

## THE AUSTRALIAN

# Truth about tigers and school

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Illustration: Eric Lobbecke Source: The Australian

**ACCORDING to the "Asian Century" report, making our education system one of the world's five best is crucial to seizing the opportunities created by Asia's economic growth. Perhaps, but the real question is what that would involve.**

Platitudes about learning Asian languages do nothing to answer that question. Instead, the report should have examined how it is that Asia's education systems have done as well as they have. For while those systems' performance differs greatly, there is little doubt that the most successful share an emphasis on parental responsibility, including for the costs of education, on competition in the supply of education, and on excellence that has helped propel them to the pinnacle of the world league tables.

Those elements highlight a broader, but crucial, reality: it is not by being welfare states that the Asian economies have lifted millions from poverty towards affluence, but by making individuals and families bear the primary responsibility for their fate. With both sides of Australian politics committed to vast increases in social spending, it is high time we learnt to take Asia seriously.

To urge greater attention to the causes of Asia's success is not to endorse a "doom and gloom" view of our education system. After all, whatever its weaknesses, international comparisons also highlight strengths, even relative to the best performing Asian systems, which are those in countries where education has been shaped by the Confucian emphasis on competitive examinations as the primary route to personal advancement and social standing.

In the 1960s and 70s, for example, standardised tests found an enormous gap between the performance of Australian and Japanese students in maths. Typically, more than 80 per cent of Japanese children scored higher than the average Australian child. In more recent tests, however, the gap has shrunk, though it is difficult to say whether that reflects real improvements or the vagaries of testing. But even taking that into account, the difference remains large, not only compared to Japan but also to Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan.

Understanding its causes is therefore of obvious importance. A good place to begin is with the factors that are plainly not at work. These cover all of the teachers unions' favourite gripes, including public spending on education, class sizes and teacher pay, which virtually every serious study rejects as explanations of the gap. Nor

is there any statistical evidence endorsing the Grattan Institute's emphasis on mentoring of teachers and on the time they have out of the classroom.

Rather, the primary factors are straightforward. Foremost is the impact competitive examinations have on students' life chances.

In Japan, for example, entering the most highly rated universities nearly doubles lifetime income, making education a very high-stakes endeavour. Although not as readily measured, the stakes appear even greater in China, where the entire fate of families rides on exams that determine their only child's access to education, with the most prestigious exams having failure rates well above 99 per cent of qualified candidates.

The unsurprising result is heavy parental investment in securing good educational outcomes. In Taiwan, for example, average families devote 20 per cent of their income to their children's education. And a recent survey of the Chinese city of Chongqing finds poor families spending 40 per cent of their resources on schooling.

With so great a commitment, parents have every incentive to ensure their resources are well spent, which they do through almost obsessive attention to how different schools perform. And that attention translates into a large, intensely competitive, market for schooling and for tutoring.

In Japan, for example, half or more of students are paying for additional private education, with similar levels in Taiwan and even higher ones in South Korea. The rankings competing suppliers receive, in terms of students' eventual exam scores, are widely publicised, including through mass advertising.

Moreover, changes in rankings lead to far-reaching switching by consumers. For instance, when Tokyo's socialist-dominated council abolished streaming in the city's public schools, causing a collapse in the success rate of the once top ranked Hibiya High School, parents promptly shifted their children to private high schools and to public schools in adjacent municipalities. As the deterioration of Tokyo's public schools became well known, teachers at those schools lost face, inducing the best teachers to leave and contributing to a change in policy.

That all this creates an environment in which most students learn core skills is undeniable. While international comparisons of performance dispersion are much less reliable than those of average levels, it is safe to say that despite extensive streaming, test scores are no more unequally distributed in Japan than in Australia, while average scores are significantly higher. There is, in other words, no evidence of poorly performing children being discouraged out of learning. Additionally, parental income seems to have much less impact on educational performance in Japan than in Australia, though that is not true for South Korea or China.

But there certainly are costs as well as benefits. Those costs are especially apparent in China, where the desperately high stakes involved have led both to a high youth suicide rate and to corruption, including through cronyism in marking, the sale of exam questions and the falsification of results.

But even putting those pathologies aside, making so much ride on exam rankings can lead to an arms race, in which parents and children invest far more in outdoing their rivals than could possibly be efficient from the standpoint of society as a whole.

And not many Australians would feel comfortable with education systems so unforgiving in offering few or no second chances.

Yet none of that can detract from the achievement. South Korea, for instance, was poorer than Bangladesh in the 1950s; now its per capita income is more than two-thirds Australia's. Without a dramatic expansion in education, mass prosperity could not have been attained.

That expansion was largely guided and funded by families, with fierce competition in supply ensuring students and parents got the outcomes they insisted on. In sharp contrast to the report's suggestion, no one gave those families a Gonski: sure, governments played their part, but by helping those who help themselves.

Yes, Australia can and should thrive in the Asian Century. However, it is not through gimmicks such as "continuous access to Asian language learning" that we will do so. Rather, it is by giving Asia's experience the respect it deserves. Finally heeding the lessons of Asian education's hard-won success would be a great place to start.

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