High-Performing Education Systems in Asia: Leadership Art meets Implementation Science

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Abstract This article looks at high-performing education systems in Asia through the lens of leadership and leadership development. It proposes that the top-performing education systems systematically build the leadership capacity for improvement and that this is part of an implementation science geared to maximizing performance. Drawing upon initial findings from a cross-national comparative study (The 7 System Leadership Study is funded by the University of Malaysia and involves Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Russia, England and Australia), the article focuses upon two high-performing systems in Asia, Singapore, and Hong Kong. The article concludes by arguing that the top performing systems in Asia, as determined by international comparative data, not only create the leadership capacity to consistently outperform others but also invest in an implementation science that defines, delineates and ultimately, determines exceptional performance.

Keywords System reform · High performing systems in Asia · Implementation science · Leadership capacity

Introduction

The world is changing and changing fast. Nowhere is this clearer than in Asia where the kaleidoscope of economic power is being rapidly and irreversibly reconfigured. Important political shifts are occurring in this region, which are destined to create major economic waves in the complex global marketplace. Global forces are rapidly posing new and demanding challenges to individuals and societies alike and increasingly, competition between countries now revolves around generating professional and human capital (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012). The forces that are currently reshaping and redefining the global economic future are relentless, powerful, and unstoppable. The financial forecasts tell the same, consistent story: Asia is fast becoming the world’s economic powerhouse.

While Asia’s extraordinary economic growth is unquestionable, growing international attention is turning to the region’s equally remarkable educational trajectory (Jensen 2012). Of the 65 countries and provinces participating in the OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2012, 1 the top performers were all in Asia. Shanghai-China scored highest in mathematics, with a mean score of 613 points—the equivalent of nearly three years of schooling above the OECD average. Following Shanghai, in descending order, Singapore, Hong Kong-China, Chinese Taipei, and Korea comprise the top five performers in mathematics. The highest-performing education systems in reading, in PISA 2012, were Shanghai-China, Hong Kong-China, Singapore, Japan, and Korea. In science, the line up is one again very familiar with Shanghai-China, Hong Kong-China, Singapore, Japan, and Finland holding the top positions (OECD 2012).

In 2011, Asian countries demonstrated, yet again, their prowess in mathematics achievement (TIMSS) with Singapore, Korea, and Hong Kong, followed by Chinese Taipei and Japan, as the top-performing systems. At both the fourth and eighth grades, the five East Asian countries had the largest percentages of students reaching the TIMSS

2 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study.