- and achievement orientation. This way of thinking is called pragmatism. Pragmatists are unwilling to be involved in too much speculation on what is going on in the minds of people. Abstract argumentation is something for "academics." What counts is whether specific actions lead to desired observable behavior: "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." 'If we can work out what's in the box – fine. It may help. If not – we'll just do what seems to work. Even if we do work out what's in the box and it doesn't work – we'll do something else.'

Some quotes: William James one of the "founders" of pragmatism said: "Truth is truth if it works" . Michael Ignatieff a Canadian politician and scholar said: "What is right does not always work; What works is not always right". Franklin D. Roosevelt the former president of the USA said: "the country needs and, unless I mistake it's temper, the country demands bold, persistent experimentation, it is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly. And try another. But above all, try something".

In contrast, deductive thinking is the norm in high UAI cultures. These cultures try first to get an understanding of what is known about a subject. The first step is always to look into what others, especially experts from the past and the present, have already said on a subject. Then a philosophy or "the principles of..." (management, leadership, marketing, education) can be formulated. The last step is application. In this approach philosophy and thinking is more highly regarded than the actions of practitioners that follow. As a result, people of these cultures experience "best practices" as "superficial." They are more interested in the thinking that led to successful approaches.

b. Can we learn from another culture?

In the Economist report professor Stecher was quoted: "Schools are both recipients and creators of cultural patterns: over the long term they help to shape norms for the next generation". (2) Yes, they are recipients, but are also creators. And the question is if it is possible to create a "culture free" best school system which other countries can simply "copy and paste" what has been successful in another country?

The answer is that cultural values are deeply rooted and are very consistent over time. The 'collective programming of the mind' starts from the moment children are born. They learn from their parents to obey absolutely or to speak up. This programming continues at school as was described above how the five dimensions apply to learning situations. Are students expected to find their own path and are they allowed to contradict the teacher? Are they expected to compete with each other in class? This all depends on the country culture. It is this "context" that needs to be taken into account when looking at what has been successful in one country and whether or how those approaches can be applied to another country. It is shortsighted to expect countries to be effective in introducing new ideas if these ideas are not likely to fit in the context of their values.

These comments are not suggesting that we cannot learn from others. Of course we should keep an open mind about what is happening elsewhere. But it is naïve to think that a best practices in a certain specific culture can be automatically copied and pasted in another culture with different basic preferences. What is needed is a way to "translate" from one value system to another to make it work. Professionals working in an international environment should understand the different expectations of colleagues and students in the teaching-learning process. They should be trained to understand and to apply the different "rules of the game" according to the different norms of the society at hand.

V_ Analyzing some key issues in education, *within a cultural framework*

The conclusion of "The learning curve" is that two issues were globally recognized as the core of understanding educational quality:

- a. a supportive culture for education and
- b. the need for a high status of teachers.

These two features of education are highly influenced by culture and therefore implemented in different ways in different countries. Some examples are provided below.

a. Supportive culture for education

In explaining the success of Korea and Finland, The Economist concludes that in both these countries there is a supportive culture for education. However, what translates as "support" is very different in these two situations. In the first instance, Korea is a high power distance country, where people accept top down policy decisions by a government. In fact it is seen as the task and privilege of a government. For example, South Korea made a "top-down" decision dating back 30 years to make the country more competitive in the global market. To do so they focused on the education of the future workforce. A lot of resources were allocated to make use of the full available potential. By comparison, low power distance cultures such as Finland, have a different approach to education policy. Because of the low PDI rating, power is decentralized in these cultures, so it is a necessity to involve all the stakeholders and to approach influencing from the bottom up..

b. High status of teachers

Another area where culture plays an essential role in defining the how and what of "status." For instance, in Finland a critical moment in education policy occurred when the Government decided that teachers should only be recruited from Universities to give the profession "high status." In other cultures an academic credential is not as highly valued. For example, in a May 2013 speech by the education secretary in the UK, Mr. Gove told his audience that he wants "...to sweep away the whole structure that has underpinned schools since the war. Schools themselves should conduct research into what produces great teaching and learning, rather than leaving such studies to universities, which he believes have offered little of practical value in terms of improving schools. Leaders should be trained within schools rather than being sent away to acquire abstract diplomas. Teachers should equally be trained within the schools themselves, rather than learning how to teach in university education departments. "(*10) Here we see credibility and status of academics conferred very differently between Finland, a country scoring 59 on UAI, and the UK, which scores 35.

