Q & A with Charlene Tan

The 2018 AERA theme is The Dreams, Possibilities, and Necessity of Public Education. What can be the promise of public schools and how does—or should—educational change bring us closer to such schooling?

In my view, the promise of public schools is a promise of hope to all children, particularly those from low socioeconomic status and girls who would otherwise be trapped in a poverty cycle and social oppression. As someone who was educated in public schools all the way from kindergarten to university, I can testify to the transformational power of such institutions.

My grandmother and mother were deprived of schooling in colonial Singapore; there were few public schools then and their parents were too poor to send them to private schools locally or overseas. As a result, my grandmother and mother endured economic hardships and could not maximize their potentials in the then patriarchal society. Growing up in post-independent Singapore, I was fortunate to study in free or heavily subsidized public schools. The well-funded and high-quality state schools I attended enabled me to gain knowledge, take courses that I was interested in, and pursue my calling as an educator and researcher. Such opportunities are especially precious for girls in developing countries who, for centuries, were deprived of schooling due to historical, religious, institutional and socio-cultural factors.

Singapore offers a useful case study of how educational change through public schooling can educate and empower the masses and not just the elite. Briefly, public schools were established across Singapore in the decades following the nation’s independence. These schools were and are still provided with the necessary
financial, manpower, and infrastructural support by the state. By choosing English as the medium of instruction and requiring all students to learn two languages—English as the first language and a mother tongue as the second language—students in Singapore could access the English-speaking world while remaining rooted in their indigenous languages and cultural traditions.

Thanks to the bilingual policy, I am able to communicate, teach, and conduct research in both English and Mandarin. A common curriculum in the public schools ensures that all students attain the core knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions. At the same time, terminal exams give every student a chance to qualify for the school or university of their choice based on their exam results. Arguably, the consistently strong performance of Singapore students in international large-scale assessments such as the Program for the International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) affirms the success of Singapore’s educational investment, policy orientation, and enactment.

The educational system in Singapore is not perfect, of course, and that is why educational change is an ongoing process in the country. But what remains constant in the midst of change in Singapore is a shared vision by policymakers, educators, parents, and other educational stakeholders that public schools can—and should—give hope to all children.

You are well known for your work on the interaction between educational policy borrowing and cultural contexts in China. What do you see to be some important contributions of this work to the field of educational change?

I wish to highlight two important contributions to the field of educational change from my work on China’s education reform and the interaction between educational policy borrowing and cultural contexts in China.

First, China’s educational reform demonstrates the significant role of indigenous cultures in influencing educational policy borrowing. Spanning over two thousand years of history, Confucianism has provided the Chinese with a rich cultural heritage that shapes their world views, beliefs, values, and ways of life. Foreign ideas and practices are inevitably and constantly (re)interpreted and moderated by prevailing cultures and logics. For instance, my research on pedagogical reforms in China shows that overtly child-centred methods that originate from Anglophone contexts are generally eschewed in the Chinese classrooms due to socio-cultural incompatibility. Instead, a hybrid form of teaching that combines both student- and teacher-centred approaches are preferred by the teachers and students.

It is therefore crucial, in educational policy transfer, to acknowledge the mediating role of cultures—both foreign and indigenous—in the reception, adaptation, appropriation, and domestication of external knowledge and
education. Effective educational change, in short, requires internalization where ‘global,’ ‘foreign,’ or ‘universal’ systems and initiatives are framed by and integrated into existing indigenous knowledges.

Secondly and in connection to the first point, China’s education reform illustrates the principle of correlative thinking through cross-cultural borrowing. Rather than ‘either-or’ thinking, correlative thinking focuses on local constructions of meanings based on a ‘this-and-that’ and ‘past-and-present’ logic. Correlative thinking seeks to accommodate and harmonize differences in desires, attitudes, and actions. Such thinking brings about changes that are evolutionary and harmony-preserving rather than revolutionary and socially disruptive.

Manifesting correlative thinking, China’s education reform aims to synthesize Eastern and Western philosophies, presuppositions, policies, and practices. China’s schooling system, although influenced by Soviet, American, Japanese, and other educational ideologies and practices, is anchored on its own cultural heritage. Confucian values such as the importance of content mastery and respect for teachers co-exist with ‘Western’ theories such as constructivism and postmodernism.

China’s assessment system has also moved away from predominantly summative and written modes that characterize the national college entrance exam (gaokao) to include formative and alternative approaches that are borrowed from Western contexts such as project work and student growth record. The experience of China draws our attention to the usefulness of correlative thinking for educational change where policies from cross-cultural contexts are judiciously adapted to suit local conditions.

**Given your focus on the philosophy of education and in particular on Confucian education, what would be an important construct in Confucian education and some major implications for global changes that may be inspired by this construct?**

An important construct in Confucian education that is pertinent to a global trend on advocating ‘Self-Directed Learning’ (SDL) in schools and universities is self-cultivation.

