

“Learning from Asia in Education”

(An Issues Paper for the “Learning from Asia in Education” conference)
Third, revised version
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This is the third, revised version of the “Issues Paper” prepared for the autumn Budapest workshop/conference on “*Learning from Asia in Education*”.¹ Its goal is to outline a framework for our common thinking about what and how we can learn from Asia in the field of education.

¹ This paper has been written by Gábor Halász with the support of the LfA team. The first version of the paper (dated 2023.02.24) was presented to our partners on the 31st of March 2023 at a hybrid (online/onsite) meeting. A second version was discussed with our partners on the 15th of June 2023 at a second hybrid meeting. The revisions have been informed by the feedback from our partners recorded in two detailed memos (“*Memo of the 1st meeting for the discussion of the draft ‘Issues Paper’ of the ‘Learning from Asia’ (LfA) project*”; “*Memo of the 2nd meeting for the discussion of the Issues Paper of the ‘Learning from Asia’ (LfA) project*”, by our dialogue with Asian PhD students studying in Hungary, and also by a fact-finding mission of the members of the project team to China in May 2023.

“We”, in this context, means Hungarian educational researchers in a narrower perspective, but also European or, in an even broader sense, Western educationalists. This document also serves as a conceptual foundation for the “Learning from Asia” (LfA) project of the *Learning Institute* of the *Mathias Corvinus College* (MCC).² Although the document has been developed in communication with our partners – whose feedback has significantly influenced it –, the full responsibility for its content rests with the Hungarian LfA team.³

Introduction

Those who initiated the LfA project share a common belief: Asian education systems have accumulated valuable knowledge and experiences, especially through recent reforms, that are worth being explored, interpreted and presented. They are convinced that this knowledge and these experiences can significantly improve their capacity to understand and face the challenges their educational systems are confronted with in the 21st century in Europe, in general, and in Hungary, in particular.

Practical, methodological and theoretical dilemmas

At the beginning of and through the process of conceptualising and designing the “Learning from Asia” project a number of fundamental dilemmas emerged. These are summarized in what follows. Although these are mostly of practical and methodologic nature, most of them might have substantial (cultural, philosophical, ethical, etc.) implications. Reflecting on these dilemmas might bring as much value to the LfA project as reflecting on the specific problem areas presented later, in the section entitled “Focus on specific areas of learning”.

The “why” question

Several of our partners asked us about the motivations behind the LfA project and encouraged us to make it more explicit *why* we want to learn from Asia. This project – like most other projects – has its own history, and motivations become clear when this history is told in detail. Some elements are rational or logical (e.g. understanding the educational implications of the “Asian century”, considerations related to Hungary’s foreign policy priorities or with the international relations strategy of the hosting organisation), while others are rather subjective (connected with the personal professional backgrounds and life stories of the initiators). The important point is that these motivations and goals must be transparent and easy to understand for participants and partners.

What do we mean by “Asia”?

Asia is an elusive concept. Its geographical and cultural frontiers can be defined in different ways. Our main focus in this project is on East and South-East Asia (ESEA). Although we do not exclude from our reflections the regions of Central Asia, South Asia, or the Middle East, on the basis of a number of practical and also theoretical considerations we decided to keep our attention focused mainly on the Eastern and Southeast areas of the continent and to regions often described as belonging to the

² The project has been presented in a document written in December 2022, and subsequently shared with potential partners (“*Learning from Asia*”. A brief project and event description. Budapest. 2022.12.28. Manuscript. MCC.)

³ We would like to express our gratitude to all our partners who contributed to the development of this paper with oral and written comments.

“*Confucian Heritage Culture*” with a special interest for its largest entity, China. However, in our dialogue with Asian PhD students, we also invited participants from Central and South Asia and we wish to strengthen our awareness of the huge diversity within the Asian regions.

How to work with a diverse community of partners?

In the LfA project, we work with a highly diverse community of partners which is a challenge but also an opportunity, both logistically and culturally. Some of our partners – both from Asia and the West – belong to an “inner circle”: they have been invited as speakers to our Autumn conference, and asked to contribute to the book we plan to publish about the project. Others belong to an “extended circle”, the members of which are invited to attend our hybrid (onsite/online) meetings and to help us to develop our conceptual framework. The community of Asian PhD students studying in Hungary, representing various Asian countries, is also part of this extended circle of partners.⁴ The high level cultural/social heterogeneity of these circles of partners is an asset, however, managing its diversity might require sophisticated intercultural skills.

Narrowing or broadening the scope?