VI Some other issues discussed in "The Learning Curve"

a. Autonomy of schools, testing and accountability

One of the important issues discussed in "The learning curve" is about giving schools autonomy in the teaching process while also making them more accountable for achieving results. "Give the schools back to the professional" is the slogan. The secretary of education in the UK, Mr Gove in his May 2013 speech was promoting his idea. As one newspaper wrote: "No education secretary in the modern era has matched his vision of a largely autonomous education system in which individual schools, heads and teachers are given back their independence and creativity. Only by releasing dynamism in this way does he believe that British schools will be able to compete with the best in Shanghai, Singapore and Scandinavia" (*10). The autonomy he believes should be accompanied by accountability. To be able to hold teachers accountable there is a need for testing to see if the students are getting the quality they deserve.

In some countries the authorities try to establish and administer standardized test to all students. In the US as a result of the Bush initiative "no one left behind" in school year 2013/14 more than one million students in 22 states are expected to take the tests, in an effort to help develop a national exam modeled on the new standards, known as the Common Core. The big concern with this approach is whether this leads to "teaching to the test". In other words, does the pressure coming from showing improvements through these tests cause teachers and students to discuss and study what is necessary to pass these tests? There are already warnings about this. In June 2013 the "Humanities Committee" a group of concerned educators in the USA sounded an alarm. "We are preparing students to be employable," said Eduardo J. Padrón, a commission member. But without the humanities and social sciences, he added, "they are missing something important." "People talk about the humanities and social sciences as if they are a waste of time," said Richard H. Brodhead, the president of Duke University and a co-chairman of the commission. "But this facile negativism forgets that many of the country's most successful and creative people had exactly this kind of education." (*11)

It is not surprising that this "reductionist" approach is common in masculine countries where the motivation to compete and to achieve is high. In more feminine countries, however, the

focus on "quality of life" prevents schools from only offering subjects that are directly related to measurable results that lead to employability. These countries retain an emphasis on a broader curriculum, that retains the humanities, arts and social sciences as essential elements of education and preparation for adult life.

Again: autonomy and testing are very much cultural issues. Autonomy, the bottom up approach, is acceptable only in Low Power Distance cultures. Like empowerment in management theories it implies that authorities/managers dare to give the power to the lowest possible level without too many instructions and structural limits, also implies a low score for UAI. This combination, low PDI and low UAI, is in principle only found in the Anglo-Saxon countries, in Scandinavia and the Netherlands. This educational strategy can be adapted to fit other countries like Germany, Austria, Hungary and the Czech Republic, by adding more explicit rules and procedures when the autonomy is given. In High power distance cultures, empowerment and autonomy is not impossible, but it must take the form of clearly-defined delegation. The level of autonomy would be clearly defined and limited within a very strict set of mandates. If things happen that are not foreseen by their mandate, schools would not be allowed to act independently to respond to the new situation. They would be required to go back up the chain of authority and ask for instructions first.

Standardized tests and quantifiable objectives with consequences for pass/fail decisions and visible ranking is an approach suited to cultures with the masculine thinking style. In other cultures people are more hesitant to focus so heavily on achieving top scores and comparing students and schools on standardized tests. Finland, for example, with the top ranking in TLC, is a highly feminine country and does not use this kind of highly competitive orientation. Pasi Sahlberg, director general of the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation (CIMO) in Finland has strong opinions on why Finland stands out in comparison with countries like the USA: "It [the education system] is run like a marketplace rather than a professional place," Sahlberg says that five aspects of the Finnish system sets it apart. At the forefront, the Finnish system was built without trying to be number one. He emphasized that competition was never part of the system. Instead the focus has aimed at creating good schools for all children. Sahlberg points out that Finland's approach is emphasizing collaboration instead of competition. The impact of competition has resulted in standardization and created immense expectations including that "everyone learn the same

and in the same way.” Instead, Finland has stressed personalization of education – where every school sets its own standards based on a national framework. He said this approach created a system where a student’s only competitor is him or herself. A direct result of standards in tests in countries like America is increased focus on accountability, particularly teachers. “Accountability is what’s left when responsibility is taken away,” he said. In Finland, the teaching profession operates as a trust-based responsibility. (*12)

Beyond the lack of emphasis on competition, Finland also has a culture that truly **values** education. The Finnish also **trust** public education. It is the second most trusted institutions in the country, next to police, earning 89 percent. This is in stark contrast to the United States, Sahlberg asserts, where only 29 percent trust the public education system. A fairly **equal wealth distribution** within Finland also impacts the education system. As a result, Finland continues to do well in many areas beyond education, like women’s empowerment, technological advances, child well-being, and prosperity.

