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Impact of Culture on Education in Poland and South Korea. A Comparative Analysis[1]

Abstract

Culture affects our perception of self, our communication styles, and how we are educated or choose to educate the members of our society. Cultural differences affect teaching and learning styles. Educational strategies and practices in Asian and Western countries seem to be in contrast with each other, like their cultures. Although both cultures recognize education as an important tool towards life and educational success, each of them has a specific view on how educational goals could be achieved. The purpose of the qualitative study was to look at how culture impacts on education of a chosen East-South Asian country as well as of a European country. The South-East Asian countries, characterized as Confucian heritage cultures, have regularly topped the international league tables, such PISA, TIMMS and PIRLS, for a few years. The main subject of analysis were the culture and education of Poland and South Korea.

Keywords: *culture in education, Poland, South Korea, Confucian heritage cultures*

Introduction

In 2014 Pearson Education[2] released its annual global educational performance report. Once again, their findings provided a roadmap for teaching students in the 21st century and an explanation of why Asian nations are racing ahead.

The 2014 Learning Curve[3] uses data gathered by The Economist Intelligence Unit[4] (EIU) to determine which countries are doing the best job in preparing students for the 21st century workforce. The report uses statistics on such indicators as spending, school attendance, teacher salary, test scores (including Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS), and Progress in International Reading Literacy Progress (PIRLS)), employment rates and salaries to rank countries (OECD, 2012).

The top seven performers in mathematics were: Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Macau, and Japan. The top five in reading: Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and South Korea. The top four in science: Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan, with South Korea and Vietnam in seventh and eighth places respectively. These are countries described as Confucian heritage cultures, and it is highly probable that there is a culturally related explanation for these excellent performances. The best results in education can be explained by the socioeconomic status of the families from which the students come, but Vietnam would be something of an anomaly in such a hypothesis, and many other of the wealthiest countries are not present at the top of rankings. The cultural explanation is the most probable, because the commonly described attributes of students in Confucian heritage cultures include: a high regard for education and a belief that it plays a significant role in upward mobility; the holding, at a deeply personal level, of Confucian values to do with the cultivation of the self; a strong work ethic that gives practical expression both to this high regard for education and to this commitment to the cultivation of the self….. (Mason M., 2014 a, b).

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[2] *Pearson Education* is a British-owned Education publishing and assessment service to school and corporations, as well as directly to students – cf. http://home.pearsonhighered. com – 2016.04.20.

[3] A *Learning Curve* is a graphical representation of the increase in learning (vertical axis) with experience (horizontal axis). A Learning Curve is used in two main ways: where the same tasks are repeated in a series of trials, or where a body of knowledge is learned over time.

[4] *The Economist Intelligence Unit* (EIU) is an independent business within The Economist Group providing forecasting and advisory services through research and analysis, such as monthly country reports, five-year country economic forecast, country risk service reports, and industry reports – cf. http://www.eiu.com/home.aspx – 2016.04.20.

Pearson (2014) found that when national education systems placed a priority on basic skill development as numeracy and literacy, these countries should be on the top of countries overall in the international tests. Not surprisingly, the South-East Asian countries, such South Korea (No. 1), Japan (No. 2), Singapore (No. 3) and Hong Kong (No.4), clinched the top four spots in the education index produced by Pearson. These four countries beat 39 countries in the Global Index of Cognitive and Education Attainment compiled by the EIU, which measures learning ability as well as literacy and graduation rates.

If we put forward a hypothesis that schools are both recipients and creators of cultural patterns, we should explain a few working terms: culture, societal culture, educational culture, and culturally relevant pedagogy:

– Culture – a meaningful system shared by the majority of people who live or interact in a certain space that helps dictate how people work with one another, how they communicate, how they govern themselves, how they interact with the land, and how they educate. Culture can manifest itself in a variety of ways, explained by many authors (Gudykunst W.B., Matsumoto Y., 1996, pp. 19–56; Hall E.T. 1967; Hofstede G,H, 1980, 2001; Ting-Toomey S., Chung L., 1996).

– Societal culture – the thoughts and views shared by a group of people, which affects communication, interactions, how others are treated, and how one interacts with the world around them (Gudykunst W.B., Ting-Toomey S., Nishida T., 1996);

– Educational culture – the thoughts and views shared by a group of people about how members of the culture should be educated and what is valued in that education.