Some of our partners suggested that we should narrow the focus of our dialogue to some more specific areas with high strategic relevance, or to specific subsystems. Although we feel the risks of having a too broad focus, we think keeping it wide-ranging has more advantages. We are interested in all areas of education and in all subsystems (from the lowest to the highest level, including non-formal and informal learning). The most relevant related challenge is keeping the focus on meaningful learning from Asian educational thinking and practice. All sectors and all problem areas are interesting for us as long as they provide experiences or cases that can support our exploration of the potential of learning from Asia.

What kind of knowledge are we interested in?

While thinking about the potential content of learning we distinguished two kinds of knowledge areas. One is closer to the technical and practical end, such as specific policy tools and solutions or educational practices and technologies. The other is more abstract and philosophical, such as epistemological and cognitive models or mental representations. We are interested in both, but we want to put the emphasis on the second. Our aim is to create a kind of “double loop learning” that allows us not only to get new information but also to find new ways of understanding.

Why not mutual learning?

There is a strong temptation to talk about mutual learning, where Asians and Europeans learn from each other, instead of Europeans learning, in a one-sided way, from Asians. Some of our partners suggested that we should open our perspective so that we could take into account learning in both ways. Our experience shows, however, that when we open the reflection on the way of learning to both directions, there is a tendency, for well-known historical reasons, of focusing more on what Asians can learn from the West than on what the West learns from the East. We would like to avoid this: this is why we keep the one-way direction.

⁴ We call this „*Asian PhD Forum*”, operating on the basis of an elaborated strategy document (see: “*Strategic plan Feb - Oct, 2023 (1st draft) 'Learning from Asia' project - Action line 2*”).

Learning from the learner

From the previous dilemma, another emerges: What does “learning from the learner” mean, and what are the implications of this “reversed form of learning”? In the last one and a half century the East – pushed and pulled to modernise and make catching-up efforts – was typically in the role of the “learner”, and the West played the role of the “teacher”. In the context of the LfA project the roles are reversed. For those working in the field of education putting “teachers” in the position of “learners”, and letting “learners” teach the “teachers” has always been an inspiring idea. This requires a significant change in our mindset and attitudes shaped by centuries of traditions in education which might be particularly challenging for those socialised in Asian education systems.⁵ In the context of East-West relations this also brings in the historical and political perspectives of colonisation, de-colonisation and post-colonialism. From this perspective the increasing role of Asian countries in international development – being both on the “receiving” and “giving” side – seems to be particularly interesting (see more about this later in the section “*Policy design, policy implementation, experimentation and development*”).

Learning “from” versus learning “through”

Although we use the word “from” in the name of our project, assuming the presence of the “other” who is willing to share her or his knowledge with us, what we have in mind is rather learning through interaction with the “other”. We see as a main source of learning our interactions (dialogue, communication, common activities). We want to learn not simply “from” our Asian partners but rather “through” communicating with them. The emphasis on learning from interaction is a fundamental principle in the LfA project which has a number of implications for the way we run the project.⁶ One of them is that in this project it is not enough to let our Asian partners speak and to listen to them, but we also have to create platforms for exchange and perform common activities.

Learning from success and learning from mistakes

We often learn more from mistakes than from successful practices. Most Asian countries have experienced painful transitions on their way of moving towards modernity and this way has rarely been smooth and straightforward. The success stories of the “Asian tigers”, for example, can be described also as stories full of uncertainties, disorientations, setbacks and failures. The eyes of a critical analyst can discover scenes of conflicts, fights, resistance and protests behind the successful reforms of high-performing Asian educational systems. For our learning, the studying of this less invisible, “grey” history of reforms might be more useful, than simple admiration or uncritical emulation.

Strengthening the “Western pillar”

One of the dilemmas that emerged during the conceptualisation of the LfA project has been related to those who want to learn from Asia. Effective learning can happen only if the learner is not only motivated, engaged and open-minded but also well-prepared. The LfA project will generate valuable outcomes only if we have good and strong

⁵ For an interesting example of putting learners into the role of teacher in an Asian context see for example Zou et al. (2015):

⁶ This is perhaps the most important of the principles appearing in this section. When we mentioned this to our partners in China, we always received particularly positive feedback to this idea of learning through interaction.

partners on the Western learners' side. As in this project the West learns from the East, we need a strong "receiving end" or "Western pillar".

Understanding how we learn from Asia

When speaking of and promoting learning from Asia we also have to think about what this learning means. We have to understand the nature of this specific form of learning. Is this "replacing" our knowledge with another kind of knowledge or is this developing a new kind of parallel knowledge without losing the old one? Is this a smooth, easy process or is this a difficult process requiring specific mental efforts? Is this simply adding new elements to our existing knowledge, without fundamental changes in our epistemological behaviour or is this a kind of "double learning" changing fundamentally our way of seeing the world? Raising questions like these and seeking responses to them is seen as an important component of the LfA project.