Conclusion: the discussions on autonomy of schools, testing, and accountability is very much “loaded” with culture. What is seen as desirable in one culture is seen as unwanted in another.

b. Performance levels in East Asian countries. Strengths and weaknesses

Another interesting result to analyze from a cultural perspective is the successful performance of students in East Asian countries. The cultural side of this result can be understood by the 5th Dimension of culture LTO:: the strong emphasis on education as obligation to parents and society.:

Analysis of their education systems has pointed out however that these are steeped in discipline, rote learning and obsessive test preparation. Many educators say however that this strength in education is also a weakness. In their opinion the education system is too test-oriented, schools stifle creativity and parental pressures often deprive children of the joys of childhood.

Jiang Xueqin, a deputy principal at Peking University High School in Beijing said in The Wall Street Journal shortly after test results were announced: “Chinese schools emphasized

testing too much, and produced students who lacked curiosity and the ability to think critically or independently". (13)

As a result critics like Jiang Xueqin feel that "Chinese schools are very good at preparing their students for standardized tests. But for the same reason they fail to prepare them for higher education and the knowledge economy."

One more issue of concern is that the stress to succeed makes that suicide rates among students are very high in countries like South Korea, China and Japan.

Mr. Zhang Chun from the Nanjing Suicide Rescue Hotline said: "Children nowadays are under too much pressure from middle school to high school. They don't have much time to go out and experience being in society. They have no other way of learning, and have no way of blowing off steam". (14)

In South Korea the most common cause of youth suicide is pressure related to the College Scholastic Ability Test.

VII Conclusion

We have shown that well researched systematic differences in value preferences per country are fundamental in understanding the way the teaching learning processes are handled. The 5 culture dimensions found by Geert Hofstede provide an analytical tool for understanding the local differences in the educational policy and school systems.

This brings us to conclude that:

1. A truly international approach to ranking countries on education should take cultural differences into account before "benchmarking" and describing the characteristics of good school systems and good teachers.
2. We can and should learn from each other. But we should also understand that to make a "best practice" work requires translation to a different culture / value system.
Example: Finland is seen by some American educationalists as the example of how to improve the educational system. Analyzing the differences Pahlberg (12) concluded that the big difference is that in the USA the driving factor is competition while in Finland it is cooperation. This is not a coincidence, something that can be changed easily. No it is a

basic cultural difference between Masculine cultures and Feminine cultures. To be effective in looking for improvement this difference should be a leading element in the planning of change. (see 16)

The same applies to the discussion on the autonomy of schools. In high power distance countries (by far the majority of countries in the world) Autonomy will only be possible in a clearly defined and limited mandate that is given by the central power holders. It should be defined top down.

3. The 5 dimensions of culture provide a guideline for the translation

4. The quality of teachers is related to how country cultures are defining the role of teachers in the education process. It is a matter of effectiveness to accept this and to understand that results can be obtained in different ways. Look at the differences between the first two countries in the ranking system Finland and South Korea.:

Finland	South Korea
Student centered education	Teacher centered education
Effectiveness of learning related to amount of two-way communication	Effectiveness of learning related to excellence of teacher
Teacher expects students take initiative	Students expect initiative from teacher
Teacher expects students find their own path	Students expect teacher to outline paths
A good teacher uses plain language	A good teacher uses academic language
Teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as stimulating	Teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as personal disloyalty
Face consciousness weak	Neither teacher nor student should ever be made to lose face

5. Planning and implementation of change in the educational field should take the country culture into account. For instance in high PDI countries it should be done top down, committing first the top of the educational field. In low PDI countries with a high score on UAI it is a must to commit first the recognized experts in the field, while in countries with low PDI and Femininity all stake holders must be involved from scratch .

6. About the authors (*17)

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Until 2007 Huib was co-owner and MD of the Institute for Training in Intercultural management ITIM. He is experienced in translating international and global strategies and policies into practical consequences for management. He has been working in this field since 1989 with Fortune 1000 companies, as well as with public and political organizations in 85 countries in all continents.

