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We Should Turn East and Learn from the World's Best School Systems

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*Train our teachers like the Tigers do, writes **Ben Jensen**.*

Across the country people are looking for ways to improve school education. But we don't have to look far to learn from the best in the world.

Students in high-performing education systems in East Asia are leaping ahead of Australian students. Yet too many Australian educators are hostile to learning from these systems.

Successful East Asian systems such as those in Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore and Shanghai occupy, with Finland, the top five places in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Program for International Student Assessment survey.

In contrast, Australian performance has declined in the past 10 years. In maths, the average 15-year-old in Shanghai performs two years above their Australian counterpart. When an Australian student performs two years below the average we consider them to be severely disadvantaged.

We have much to learn from East Asian education systems, but some of our education leaders do not understand this. Why? Four myths are prevalent. Some believe, first, that the test scores in Asian countries are not valid; second, that high performance is coupled with high inequality; third, that they do well on tests simply because they focus too much on rote learning; and, fourth, that cultural differences are too great to learn from East Asian systems.

These reasons have little basis in fact. There is no evidence that scores achieved by students in East Asia are not accurate. The standards for international assessments are rigorous. When standards are not reached, a country's data is removed. This has happened to Britain and the US, among other countries.

In addition, high performance is matched by high equity. A variety of policies has been successful, including a teacher career structure that has the most effective teachers wanting to teach in the most disadvantaged schools. This is coupled with extensive support targeted at young children and high standards at all schools.

Inequality is greater in Australian education. If you come from a poor family in Australia, you are likelier to drop out and have failing grades than in East Asian systems.

The latest PISA results blew apart the myth about rote learning in Shanghai. PISA focuses on problem-solving skills. Rote learners and those without creative thought do not do well. In South Korea and Singapore the focus is on 21st-century skills; in China, on creativity. Student assessments in Shanghai have been redesigned: there are no multiple-choice questions and cross-disciplinary questions and new material test whether students genuinely understand the subject. In Australia, national policy has a narrower focus, emphasising literacy and numeracy as measured in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy tests.

There is no doubt that culture matters. Not all lessons from East Asia apply here. But it is negligent to dismiss lessons that can help our children. Australia is not alone in this failing. The tiger mother debate in the US is full of stereotypes but little evidence. It may distract policy-makers there from learning from programs in Asia.

Many who dismiss lessons from East Asia emphasise the need to follow Finland, a country geographically much smaller than Australia, and with a population in which more than 90 per cent are

of Finnish ethnicity. There is much to learn from Finland, but given our multicultural population and proximity to Asia we should also learn from the most successful group of systems in the world..

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