Bipolarity versus unity

The title of the project implies a bipolar perspective in which there is a clear distinction between "them" and "us". This suggests a model assuming that "we are learning from them" and "they are learning from us" which might seem to be in contradiction with our anthropological postulates. We are all humans with similar natural characteristics, and differences within Eastern and Western cultures might be greater than differences between these cultures. The bipolarity suggested by the title of the LfA project should be conceived as a *methodological tool*, supporting a focused dialogue, it does not question our basic assumption of unity and similarity.

Emulating, understanding, reflecting

The high-performing education systems of ESEA countries have attracted much attention from the West, sometimes even provoking emulation efforts (see more details about this below). A better understanding of the background of the high performance of these systems, in order to "borrow" some of their elements, could naturally be among the goals of the LfA project, but this is not the main goal. The focus is on reflection without *direct* intentions to influence education policies. In this project, the intellectual dimension might be more important than the direct practical or utilitarian implications.

How to avoid reinventing the wheel?

Learning from other systems and cultures has long been an important theme of comparative and cultural studies. There is abundant literature available on this. An important goal of the project is therefore to explore what existing literature says about our theme. and to build on existing knowledge in our reflection. In the context of the LfA project, it is worth mentioning the existence of a quite rich Hungarian literature on education in the ESEA region as a valuable input.⁷

Focus on specific areas of learning

In the following, short reflections related to a number of specific areas will be presented with the intention of strengthening the conceptual background of the LfA project, and also offering

⁷ A prominent Hungarian expert of this theme is professor János Györi who has published extensively about education in the ESEA region (see, for example, Györi, 2006).

specific focuses to our dialogue during the “Learning from Asia in Education” conference, and supporting our speakers.

The main goal of defining a limited number of areas of special interest is to enhance the process of exploring the possibilities of learning. This has been influenced by the conversations with our partners, some of them seeing the selection too broad, others too narrow. What follows can be conceived as a kind of “menu”, giving hopefully sufficient freedom to our partners to bring in what they think to be the most relevant from their own interests and experiences. The most important expectation is that our dialogue in each thematic area should support learning.

The selection of the specific areas below reflects the interest of those running the LfA project. Since this is not an exclusive list, further areas could naturally be added, and not all of them deserve necessarily the same level of attention. This can also be complemented by a number of horizontal, cross-cutting themes that might be discussed within each of the proposed thematic areas. Some of the general dilemmas and principles presented in the first part of this paper – especially those related to the nature of learning – could appear explicitly in each thematic area. The question of sustainability – stressed by some of our partners – could also be discussed as a horizontal theme, similarly to the questions of different value systems and those related to globalisation. Although our goal is not comparison, each thematic area might be approached in a comparative perspective, exploring similarities and differences in both East-West and East-East relations. Our hope is that it is possible to discuss the specific problem areas presented below from the perspectives of the general dilemmas presented in the previous section.

High-performing Asian education systems

The idea of learning from Asia in education has received growing attention in the West since the publication of the results of the first international assessments of student performance in the 1980s, demonstrating that some Asian education systems significantly outperformed their Western peers. It might be worth quoting a paragraph from a book that has played a particularly strong role in directing the attention of Western educational thinkers toward Asia in the early 1990s. The two American authors, who conducted comparative studies of US, Japanese and Chinese education, wrote this in the introductory chapter of their book:

“Having compared teaching, parenting, learning, and academic achievement in several very different cultures, we found the most exciting revelations not in what we discovered in Asia, but in what was revealed in the United States. Despite the fact that we have spent all our lives in this country, we, as is likely true of most Americans, had never really understood the consequences of many American beliefs, attitudes, and practices until we began our studies in Asia. Many aspects of American education began to seem strange when we viewed them through lenses altered by our Asian experience.” (Stevenson – Stigler, 1992).

This quotation can be used also to illustrate an important aspect of our LfA project: one of the expected outcomes of learning from Asia is a better understanding of our own system by looking at what we can see in Asia. Learning in this case necessitates not only understanding what others do but also discovering our own strengths and weaknesses. One implication of this is that we welcome the reflections of our Asian partners about what they see when they observe education in the West.