– Culturally relevant pedagogy – based on the idea that learning is the process that is mediated by the culture and social structure of the area. This means that no curriculum is natural or culturally unbiased; curriculum relies on culture and political power at the time of its creation (Irvine J.J, 2010, pp.57–61; Ladson-Billing G., 1995, pp. 465–491; Moore A., 2000).

Methods and procedures

The purpose of the presented research is to look at how culture affects education of students from the South-East Asian countries and European countries. The proposed research question was the following: How do societal and educational cultures affect the Asian educational experiences of students from South Korea and Poland? The sub-questions were: What are the societal cultural differences in

South Korea and Poland? What social and educational cultural differences affect learning in South Korea and Poland? How do cultural differences affect communication in Korean classroom settings in comparison to Polish ones?

In the qualitative paradigm of the empirical research we want to look at the personal interaction between two cultures: background culture and experienced culture. According to Stanisław Juszczyk (2013, p.8), qualitative research does just that; researchers attempt "to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them". We used the phenomenological paradigm of the research, which originates from philosophy (LeCompte, Schensul J.J, 1999). It seeks to find the meaning of human experience with a focus on a certain phenomenon and K. Richards describes phenomenology as a way to thematically describe and capture the essence of human experience (Richards K., 2003). Culture can by shared not only by a group but also individually experienced (Ark A., 2013). The analysis has been made in the framework of the critical theory, which can be defined as a social theory where issues of concern focus on the idea of power and justice and the ways that notions such as race, class, ideologies, education, and cultural dynamics interact and how we can better understand these interactions to create justice for all involved (Kincheloe J.L., McLaren P., 2000, pp. 279–313). The study attempts to provide a better understanding of how the Korean as well as Polish students interact with their education and how culture impacts on education in these countries. In the research we analysed the chosen published opinions on the influence of culture on society and education, the selected published results of the empirical research conducted by different authors in this subject, the results of our interviews with teachers and our own observations of classmates at different levels of learning in both countries.

Conception of education in the Confucian tradition

In the history of China, Confucianism had a great effect on the whole culture and society of this country, including education. Confucianism is known as "the unifying intellectual philosophy in China" (Yu A., 1996, p. 231), and it has shaped the mode of life of Chinese people for over two thousand years and it has been influencing neighbouring regions, such as Korea (Lee Y-K, 2001, pp.1–11), Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong, called the little tigers of East Asia in the 1990s (Lam Ch-Ch, Ho S. Ch, Wong N-Y, 2002, pp. 99–114).

Confucianism, as the Golden Rule or a national cult, affected the state's politics, economics, society, culture, and education for many centuries (Hwang K.K., 1999,

pp.163–183; 2001, pp. 179–204). According Don Starr (2012, p.8), this philosophy was based on three Hs: humanism, harmony and hierarchy:

  – Humanism meant developing virtuous conduct through education. This involved practising the five virtues: benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), wisdom (*zhi*), loyalty (*zhong*) and altruism (*shu*).
  – Harmony meant avoiding strife, avoiding extremism, being willing to compromise and aiming for the middle way.
  – Hierarchy also reflects this quest for harmony: people should know their place and behave accordingly.

The key relationships are also characterised as: rule & subject, father & son, husband & wife, older brother & younger brother, friend & friend. Apart from the latter, the first four relationships are all asymmetric (Gao G., 1996, pp.81–101).

We can still treat the term 'Confucian Heritage Culture' loosely and take it as a connotation describing the traditional culture which has been largely influenced by the thinking of Confucius and his disciples (Wong N.Y., 1998, pp. 85–98).

Since education was seen as a qualification for leadership, education was also the only form of social upward mobility in ancient China. As Z. Zhao (2007) wrote, this idea is what established the civil servants examination, which was a comprehensive exam to prove that one was educated enough to become a leader in a community. The ancient examination and its great importance in establishing leadership is largely the reason why testing is so heavily emphasized in South-East Asian societies, where Confucianism has a great influence. Confucius believed that all students could learn through hard work and dedication, which has further contributed to the emphasis on testing in Chinese education, which is still in use today (Cheng K.M, Wong K.C., 1996, pp. 32–49). The two main aspects of Confucianism that are still in effect today are moral education and education as a way to advance yourself in society. Moral education is also connected with discipline, as schools have heads of discipline that are called moral leaders (Cheng K.M., 1998).