A Confucian classic *The Great Learning* highlights self-cultivation as the building block for the family, state, and the world. Another Confucian classic *The Mean* echoes the Confucian message that a person who succeeds in cultivating oneself is capable of governing others. So indispensable is self-cultivation that the Confucian philosopher Xunzi argues that anyone can become a sage king like Yu as long as he or she puts in sufficient effort to study and adhere to *li* (traditionally denoting ritual propriety but more accurately translated as normative behaviours).

Cultivating oneself in accordance with *li* (normative behaviours) entails that such an endeavour is fundamentally moral in nature. To cultivate oneself is to become more fully human (*ren*) where one internalizes and demonstrates virtues such as righteousness, courage, and empathy. It is important to point out that Confucian self-cultivation does not reject dependence on others;
instead, developing oneself demands a symbiosis between ‘self’ and ‘others’. Put otherwise, self-cultivation reflects the self as constituted by and situated within human relations.

The Confucian concept of self-cultivation is relevant to SDL, given their common emphasis on self-learning. Both SDL and the Confucian concept of self-cultivation converge on the learner taking ownership of one’s own learning. In both cases, the learner’s independence, autonomy, and inner-directedness are underlined as the key ingredients for successful learning. But the Confucian construct of self-cultivation, I would argue, enriches our understanding of SDL in at least two ways. First, Confucian self-cultivation rejects individualistic learning by underscoring the collective resources and wisdom that are located in and generated by individual and group learning.

The learning approach propagated by Confucian self-cultivation is both ‘self-directed’ and ‘selves-directed’ where individual learning occurs simultaneously with group learning. Such a collaborative approach fosters interdisciplinary and cross-cultural learning that is critical in solving ill-structured problems in real-world settings.

Secondly, Confucian self-cultivation extends the conception of SDL by foregrounding a shared moral vision of the good for learning. Given that personal and collective values are invariably premised on and subject to local socio-cultural conditions, a common ethical commitment is necessary to unite and inspire members of a learning community. Such a vision underpins, guides and propels SDL by motivating individual learners to go beyond personal and short-term interests to champion the common good and larger purposes in life.

You are currently conducting research on High-Performing Education Systems (HPES) in East Asia such as in Shanghai and Hong Kong. What, in your view, is distinctive about educational changes in these HPES?

One distinguishing feature of educational changes in High-Performing Education Systems (HPES) in East Asia such as Shanghai and Hong Kong is the practice of harmonization. Harmonization is not simply working with paradoxes; it is about bringing together discrete or opposing parts to form a new integrated whole.

An example of harmonization is the ability of Shanghai teachers to combine student-centred and teacher-centred approaches to produce a new pedagogy known as ‘teacher-directed and student-engaged’ teaching. This ingenious pedagogy balances didactic and child-centric teaching by fostering active student engagement through activities planned and directed by the teacher. In the Chinese context where teachers are confronted with large class sizes and the pressing need to prepare their students for high-stakes exams, this teaching method enables teachers to cover the syllabus while furthering the students’ autonomy, collaborative spirit and higher-order thinking concomitantly.
Likewise in the case of Hong Kong, policymakers and educators seek to harmonize diverse and often conflicting expectations and goals. A case in point is assessment reform. On the one hand, Hong Kong policymakers have shifted from a predominantly ‘assessment of learning’ (AoL) system to one that champions ‘assessment for learning’ (AfL) through an array of initiatives, structures, and programs. The desired outcome is for schools to transcend test-based accountability policies and teaching for predetermined results.

On the other hand, as common in other East Asian education systems, the education authority in Hong Kong retains public exams, external accountability, and an emphasis on literacy and numeracy. The principles and practices of AfL and AoL are therefore harmonized into one coherent system to equip students in Hong Kong with not just disciplinary knowledge but also 21st century skills, attitudes, values, and dispositions.

To be sure, the practice of harmonization does not always translate into successful policy outcomes or public satisfaction. There remain tensions and obstacles for educational reforms in Shanghai and Hong Kong such as a pervasive exam-oriented culture that privileges didacticism and AoL. But what is worthy of note about educational changes in these two HPES is the resolve and propensity of teachers and policymakers to reconcile apparent contradictions through harmonization.

Another major research area of yours is educational change in Islamic schooling. Based on your research, what are some key education reforms in Islamic education and their accompanying challenges?

A number of Islamic schools around the world have introduced educational changes to prepare their students for a globalized world. The acceptance of ‘secular’ knowledge or ‘modern’ subject is not foreign to the Islamic heritage. Islamic educational institutions during the Ottoman Empire taught ‘specific sciences’ (al-‘ulūm al-juz‘iyyah) that included mathematics (hisāb), geometry (handasah), astronomy (hay’ah), and practical philosophy (ḥikmah).