Asia’s “high-performing” education systems have attracted much of the attention of educational researchers, and the authors of many publications have tried to unveil the “secrets” of these

systems (see, for example, OECD, 2011, Jensen et al., 2012; Deng - Gopinathan, 2016; Tan, 2018). The outcomes of international student assessments have profoundly influenced policy discourses, Asian systems becoming recurrent reference points in them (Sellar - Lingard, 2013; Takayama, 2017; La Londe - Verger 2020; Zhu, 2020, You, 2020). In the video series of the OECD's PISA program on the most successful education systems one-third of the systems presented are from the ESEA region.⁸

The increasing Western attention to high-performing Asian education systems has already resulted in processes that can be described as “learning from Asia”. Policy borrowing has become a two-way process, sometimes superficial or remaining at the level of rhetoric but also substantial (Forestier - Crossley, 2015). There have even been interesting experiments to “transplant” Asian pedagogical approaches directly to Western school contexts, demonstrating the difficult, or even painful nature of such attempts.⁹ Exploring examples of Western learning from high-performing Asian education systems might bring relevant insights to the LfA project.

From the perspective of the LfA project, the question of high performance appears as a complex phenomenon worth studying because this might contribute to the development of our own thinking about pedagogical practices and educational policies. We should not forget that the notion of high performance, especially when it is strongly connected to measurements based on standardised tests has always been contestable.

Analysing specific reforms in Asian systems

One of the phenomena that seem to be of special interest to the LfA project is the reform movement in several ESEA countries aimed at promoting the development of 21st century skills. From a Western perspective perhaps the most interesting aspect of these reforms is that they have been implemented in a particularly challenging cultural context characterised by what many authors label with the attribute “Confucian”. This was described some years ago by a former Dean of the Faculty of Education of the University of Hongkong in a paper analysing reforms in three East Asian cities in the following way:

„...almost all the reforms in the three systems take as a given the will to overcome the shortcomings of the cultural heritage in education. That is, the overwhelming pressure of public examinations that overshadows the entire school system; the overemphasis on examination scores throughout the school system; the didactic pedagogy that precludes innovations and creativity; and the obsolete focus on manpower-planning in the economy and the narrow employability of individuals for specific jobs.

There are general efforts to shift the emphasis from knowledge and information to learning, hence examining the process of learning as well as the results. There is therefore a switch from an emphasis on subject knowledge to the ability to use language (which is PISA's emphasis). There is also a common belief in the necessity of turning a *teaching* discourse into a *learning* discourse. Therefore, there is also, subsequently, a very significant increase in educational resources and in improving learning environments. On the surface, this could easily be seen as moving away from East Asian traditions of education practice, as perceived by Western observers” (Cheng, 2014)

⁸ See the OECD video series on „Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education” (<https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/strongperformers/>)

⁹ See the BBC documentary „Are Our Kids Tough Enough? Chinese School” here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06565zm>

The successful implementation of the reforms aimed at promoting learning for 21st century skills in the ESEA education systems has certainly required sophisticated implementation and change management skills, including understanding complexity, coping with uncertainty, creative policy design, policy improvisation, resilience, understanding and coping with resistance, and so on. It also required resistance to self-indulgence potentially nurtured by the positive feedback received from large-scale international assessments (Takayama, 2017). This process has certainly not always been successful, there must have been setbacks, shortcomings, and unexpected events. This is particularly interesting for our learning.

A deeper analysis of reforms that have often been described as “borrowing” from the West, that is, as cases of the East learning from the West, might reveal that these reforms have been building as much on domestic traditions and cultural patterns as on borrowed models (see, for example, Tan, 2016). Ancient Asian pedagogical thinking could inspire modern learner-centered and competence-based approaches as much as Western ideas of progressive pedagogy (Wei, 2019; Zhao, 2021).¹⁰

Policy design, policy implementation, experimentation and development

Development economists interpreting the rapid economic growth in ESEA countries identified a number of features of what they call the “East Asian Development Model”. These include intelligent accumulation of physical and human capital with significant investment into education, high saving rates allowing intensive domestic investment, import-substituting industrialization gradually replaced by export-pushed trade strategies and the removal of protection measures, and the operation of a strong developmental or interventionist state. They also often add cultural elements, such as the Confucian values of industriousness, frugality, high respect for education, the acceptance of hierarchical relationships, and the emphasis on the group rather than the individual (Klenner, 2006; Hua, 2014).