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Carel is senior consultant/trainer for ITIM in The Netherlands and is Certification Agent for the Educational sector of the Hofstede Centre. After a career as MD of an international learning company and project manager in international business projects he concentrated on intercultural management in both the public and private sector in the area of education, organization development and management of change.

References

1. The **Progress in International Reading Literacy Study** (PIRLS) is an international study of reading achievement in fourth graders. It is conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). "It is designed to measure children's reading literacy achievement, to provide a baseline for future studies of trends in achievement, and to gather information about children's home and school experiences in learning to read."

The **Programme for International Student Assessment** (**PISA**) is a worldwide study by the OECD in member and non-member nations of 15-year-old school pupils' scholastic

performance on mathematics, science, and reading. It was first performed in 2000 and then repeated every three years. It is done with view to improving education policies and outcomes. The data has increasingly been used both to assess the impact of education quality on incomes and growth and for understanding what causes differences in achievement across nations.

The **Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)** is an international assessment of the mathematics and science knowledge of 4th and 8th grader students around the world. TIMSS was developed by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) to allow participating nations to compare students' educational achievement across borders.

2. As quoted in the LCDB. See 3.

3. The **Learning Curve Data Bank (LCDB)** – created by the Economist Intelligence Unit as part of the broader Learning Curve programme – is an effort to advance study in this area. It is purpose-built, substantial collection of data which includes more than 60 comparative indicators gathered from over 50 countries. Many of these indicators in turn rely on multiple pieces of information, so that, even with some inevitable gaps, the LCDB encompasses over 2,000 individual data points. These go well beyond traditional education metrics, such as teacher-student ratios and various spending metrics, to cover a broad range of educational inputs and possible outputs, from the degree to which parents demand good results of schools to the proportion of adults who end up in jail.

4. **Educational attainment** is a term commonly used by statisticians to refer to the highest degree of education an individual has completed

5. **Black box:**

In philosophy and psychology, the school of behaviorism sees the human mind as a black box. The mind cannot be opened to "look inside" and see how it works. What is possible is to guess how it works based on what happens when something is done to it (input), and what occurs as a result of that (output). The *black box theory of consciousness*, states that the mind is fully understood once the inputs and outputs are well defined and generally couples this with a radical skepticism regarding the possibility of ever successfully describing the underlying structure, mechanism, and dynamics of the mind

6. **Geert Hofstede**, (2 October 1928) is an influential Dutch researcher in the field of organizational studies. He played a major role in developing a systematic framework for assessing and differentiating national cultures and organizational cultures. His studies demonstrated that there are national values that influence behavior of societies and organizations.

He is considered to be one of the 20 most influential business thinkers. See below

The Top 20			
The most influential business thinkers, according to a Wall Street Journal ranking			
Name	Distinction	Name	Distinction
1. Gary Hamel	Consultant	11. Peter M. Senge	Author, 'The Fifth Discipline'
2. Thomas L. Friedman	New York Times columnist	13. Richard Branson	Virgin founder
3. Bill Gates	Microsoft chairman	14. Michael E. Porter	Harvard professor
4. Malcolm Gladwell	Author, 'Blink'	15. Michael S. Dell	Dell founder
5. Howard Gardner	Harvard professor	16. Geert Hofstede	Author, 'Culture's Consequences'
6. Philip Kotler	Northwestern professor	17. Clayton M. Christensen	Harvard professor
6. Robert B. Reich	Ex-labor secretary	18. Jack Welch	Former General Electric CEO
8. Daniel Goleman	Psychologist	18. Tom Peters	Author, 'In Search of Excellence'
9. Henry Mintzberg	McGill professor	20. Myron S. Scholes	Nobel laureate
10. Stephen R. Covey	Author, '7 Habits of Highly Effective People'	20. Ikujiro Nonaka	Hitotsubashi professor
11. Jeffrey Pfeffer	Stanford professor		

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9. **Hofstede, Geert H.** (2001) Culture's Consequences. Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations (Sage publications)

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16. **Huib Wursten. Culture and Change management;** www.itim.org/articleon_changemanagement.pdf

17. We are grateful for the editing suggestions of Ze'eva Cohen, Dinah Nieburg and Tom Fadrhonc

