

The PISA results are interesting but do not compare 'like with like'. In Australia, one of the most diverse nations in the world, teachers work with an incredible diversity of students, and need to meet the needs of a wide range of learning styles and do not benefit from a 'culture of compliance', arising from structural factors, evident in other nations. Thus a critique of different education systems needs to be moderated by understanding the unique factors that characterise schools in each nation.

GPTA CEO, Mohan Dhall says:

"In nations where there is a high level diversity teachers have a role that is far more demanding than in nations where there is less diversity. Moreover, in numerous nations that do well there are structural factors that affect student outcomes. These include:

- *Self-discipline*
- *A culture that values education almost to the exclusion of other aspirations*
- *A centralised approach to syllabus, teacher inspections and prescribed resources*

"For example, in nations such as Vietnam, Singapore, Hong Kong, China and many other countries in Asia, there is a centralised Ministry of Education (MOE) that prescribes the content that children must learn, the order in which it must be learnt and the time it must be covered. In such systems, the supplementary books and resources must be approved by the centralised Ministry if used in schools. Moreover, there is a strong focus on examinations as the main mode of assessment. This has the effect of standardising the curriculum in all schools and of mandating what is learnt, how and when.

"A critique of such systems is that there can be an over reliance on the texts and very little preparation done by teachers prior to classes. Moreover, in the nations listed, teachers tend to be held in high esteem, meaning that respect is expected and does not have to be earned. The title commands respect, regardless of the teacher's actual intellect, drive, interest in the subject matter or love of teaching and learning.

"By contrast, in Australia for example the government does not prescribe the texts, though it does often prescribe knowledge and understanding to be covered. Teachers do not generally expect respect, certainly in high schools, unless they earn it.

"Indeed, in Australian schools there is a presumption and fundamental teaching principle largely absent in many Asian nations: this factor may be called 'a presumption of discipline'. That is, prior to being able to teach a class, teachers are required to command a space and to hold attention. This means having an understanding of students, being able to set limits, being able to notice when attention is wavering, and also being able to assess how the teacher is impacting the learning of their students.

"Cognitive studies show that commanding attention is the first step in helping students to become interested in subject matter, more likely to be engaged and remember. Setting limits helps students to know when to focus and respect the environment of the classroom as a teaching and learning space.

“Teaching requires more than simply presenting or translating texts and existing resources, although these skills can be useful and important. Teachers non-reliant on texts will prepare resources drawing from a variety of sources and with consideration of a wide variety of learning styles: visual, kinaesthetic, linguistic, auditory, and the like. This takes effort and time. Catering for diversity is always harder than treating all as the same and relying on self-discipline and high expectations to do the learning.

“In my university classes, I hear from students coming through the highly centralised schooling systems that they were not taught to question, not taught to critique and not taught to be creative. Classes were mostly silent; students knew their place and students worked towards the achievement of outcomes on exams. These students tell me that they are confronted in Australia but also feel free. That they struggle because answers are not prescribed and it is hard to think when structures have taught you what is to be said.”

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