Further interesting characteristics, related to managing social and economic transformation and change have been identified by researchers analysing policymaking and policy implementation processes in East Asia. One of these is the use of experimentation in designing and implementing policies. The Chinese approach has been described as “a policy process in which central policymakers encourage local officials to try out new ways of problem-solving and then feed the local experiences back into national policy formulation” (Heilmann, 2018). One description of the process might be worth being quoted here in detail:

„First, local “experimentation points” (*shidian*) or local “experimentation zones” (*shiyangu*) are established. Second, successful “model experiments” (*dianxing shiyan*) are identified under these pilot experimental projects and expanded “from point to surface” (*you dian dao mian*, or *yidian daimian*) to test the extent to which the new policy options can be generalized or need to be modified. Third, the policies are not implemented in national legislation until they have been thoroughly tried and tested in a real-life administrative environment, a process that usually takes a number of years.” (Heilmann, 2018).

This approach has also been used in the education sector, for example when designing and implementing a curriculum reform in the school sector (Zhou – Zhu, 2006; Guan - Meng, 2007) or introducing reforms in the field of higher education (Han - Mills, 2020, Han, 2021). The role

¹⁰ When, during our factfinding mission to China, we were asking a teacher about the advanced learner-centred approach we found in her school she started speaking about being inspired by Confucian ideas.

of “local policy entrepreneurs” (Teets, 2015) in this process seems to be particularly interesting in the context of the LfA project.

The increasing role of Asian countries in international development offers a particularly interesting case for reflection, illustrating the “learning from the learner” perspective. Several Asian countries have been moving from the role of receiving development aid to the role of supporting development in less developed countries in the context of the so-called south-south cooperation (for a detailed picture see, for example, Mulakala, 2021). The case of China illustrates well how the “learner” (using foreign aid for domestic development) becomes “teacher” (becoming a key player in providing development aid to Africa), and why in this double role it could be often more effective than the donor community of highly developed Western (Northern) countries (Brautigam, 2011).

Innovation potential, dynamics and performance

An increasingly important element of the East Asian development model is looking at innovation, especially at its indigenous form, as one of the most important engines of economic and social development. This is particularly visible in China where, since the nineties, investment in research, innovation and human resources has been rising spectacularly (Zhou - Leydesdorff, 2006; Simon – Cao, 2009; Chen, 2021). From the perspective of the LfA project the question of innovation potential and performance of countries often described by Western analysts as “authoritarian”, having strong national governments and limited institutional or local autonomy, illustrating an “innovation paradox” (Grillo - Nanetti, 2018), seems to be particularly interesting. Promoting innovation in education has been a key component also in the education sector in several ESEA countries (Hogan, 2007; Marsh - Lee, 2014; Wu - Lin, 2019; Tran et al., 2023). In some systems, especially in Singapore and Hongkong, encouraging and inciting school-level innovations has been a key element of education reforms.

An important focus of our reflection within the LfA project will be directed to innovative thinking and practice in ESEA education systems. We are especially interested in gradual, incremental, locally initiated and bottom-up forms of innovation. As the brief project description – mentioned earlier – shows, there is also an intention to cooperate with some ESEA partners in measuring and analysing school or basic unit-level innovations, using an instrument developed earlier in Hungary.¹¹

Our recent visit to China¹² has confirmed the tremendous innovation potential of Asian education systems, including the motivation and capacities of schools and teachers to design and implement creative solutions supporting more effective learning. Most Asian countries consciously promote innovations – especially their technology-based forms – in their education systems. From the perspective of the LfA project, it is particularly interesting to explore how innovation processes are generated in a cultural context often described as “traditional”, and how tensions between cultural traditions and advanced new solutions are managed. Cases of revitalising cultural traditions in innovative forms and creating a new balance between the “old” and the “new” seem to be particularly interesting. The emergence and spread of disruptive forms of innovations in the context of the recent pandemic in several Asian systems could also be of interest to the LfA project, especially from the perspective of cultural factors influencing adoption and behavioural/organisational changes.

¹¹ For details see, for example, Halász (2018) or Halász - Fazekas (2021).

¹² The visit took place between the 4th and the 21st of May 2023. We visited 7 universities, 2 research organisations and 5 schools in three cities (Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong).

An interesting and original line of thinking could be generated by exploring the educational implications of the so-called Shanzhai phenomenon in China (Dong, 2014; Han, 2017). This can be conceived as a special Asian form of innovation activity comparable to what education innovation researchers sometimes describe with the notions of “tinkering” and “bricolage” (Honan, 2006; Fuglsang, 2010).¹³ This line of thinking in the LfA project could be enhanced by earlier Hungarian research on grass-roots, school-based and teacher-led innovations (Halász – Fazekas, 2021).