Cultural differences between Asian and European countries and their impact on education

Geert Hofstede (1980, 2001) is the researcher who did the most fundamental research on cultural differences. He defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others". G. Hofstede carried out fundamental research into the dominant values of 72 countries and in 20 languages, and the way in which they influence

behaviour in organizations. The five dimensions of national culture identified by G. Hofstede (2001, described also by Wursten H., Jacobs C., 2017), are:

1. Power Distance Index, i.e. the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept that power is distributed unequally. In high power-distance cultures (like in Asian countries as: Japan, China, Singapore, South Korea and Poland) everybody has his/her rightful place in society (old age is respected, and status is important). In low power-distance cultures (like in many European countries and the USA, and Australia) people try to look younger and powerful people try to look less powerful (Gudykunst W.B., Matsumoto Y., 1996, pp. 19–56).

2. Individualism vs. collectivism. In individualistic cultures, like almost all the rich European/Western countries, and Poland, the USA and Australia, people look after themselves and their immediate family only; in collectivist cultures, like Asia (South Korea, China, Japan and Singapore) and Africa, people belong to "in-groups," who look after them in exchange for loyalty. In individualist cultures, values are in persons, 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 (Hall E.T., 1976; Hofstede G., 1980; Ting-Toomey S. Chung L., 1996; Kim J., Lim T.S., Dindia K., Burrell N., 2010, pp. 543–566).

3. Masculinity vs. femininity. In masculine cultures, like the USA, Australia, Canada, the UK, Germany, Japan, China and Poland, the dominant values are achievement and success. Performance and achievement are important. The dominant values in feminine cultures (like South Korea, Singapore or Scandinavian countries) are consensus seeking, caring for others and quality of life and people orientation. Small is beautiful and status is not so important (Hofstede G., 1980).

4. Uncertainty Avoidance Index (or uncertainty control). It stands for the extent to which people feel threatened by uncertainty and ambiguity. In cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance (like Germany, Japan, South Korea, Australia and Poland) people have a strong emotional need for rules and formality to structure life. In these countries the need is to know about what people in the past and present already said about a certain subject. In contrast, in weak uncertainty-avoidance cultures, like the UK, the USA, Canada, China, and New Zealand, the views of practitioners are more highly respected (Hofstede G., 1980).

5. Long Term Orientation is the extent to which a society exhibits a future-oriented perspective rather than a near term point of view. Low scoring

countries' like the USA, Canada, Australia, Singapore and European countries (among them Poland), 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 China, Japan and South Korea, for example those practicing Buddhism, Shintoism or Hinduism, people believe that truth depends on time, context and situation.

A culture's stance on each of these areas affects how the culture interacts and communicates with others and their surroundings.

The case of South Korea's education

Many researchers wonder how South Korea can rise so quickly and continue to have one of the most successful education outcomes in the world. In the 2009 results from the PISA list, South Korea ranked within the top 10 in overall mathematics, science, and reading literacy (Fleishman H.L. et al., 2010). In order to explain such dynamical rise we have to analyse some historical influences on education in Korea. For over 400 years until 1987, Korea had closed to outside contact. By 1910 Japan took complete control over Korea. As a colony of Japan, Korea was made to conform to the Japanese colonial administration. According to C.W. Sorensen, it was "autocratic, systemic, thorough, and used large numbers of ethnic Japanese brought from metropole to occupy key niches in the civic service, education system, business, and industry" (Sorensen C.W., 1994, pp. 10–35). During the period of occupation, ethnic Japanese and ethnic Koreans had separate systems with secondary education highly restricted for ethnic Koreans. The Japanese left Korea in 1945 and left them with a broken education system: all schools were taught by ethnic Japanese, there was a shortage of teachers and the illiteracy rate was 78% (Education in South Korea. Understanding… www.sites.miis.edu/southkoreaeducation/introduction). The Basic Education Law was implemented in 1949, unifying the education system, and up to 1953 it was experiencing an increase in the number of students enrolling in middle school and high school, but with no regulation, the schools were admitting students even without the space. With the increasing number of students entering high schools, vocational high schools were reintroduced in 1963. In order to make education more accessible, in 1969 the middle school entrance exam was abolished and this level of education was made compulsory (Kim Y-L., 2016, pp. 73–92).