Rather than relying on rote-memorization, these institutions promoted ‘instrumental sciences’ (al-‘ulūm al-āliyyah) where students learnt, among other things, the art of rhetoric in terms of eloquent elocution, literary style, and artful composition. What is known today as ‘student-centred pedagogies’ such as problem solving, dialogue, discussion, disputation, and application were propagated by Muslim scholars and practised in Islamic educational institutions since the medieval era.

A key research finding from my fieldwork in Islamic schools in Singapore, Indonesia, and Britain is that these schools aspire to produce religious teachers and leaders as well as Muslim professionals who hold secular jobs. These Islamic schools have reviewed and revised their curricula, pedagogies, and assessment formats so that their students could acquire religious as
well as academic competence. Both religious subjects such as Arabic and Quranic Study as well as academic subjects such as English, Mathematics, and Science are taught to students. In terms of pedagogy, student-focused methods have been adopted through activities such as group discussion and games.

In an Islamic school in Singapore, teachers employ engaging strategies such as the ‘Shared Book Approach’ where students read along and role-play the characters in the story. In Britain, teachers in an Islamic school utilize questioning techniques to encourage reflective thinking, with the students contributing actively through discussion and drama.

In Indonesia, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is capitalized on in the Islamic schools through project work and oral presentation. A unique practice in some Islamic schools is *shura* (mutual consultation) that is based on a Quranic command and listed with other cardinal virtues such as performing prayers. *Shura* is utilized by the school leaders and teachers in an Islamic school in Singapore during their staff meetings and teacher training sessions to build collegiality and improve teaching and learning. Through consultation with the various stakeholders, collective decisions are made and unity is forged between the leader and followers in an organization.

A major challenge faced by Islamic schools arises from their dual emphasis on the learning of both religious and academic subjects. As a result, students in Islamic schools typically experience a heavier study workload than their counterparts in the public schools. A related challenge is the problem of educational dualism: the teaching and learning of religious and academic subjects that are discrete and unconnected to each other. In response, some Islamic schools have infused Islamic beliefs and values into the teaching of academic subjects and school ethos, to varying degrees of success.

Young people today (students) are the focus of educational change for improvement. From your perspective, what are the key needs of young people at this time and what might the field of educational change prioritize in order to meet these needs?

Young people are at a stage of life where they search for a stable positive self-identity, a larger purpose in life, and meaningful connectedness with others. This quest presents to adolescents not just opportunities, inspiration and excitement, but also setbacks, confusion and disappointment. Adding to the challenges confronting youth today is the VUCA world (see Whiteman, 1998) they live in—Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous—that makes their path ahead more uncharted and unpredictable than ever before.

Young people therefore need the wherewithal, beyond academic knowledge, to find their moral compass, make sense of the many changes surrounding them, and ultimately discover their own individuality and place in society. But instead of helping students develop their distinctiveness and
meeting their social-emotional needs, some schools have focused on producing measurable results through high-stakes testing and external audits.

I am not against formal assessments and test scores per se, as I believe that they can provide useful information, when utilized appropriately, on the students’ acquisition and application of school content. But such an emphasis should not undermine or supersede the school’s mission to nurture the young people’s character, ethical perspectives, and interpersonal competencies.

Hence a priority for the field of educational change, in my view, is to care for the soul or spirit of young people through spiritual education. Spiritual education is contrasted with religious education as the former is not necessarily associated with any named supernatural power, institutionalized doctrines or religious affiliations. Spiritual education draws our attention to a non-material dimension to life and intimations of an enduring reality. Transcending the mundane and the material, the goal is to derive insights into one’s personal existence and relationships that are of enduring worth.

Examples of spiritual ideals are self-knowledge, humanity, justice, and beauty. Through spiritual education, students are invited to reflect on their purpose in life, connectedness with others (human and/or divine), and the difference they could make in this world. Spiritual development empowers young people to exercise their agency by defining self and others, finding their calling in life, and shaping their own growth.

One way to enact spiritual education in schools is through service learning where participants serve fellow human beings and learn reflectively at the same time. An example is a project undertaken by a high school in Singapore where the students befriended a group of elderly people who lived alone in an old housing estate. A student shared in his project journal how he observed that the elderly people, despite their old age and infirmity, were determined to perform simple daily chores for themselves without assistance. This realization prompted the student to reflect on every human’s desire to be in control of one’s faculties and, by extension, one’s destiny. This service learning project opened the door for teachers and students to explore spiritual ideals such as human dignity, frailty, mortality, and shared fate.

Prioritizing spiritual development in the field of educational change will help young people achieve personal significance and navigate their way confidently in a VUCA world.

References
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She has (co)authored 7 books and over 100 refereed journal articles and book chapters. Her recent books include Learning from Shanghai: Lessons on Achieving Educational Success (Springer), Confucius (Bloomsbury), Educational Policy Borrowing in China: Looking West or Looking East? (Routledge) and Islamic Education and Indoctrination: The Case in Indonesia (Routledge). Her forthcoming book is on high-performing education systems in Asia.

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