Entrepreneurship and education

Asian people are often presented not only as being entrepreneurial but also as representing a particular kind of entrepreneurship, sometimes described as “imitative” or “adaptive” (Yu - Yan, 2014). Since creativity is seen as a key component of entrepreneurship it might appear paradoxical that they are also often presented as “lacking creativity”, which is typically imputed to the dominant form of education seen as not to be effective in developing skills related to creativity. But after having discussions with Asian educators and visiting Asian schools we might soon come to the conclusion that the West has much to learn from Asia about how to educate for creativity. This might illustrate what we earlier said about “learning from the learner”. As brilliantly explained in a strategy document by an Icelandic researcher, Confucianism simply has a different understanding of what one calls creativity in the West (Sigurðsson, 2010). It is less about creating something “original” (that did not exist before) and more about recognising opportunities to reconfigure things in a given context and also effectively performing this reconfiguration (Han, 2017). Furthermore, it is often linked rather to the community than to isolated individuals.

One of the things that one can learn from Asia in connection with education for creativity and entrepreneurship is, for example, how to balance between well-established, difficult-to-change rules and the infinity of open options given in every context. Another thing one can learn is how to promote education for creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship in an environment in which overemphasizing stability and encouraging dogmatic interpretations of classical (especially Confucian) texts has been a common trend.

Reflections about *educational* entrepreneurship are particularly relevant for the LfA project. On the basis of our current knowledge entrepreneurship has a much stronger role in ESEA education systems than in most Western systems. Private tutoring and the high-level consumption of privately-provided educational services are often mentioned as key features of ESEA education systems (e.g. Bray – Kwo, 2014; Tan, 2018; Zhang, 2019). Entrepreneurs providing educational or education-related services are particularly active in those areas where the penetration of IT technology in education is very intensive.

Our assumption is that the high number of both providers and consumers and the high-level variety and diversity of private educational services have led to the emergence of a unique educational ecosystem where the sharing of tasks between public and private agents shows a particular dynamic. Studying this ecosystem offers unique opportunities not only to understand the nature of educational entrepreneurship better but also to learn about the motivations, potential and limitations of regulatory policies and to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and the dynamics of the education market (Zhang, 2023). From this perspective, it could be

¹³ An internet search connecting “Shanzhai” and “education” does not result in many relevant hits but asking ChatGPT about this shows that they have already been connected by some authors.

particularly interesting to explore the background and the impact of the recent Chinese “double reduction” policy which, while suppressing abruptly a significant part of the private sector in this country, generated particularly creative responses from educational entrepreneurs in their efforts to survive.

Technology and post-pandemic conditions

In most Asian countries the penetration of digital technologies in all spheres of life, including education, has been spectacular (OECD, 2017), and this has been accelerated dramatically by the recent pandemic. The study visit of the LfA project team in China in May 2023 provided several direct experiences of this.¹⁴

The openness of Asian societies to rapidly absorb advanced digital technologies creates extraordinarily favourable conditions for these technologies to penetrate also into the world of education in Asia. This is enhanced by the positive climate in several Asian countries for the development of the education technology industry. Private and public investment in this area is particularly high and growing faster than in the US or Europe. According to the analyses of a market research company, investment in educational technology in China surpassed in 2018 similar investment in the US (Adkins, 2020), which has been accompanied by a spectacular proliferation of EdTech start-ups.

Some Asian countries have been particularly successful in shifting from face-to-face education to online learning during the pandemic. Many schools have achieved extremely rapid adaptation thanks to the creativity and innovative capacities of their teachers and their leaders. According to an analysis we received from a renowned Hong Kong academic, online teaching has sometimes led to spectacular improvements in areas like promoting self-regulated learning, strengthening student-centred teaching, supporting social-emotional development and student well-being or enriching teacher-parent communication (Cheng, 2023).

One aspect that might be particularly interesting from the perspective of the LfA project is the use of advanced digital technologies in creating personalised instant feedback to learners during the learning process (see, for example, Mok, 2018). This is a rapidly developing area in Asia, due to two favourable contextual factors: the strong focus on teaching students cognitive processes and the relatively easy access to student data due to privacy and data protection related regulations being more flexible than in the West.

Teachers’ status, work and learning

Questions related to the status of teachers, their way of working and the way they learn seem to be particularly relevant from the perspective of the LfA project. In our communication with our partners, we often heard references to these questions. In most Asian countries the social recognition of teachers is significantly higher than in many Western systems, especially in Hungary, where the prestige of the teaching profession and the material recognition of the work of teachers is particularly low.

Some questions related to teachers seem to be especially relevant from the perspective of the LfA project. One of them is the definition of professional knowledge and the various forms of managing – building, sharing and using – this knowledge, especially at the level of schools and in different forms of collaborative actions. The widespread practice of collective lesson design,

¹⁴ We could see, for example, the use of artificial intelligence to analyse videorecorded teaching practices for improving the quality of teaching at Fudan University based on advanced analytical frameworks and algorithms.

based on careful analyses of student cognitive habits – as demonstrated by the lesson study movement or the sophisticated practice of “learning study” in Hong Kong (see, recently, Györi, 2019) – is, for example, of particular interest for the LfA project.

