

“Although they may not be able to quantify it, governments in most countries recognise a link between the knowledge and skills with which young people enter the workforce and long-term economic competitiveness. For this reason, interest is intense in research which explores the factors that seem to lead in some countries to outstanding educational performance, and ultimately to better qualified workforces. This report, and the broader The Learning Curve programme of which it is part, is aimed at helping policymakers, educators, academics and other specialists to identify some of these factors.”

Note: This document replicates the Executive Summary and Five Lessons from the report, which can be downloaded from www.thelearningcurve.pearson.com

Executive Summary

Strong relationships are few between education inputs and outputs. Education remains very much a black box in which inputs are turned into outputs in ways that are difficult to predict or quantify consistently. Experts point out that simply pouring resources into a system is not enough: far more important are the processes which use these resources.

Income matters but culture may matter more. Both higher income levels and better cognitive test scores are the result of educational strategies adopted, sometimes years earlier, independently of the income levels existing at the time. More important than money, say most experts, is the level of support for education within the surrounding culture.

There is no substitute for good teachers. Good teachers exercise a profound influence: having a better one is statistically linked not only to higher income later in life but to a range of social results including lower chances of teenage pregnancy and a greater tendency to save for their own retirement. Successful school systems have a number of things in common: they find culturally effective ways to attract the best people to the profession; they provide relevant, ongoing training; they give teachers a status similar to that of other respected professions; and the system sets clear goals and expectations but also lets teachers get on with meeting these. Higher salaries, on the other hand, accomplish little by themselves.

When it comes to school choice, good information is crucial. Recent research indicates that countries with greater choice of schools have better education outcomes. Presumably, allowing parents to choose the best schools rewards higher quality and leads to overall improvement. In practice, however, finding the mechanism to make this happen is difficult.

There is no single path to better labour markets. Finding the type of education that leads to the best economic outcomes, however, is far from straightforward. Different strategies have distinct pros and cons. For example, some countries – but far from all – place considerable emphasis on vocational training as preparation for employment. Similarly, education systems cannot simply educate for the present: leading ones look at what skills will be needed in future and how to inculcate them.

A global index can help highlight educational strengths and weaknesses. The top performers in the Index are Finland and South Korea. In some ways, it is hard to imagine two more different systems. “Closer examination, though, shows that both countries develop high-quality teachers, value accountability and have a moral mission that underlies education efforts.

Five Lessons for Education Policy Makers

1. There are no magic bullets.

The small number of correlations found in the study shows the poverty of simplistic solutions. Throwing money at education

by itself rarely produces results, and individual changes to education systems, however sensible, rarely do much on their own. Education requires long-term, coherent and focused system-wide attention to achieve improvement.

2. Respect Teachers.

Good teachers are essential to high-quality education. Finding and retaining them is not necessarily a question of high pay. Instead, teachers need to be treated as the valuable professionals they are, not as technicians in a huge, educational machine.

3. Culture can be changed

The cultural assumptions and values surrounding an education system do more to support or undermine it than the system can do on its own. Using the positive elements of this culture and, where necessary, seeking to change the negative ones, are important to promoting successful outcomes.

4. Parents are neither enemies nor saviours of education.

Parents want their children to have a good education; pressure from them for change should not be seen as a sign of hostility but as an indication of something possibly amiss in provision. On the other hand, parental input and choice do not constitute a panacea. Education systems should strive to keep parents informed and work with them.

5. Educate for the future, not just the present.

Many of today’s job titles, and the skills needed to fill them, simply did not exist 20 years ago. Education systems need to consider what skills today’s students will need in future and teach accordingly.

Global Index of Cognitive Skills and Educational Attainment

Country	Z-Score	Rank
FINLAND	1.26	1
SOUTH KOREA	1.23	2
HONG KONG-CHINA	0.90	3
JAPAN	0.89	4
SINGAPORE	0.84	5
UNITED KINGDOM	0.60	6
NETHERLANDS	0.59	7
NEW ZEALAND	0.56	8
SWITZERLAND	0.55	9
CANADA	0.54	10

rEDUCED pOLICY cOMPANY

The Reduced Policy Company has been established to make policy documents more accessible to the professional and lay reader. More information is available at

www.reducedpolicycompany.com

© Timothy Hutchison & Chris Waterman