The role of the teacher in a traditional Korean classroom was even more significant. The publications devoted to educational, social, cultural policy but also to the everyday life of the teachers show that until the early 20ᵗʰ century teachers in all fields were those who controlled the ideas and ideals and in accordance with the Confucian principle: *Gun-sa-bu-il-che* a ruler, a teacher and a father should be honoured and respected the same way ("*Gunsabuilche - The ruler, the teacher, and the father are one body or the same*"). What is more, according to Confucian education, even the shadow of a teacher cannot be stepped upon because it would be a behaviour inconsistent with the commandment that a teacher should be treated with dignity and respect as an ideal, virtuous person and almost Saint (*Deok-in*) with four virtues: *In-ui-ye-ji*: goodness, fairness, good education (decency and personal culture) and wisdom (Park S., 2008).

Comparison of the chosen features of the Korean and Polish education systems

South Korea and Poland are influenced by culture. The culture of Korea is mostly collectivistic with large influences of Confucius (Lee J.K., 1986; Yun S.S. 1996), so being humble, having strong interpersonal interactions (in class and with peers), and having an education were stressed in society. Education in Korea is mainly based on testing and competition for high test scores among secondary students. In college, students tended not to participate due to cultural effects of "face" and being humble (Ho S.Ch. 2000, pp. 171–189).

An individualistic culture dominates in Poland, according to which people look after themselves and their immediate family only. Values are in persons, and there is more explicit, verbal communication. Poland is under the influence of a monotheistic religious system, mainly Christianity. People in this country believe that there is an absolute and indivisible truth. South Korea belongs to high scoring countries, in which Buddhism is practiced, and people believe that truth depends on time, context and situation. Very characteristic social feature in Korea is that of how parents view formal education and extracurricular activities, their involvement in learning activities at home (improving homework habits), and their willingness to be involved in extracurricular activities in school (in enhancing student achievement, reducing absenteeism and dropout rates).(Ho S.Ch., 2000, p. 172; Lam Ch-Ch., Ho E.S.Ch., Wong N-Z, 2002, pp. 99–114).

But in both the studied countries we can find high power-distance cultures, in which everybody has his/her rightful place in society. It means that old age is

respected, and status is important. There is a clear hierarchy between teachers and students, and students always show respect to teachers and avoid disagreeing with them as much as possible. These differences and similarities affect the leadership and organizational culture of the education systems in Poland and Korea.

However, in Poland the learner-centred education dominates (Juszczyk S., 2014, pp. 267–294; Juszczyk S., Kim Y-D, 2015, pp. 153–164) and in Korea the teacher-centred education; in both systems courses are heavily lecture-based, meaning that teachers unilaterally transfer information to students. While the teacher talks, students take meticulous notes, trying to write as much down as they can. But in both countries there are teachers who try to stir up discussions among their students, but the majority do not put much emphasis on participation. Even if the teacher asks questions, students shy away from answering them as they are embarrassed of speaking in front of their classmates or afraid of getting the answer wrong. In the schools of both countries, students are made to memorize their lessons, especially definitions, rules, procedures, facts, and concepts. The reason for such a situation is examinations (with the use of tests) after finishing different levels of education. If the student obtains a test with multiple choice questions, the choices are not chosen well, leading to too obvious answers or too confusing answers. However, in both countries students and parents give high importance to scores, school ranking, and test results. Especially in Korea many students have tutors waiting for them at home to review their lessons for the day and to study in advance for the coming lessons at schools. This phenomenon, called a "shadow education system," is a big social problem in Korea, because numerous Korean students enrol in private academies after school, where there are teachers who teach the same material taught at school and parents pay for privately provided additional tuition (Bray M., 2009).

Conclusions

Analysing similarities and differences, difficulties and positive features of the education systems in Poland and South Korea, we can wonder how Korea can rise so quickly and continue to have one of the most successful education outcomes in the world. Polish education improves from year to year, but our development is not as strong as in Korea. In both countries, after the second world war (Poland) and after the Japanese occupation (Korea) the changes made in their education systems were highly focused on productivity through access to education. By increasing the literacy rate, the Polish and Korean population are more equipped to make

better decisions about social changes. By increasing accessibility to education, our societies will be able to have the knowledge of the various fields that support the countries. In our countries we focus on "critical thinking", "problem-solving", and "creativity", which may be understood as reflecting the influence of "Western" approaches to learning, or/and a result of economic development in our countries.

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