A similarly promising area of inquiry is teacher-student relationships, especially when we go beyond the stereotypes that many Western observers follow when describing this relationship as “hierarchical” or “distant”. Understanding better, for example, what one Chinese author in her analysis of social-emotional learning described as “relational ontology” and „ecological interdependency” (You, 2023) might lead to a reconfiguration of our thinking about teacher-student relationships.

Studying the challenges of moving from teacher-centred to student-centred pedagogies and from content-based to competence-based teaching in many Asian systems also seems to be a particularly promising area of reflection from several perspectives. On the one hand, this is a typical case of “learning from the learner” as teachers and schools in many Western systems encounter the same challenges. Although these “progressive” approaches are often presented as “borrowed” from the West, in fact, they are much less widespread and absorbed there than many assume. It might sound like a paradox but when we want to help our Hungarian teachers to learn how to behave and work in a student-centred manner and how to practice competence-based pedagogies it might be better to show them examples from Hong Kong or Singapore rather than from Sweden or Scotland. On the other hand, a deeper understanding of Confucian thinking about learning and teaching might reveal that these “progressive” approaches might have deeper roots in ancient Asian thinking than in classical Western philosophies (see, for example, Di - McEwan, 2016; Zhao, 2018).

Historical, political and cultural dimensions

Developing and managing the LfA project requires in-depth reflection on the historical, political and cultural context of education in the ESEA region. A key element of this context is what we could describe perhaps the best using the terms of colonisation, de-colonisation and post-colonialism. Colonisation – in its direct and indirect forms – and de-colonisation following the Second World War have shaped the social and cultural reality of ESEA countries enormously. This includes, in a broader perspective, identities, attitudes, behavioural patterns, and, specifically, attitudes towards becoming a source of knowledge and accepting roles in which others (especially former colonisers) want to learn from them.

We could illustrate the complexity of this by quoting the title of the introductory chapter of a book entitled “*Asia as Method in Education Studies*” (Zhang et al., 2015). The author of this chapter has grown up and was educated in the former British colonial Hong Kong and is currently a professor at a Canadian university. The seemingly enigmatic title to her introduction – “*Can a spider weave its way out of the web that it is being woven into, just as it weaves?*” (Lin, 2015) – displays expressively the challenges related to Asian identities in the context of communicating with the West.

Another title could perhaps help further our thinking about colonial histories and post-colonial realities. The Singaporean thinker (former UN diplomat) Kishore Mahbubani gave this deliberately provocative title to one of his books, published more than two decades ago: “*Can Asians Think?*”. Recalling his experience at Harvard University in the early nineties he wrote this:

“The Western mind believes that it understands all worlds, since it is open to all ideas and closed to none. The paradoxical result of this deep-seated assumption is that the Western mind is actually unaware of the limits of its understanding and comprehension” (Mahbubani, 2009).

This carries a particularly important message to those involved in the LfA project, especially to those on the Western side. It implies that in a post-colonial context, it might not be enough to be an intellectually open-minded learner, but something more might be needed. This “something more” might have sensitive dimensions, including emotions, unusual and not always welcome in an academic environment, such as empathy, sympathy and compassion.

In this perspective, an interesting line of discussion could be related to what the dean of the Education Faculty of Hong Kong called in his recent book “The Chinese idea of a university” (Yang, 2022). This shows how institutions of “higher learning” in different Chinese-speaking systems, after decades of conscious and government-supported “westernisation” are re-discovering earlier traditions and how they try to create a new form of synthesis of these traditions and the Western model of university.

Another promising line of thinking could be related to exploring the ways how Western educational ideas have been translated into Asian languages, what kind of changes of meaning have accompanied this process, how inherited classical meanings influenced the interpretation of imported notions, and what epistemological implications this might generate. For example, the process of creating a new understanding of “competence” in the Chinese curriculum reform, leading to the emergence of a concept that is rooted both in traditional Confucian and modern Western educational thinking (Zhao, 2020), seems to be particularly interesting in the context of the LfA project. This is a further case to illustrate how the (Western) learner can learn from the way the (Eastern) learner is learning (constructing new meanings).¹⁵

Cognitive and philosophical dimensions

Understanding education in ESEA countries requires going beyond the easy-to-see, highly visible and explicit factors: we have to look under the surface and be open to higher levels of reflection. Comparative studies often neglect the deeper exploration of cultural determinants or “dominant cultural scripts” (Tan, 2013; Zhu, 2020). There is a need, for example, to identify those elements of “Confucian heritage cultures” (Mason, 2014) that might have direct or indirect influences on education.

