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School Achievement: Let's Not Worry Too Much About Shanghai

By Vanessa L. Fong and Philip G. Altbach

In the present environment, Americans face plenty of concerns about educational achievement. This country now ranks in the lower-middle of student test scores globally and, thus, will have problems competing in the world knowledge economy. America's steady decline reflects not mainly a deterioration of a never-highly-robust K-12 education system, but rather the improvements in other countries. This situation is alarming because the global economy does not stand still.

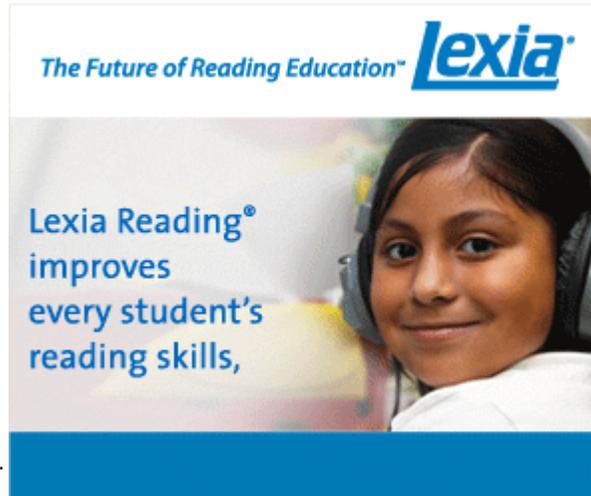
The recent Program for International Student Assessment, or **PISA**, exam ranked Shanghai, China, at the top of the list for both science and mathematics. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan calls the PISA results a "wake-up call." Certainly America is subpar when compared with many of our competitors. Yet the results in Shanghai provide some interesting lessons, positive and negative, for the United States and other countries.

Unquestionably, Shanghai shows that investments in education, by parents, the society, and the students themselves, produce positive results on tests and in the acquisition of knowledge. But it is also true that Shanghai's system in some ways relies on a Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest mentality in schools, and some observers in China have recognized that lock-step, test-oriented education may not produce young people well adapted to the complexities of the new knowledge economy. Liberal education is being added to the university curriculum in a few places, and test obsession is being criticized. And, so we ask, does the United States want to embrace traditional China's exam-focused education approach at the same time rigidity is being questioned in China?

Education-Crazy

Multiple factors contribute to China's obsession with education. Education has long been seen as a key path to upward social mobility and professional success in China. A system encouraging youths to strive toward a higher station in society by performing well on imperial civil-service exams was integral to China's culture and political economy for almost 2,000 years, before it was replaced by modern college- and high-school-entrance exams in the early 20th century. In addition, political instability and rapid social change have interfered with normal social mobility. As a result, most Chinese children believe they can be upwardly or downwardly mobile regardless of their family backgrounds. China's one-child policy has also intensified parental investment in and aspirations for each child. However, in addition, economic reforms have increased the stakes of educational achievement by enhancing socioeconomic inequalities. Other stressors include increasing

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uncertainty about whether Chinese families will have sufficient pensions and health-insurance benefits. Further, rapidly inflating costs of housing, education, and medical care add to the tension

Almost every urban Chinese child is an only child who will eventually need to get a job that can support many dependents. Most such jobs, however, are only available to the small minority who score high enough on entrance exams to be accepted by the right college-prep high schools and then highly ranked universities. Many Chinese youths cannot even gain entry to any high school or college. According to the **United Nations Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization's 2008 statistics**, only 76 percent of high-school-age teenagers in China attended high school, and only 23 percent of college-age Chinese were enrolled in college.

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If only-children lose out in the competition for upward mobility, their parents will have no other children to fall back on; and an impoverished only-child will have no siblings to turn to for help. A single-minded obsession with educational achievement is inevitable when every child desperately wants to be a winner in an educational system where success is limited.