We could illustrate this here using two examples, closely related to each other: one is the concept of “harmony”, and the other is the idea of “process thinking”. In his book about the Chinese notion of harmony Singaporean philosopher Chenyang Li contends that “Confucian harmony is not mere agreement but has to be achieved and maintained with creative tension” and this harmony “is a dynamic, generative process, which seeks to balance and reconcile differences and conflicts through creativity and mutual transformation” As for “process thinking”, this is generally connected with “process philosophers”, such as Alfred North Whitehead or John B. Cobb, who look at reality not as made of “things” but as something “becoming”, focusing on relations instead of seeing stable objects. They often stress explicitly

¹⁵ This example also shows that what some critical authors in the neo-colonialism perspective describe as „epistemicide” can sometimes be interpreted as the creation of new, original, hybrid epistemic models. This might also be an interesting case of showing how the former “colonialist” (who is still often struggling with digesting the concept of competence) can learn from the former “colonised” (who might have gone more successfully through this process).

that the “Asian mind” is more open to this kind of thinking than its Western pair, and encourage dialogue between Eastern and Western thinkers (Cobb, 2007; Wang, 2013) leading to “complementary consciousness and co-flourishing” (Fan – Wang, 2015).

From the many potential examples, perhaps one further could be mentioned here. “Critical thinking” is often presented as a key element of modern Western culture and, in many education systems, its development has become a top priority of curriculum reforms, while Asian education is often criticized for undervaluing this goal. However, a careful analysis of Confucianism may reveal that critical thinking is not less valued by Asians: they simply have a different way of understanding it. As the Icelandic researcher quoted earlier noted:

„One problem with the general Western view of critical thinking (and philosophy in general) is that it neglects both context and change. Logical analysis decontextualizes statements by isolating them and applying abstract rules to them. The general framework is undeniably rather one-dimensional. In each case, an object to be critiqued is identified. The object is in some sense simply there, isolated in its changelessness, and waiting for us to scrutinize it. The aim is to gain full knowledge of the object or to bring it fully into consciousness.” [In contrast with this in Confucian thinking] „...learning to be human is necessarily a critical task, but one that demands a continuous assessment of circumstances, configurations and situations in which the self is also an integral part no less than others. Therefore, critical scrutiny must also include the thinking and acting self: a self-critical element is wholly indispensable” (Sigurðsson, 2017).

These philosophical-level reflections might have direct implications on how we think about pedagogy, policy design, reforms, changes, innovation or policy implementation in education, providing various opportunities for “learning from Asia”. A good example could be the interpretation of successful education policies as effective management of paradoxes (see, for example, Ng, 2017). There is certainly much to learn from traditional Asian thinking when it comes to coping with complexities, contradictions, uncertainties and ambiguities while designing and implementing both classroom-level activities and national-level policy interventions.

Concluding remarks

One of our partners suggested that we should add “research questions” to each of the thematic areas presented above. While fully acknowledging the potential role of research questions in strengthening the focus of our dialogue and assuring its coherence, after some hesitation we came to the conclusion that we should add only one single question: “*How reflecting about the given area can enhance the learning from Asia?*”

Of course, this single question can be enriched by specific sub-questions which could create stronger linkages between the different problem areas and the dilemmas presented in the earlier section entitled “*Practical, methodological and theoretical dilemmas*”. We could ask questions like these, for example: “How interaction (dialogue) about entrepreneurship can contribute to learning from Asia?” or “What can we learn from the efforts (successes and failures) of Asian systems to implement curriculum reforms aimed at developing 21. century skills?” or “Will the study of Asian practices of teacher collaboration improve significantly our general understanding of the development potential hidden in teacher collaboration?” or “Could the Chinese practice of policy experimentation be applied in the Hungarian education policy environment?” What is common in all these examples of questions is that the emphasis is not on the specific problem area but on our main concern: promoting various forms of learning from Asia.

From what has been said above it might be clear that our main intention is not to generate new specific knowledge in certain well-defined areas but to explore how learning from Asia can contribute to the generation of new knowledge in any area of education. This is the reason why we have encouraged the speakers of the “Learning from Asia in Education” conference to share their knowledge, personal experiences, stories and memories related to cases where the West was learning from the East. For the LfA project, the process of learning, the challenges met, the conditions of successful learning, or the causes of failure to learn are more interesting than the specific content that was or was not learnt.

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