Admissions to high schools and colleges depend on performance on the college-entrance exam and the high-school-entrance exam, but not on grades given by teachers or on extracurricular activities. Consequently, students, parents, and teachers focus almost entirely on preparing students for entrance exams, which increasingly emphasize the critical-thinking skills tested by the PISA as well as concentration and memorization skills—the previous focus of such exams. From 1st grade onward, students stay in school all day, developing skills and taking practice exams to prepare them for high-school-entrance and college-entrance exams. They are constantly pressured by parents and teachers to perform as well as possible on tests. Evenings, weekends, and vacations are spent on homework, with intensive help from parents, relatives, and (for wealthier families) private tutors and “cram schools.” Unlike American teachers, whose role in assigning grades that determine students' ability to enter college makes them gatekeepers, Chinese teachers serve mainly as coaches, doing everything they can to help students attain high scores on entrance exams. Chinese teachers whose students succeed are rewarded not only with gratification for the positive result and a job well done, but also with prestige, promotions, merit pay, jobs at better schools, opportunities to earn large fees as private tutors, and a lifetime of valuable connections with powerful former students who remain grateful for their help.

The Shanghai Context

The factors that make Chinese children education-crazy are especially strong in Shanghai, which has the highest cost of living, socioeconomic inequalities, educational attainment levels, and adherence to the one-child policy in China. According to the **Shanghai Municipal Education Commission**, in 2006 almost all Shanghai children attended school from kindergarten through 12th grade, 55 percent of high-school-age students attended college-prep high schools, and 82 percent of college-prep high school graduates enrolled in college. Shanghai is China's commercial capital and wealthiest city, with almost 20 million permanent residents. It has long been a magnet for highly motivated people seeking upward mobility and success, including top teachers from across China. Shanghai parents put their kids in preschools that teach English, math, Chinese, and

other skills from the time they are toddlers, and spend as much time and money as possible so their children can attend the best preschools, primary schools, junior high schools, and colleges.

Rural schools in central and western China, in contrast, have trouble attracting and retaining qualified teachers. Children in poor, rural Chinese villages spend much of their time doing farm work and chores, often cannot afford books and school fees or the extra tutoring and cram schools common in urban settings, and are tempted to drop out of school to pursue low-skill work opportunities in cities such as Shanghai. The largest educational inequalities in China are not between different groups within cities, as in the United States but, rather, between cities and rural villages—many of which lack electricity and running water. According to the [China Population Information Center](#), 53 percent of China's population was rural in 2009.

The timing of the international PISA exam is particularly fortunate for Shanghai students. It happens that at the end of 9th grade (when most students are 15—the age at which PISA is administered), a high-stakes test in China determines which high school a student will attend. In many ways, the high-school-entrance test is the most important exam of a Chinese citizen's life. Children are less likely to have more than one chance at the exam, both because of bureaucratic obstacles to allowing students to repeat the exam and because parents and children fear that children who enter high school at much older ages than their peers may face devastating social stigma.

In Shanghai, as in most of China, every high school has a particular rank in a pyramidal hierarchy. Scores on the high-school-entrance exam determine which high school a student can attend. The top elite college-prep high schools have the most funding, attract the best teachers and students, admit only the highest-scoring students, and prepare them to attend the top universities in China and abroad. Students who attend lower-ranked college-prep high schools are rarely able to gain admission to top universities, though most can get into lower-ranked regular and adult education colleges. Students who study at vocational high schools instead of college-prep high schools spend much of high school preparing for low-paid service and technical jobs instead of college-entrance exams, and some do not even learn skills sufficient to qualify for the adult education colleges for which they are eligible.

What Does It All Mean?

Certainly, there are useful lessons to be learned from China's model. A societal commitment to education helps a great deal. So does spending time on learning. Yet, as we pointed out earlier, the Chinese themselves are beginning to wonder if educational achievement as measured by high-stakes exams is most important. Educators and others are beginning to think about critical-thinking skills, the "well-rounded individual," and other soft but nonetheless important educational values.

With that in mind, let's learn something from Shanghai's experience, but let us also keep in mind that what works in one society may not be effective in another.

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Vol. 30, Issue 15, Pages 28-30

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