LEAD THE CHANGE SERIES
Q&A with Yong Zhao

Why are current Chinese and U.S. school reform efforts moving in the opposite direction from each other?

I would also expand to a lot of East Asian countries—South Korea, Japan, and Singapore. These countries have traditionally practiced nationalized, centralized, standards-based approach with a narrow curriculum. And now, they are moving toward a more decentralized system, devolution of power, local control, and a broader curriculum. In the U.S., there is growing tendency to move toward nationalization, standardization, high-stakes testing, which we can see through development of the common core initiative, Race to the Top, and tying teachers’ income to high-stakes testing. U.S. is moving in the opposite direction of China.

The reason I think is that people reform for their own reasons. In Asian cultures, while they were celebrating what they have achieved in terms of test scores on the international scene through Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), they also know that these tests are not a valuable indicator of their citizens. They want more creativity, independent thinking, and more innovation. Particularly in China, there is a move to transform the cheap-based economy into knowledge-based economy.

The most recent wave of transformation started in the 1990s. Singapore started in 1997 with the reform movement called, “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation,” and subsequently, they introduced in 2000s, “Teach Less, Learn More,” which brought more flexibility into the system. The same thing happened in Japan, South Korea, and China.

The recognition that they need more creativity has been there for a while. There has been a recognition that when your economy grows so fast, there is value is generating innovation and not simply investing in cheap labor, which is abundant in the world, and you can ship such jobs anywhere.

In the U.S., the problem is the achievement gap among different groups, which is
dependent on where children live and on their family income, so the focus is on that disparity. We also see that the U.S. is not standing well internationally on math, science, and literacy, so we think that there are both domestic and international gaps. We look at these gaps and think that we can fix them through nationalization and standardization. We think that will solve the problem, which, of course, is an illusion.

What do you see are some of the key educational changes emerging in China today?

In terms of education goals, they are looking to make their students and future citizens more competent in the innovation domain. They want people who can create and make things, who can invent things. The big question in China is, How is it that hundreds of millions of college graduates have not produced many Nobel prize winners or patents? Ability to create is the first trend.

The second significant trend for China is, other than regurgitating knowledge and focusing on memorization, do the students have the ability to apply what they have memorized? Do they have the ability to interact in the society, to lead in a changing society? Do they have the right emotional intelligence and emotional experiences to do these things? The focus is to create a well-rounded person, not only to focus on the cognitive gains, the academic gains, but also on social and emotional ability.

How do we create a system that allows more flexibility is a third trend. Countries like China have had national standards and reforms for many, many years; that is their tradition. They are trying to relax that and to provide a broader curriculum to schools and to give local levels control over curriculum decisions. They are also trying to infuse art, music, sports, and more integrated studies, and to reduce academic pressure. In fact, while U.S. is increasing academic pressure, China is going in the opposite direction—they want to shorten school days, to forbid schools from offering extra-curricular lessons during the weekends or during winter or summer times, and are cracking down on teachers who offer additional homework or place additional academic demands on their students. They are minimizing importance of standardized testing and are trying to diversify admissions criteria at the university level to allow multiple talents to be recognized.

The fourth trend is that they want to have a global perspective. China wants students to study abroad, to visit and learn in other countries. Overall, they are trying to focus on human talents, diversity of talents, and ability to lead, to focus on the whole-child.

While there is not much pushback for these changes to occur, the tradition has been resistant, so not much change has been happening. That is why I am so worried about the U.S. Once you get to one level of nationalized system, it is very hard to change.

There is broad-based support in China for this type of change. The problem is that they do not really know how to make it happen. Chinese education has reached a level where tradition based on obedience and industrialized labor market does not support the society as it moves to the future. In Singapore, as in China, the labor prices are rising, and if they continue to hold to the traditional manufacturing, they cannot do it. In Singapore, one of the problems is how to create entrepreneurs, not only who will lead multinational companies, but who will actually create such companies. The Chinese system might have produced capable workers, but has not produced inventors and action leaders for the future.
Discussions about the global achievement gaps tend to focus on the participating nations’ performances on PISA or TIMSS. How can educators widen this discourse beyond the test scores?

This fascination with test scores comes from our human nature. We want something simple, clear, easy to understand; a standard indicator that tells us where we stand, how good we are as a nation, as a people. It invites competitiveness. And, that is a weak spot of human nature. We need to be more deliberate and go beyond the tests and see that what really matters for the nation, community, and person cannot be measured by any test.

A recent report by the National Research Council, *Incentives and Test-Based Accountability in Education*, tells us a lot about what tests cannot measure. We need to expand our view in our test-driven incentive system. Another report out of the U.K., from *The Cambridge Primary Review, Children, Their World, Their Education*, examines the English primary education over the last forty years. They too note that whatever you are measuring, you are still not encompassing the whole need of a society.

I would advise our education researchers to move away from single measures. A lot of educational researchers only try to measure what will get them grants and gets them published, so they measure a very narrow set of instructional indicators. Whatever we measure, there are other things that we do not measure. And we lose something when we push to improve on a narrow set of measures.

We need to stop looking at short-term measures of different countries. Even if you could look at those indicators to measure education quality or future capacity of a nation, we still need to be very careful and also understand the context of these educational systems.

Today, we talk a lot about excellent systems—Finland, Singapore, South Korea—but we are not recognizing that for example, many of these countries are the size of Massachusetts. There are very different contexts. Plus, there is no way you can borrow from one system and plug it into another system. There are cultural, economic, social, and geographic factors. Singapore is the size of Boston. Education researchers need to recognize and help the general public and the media understand the complexity of international comparisons, instead of just trying to perpetuate stereotypical views of other countries.

For example, if you look at the historical development of Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, they did not start with high quality teachers. High quality teachers came as a result of their economic development, not as a reason. We need to recognize the cultural underpinnings of success or a lack there of.

The 2011 AERA theme was “Inciting the Social Imagination: Education Research for the Public Good.” How can research enable us to develop innovative forms of teaching and learning?

There is a big problem with the current education research. A lot of our education research seems to be focused on instructional intervention rather than on larger, systemic changes. This is education’s own fault. We try to become more like a science. We are trying to deal with short-term outcomes. We do not value other types of abilities.

Another problem is the preparation of researchers. We are very driven by the economic model, saying to future researchers, “this will lead you to better jobs, career-readiness.” We need to focus on our fellow citizens, on creating a just society.
A lot of our improvements do not include educational philosophies. We do not even question, why do we have this education system, why do we teach this way? Researchers have to rise above the simple, mechanical mentality in education and toward a broader, more humanistic approach and philosophical stance.

To borrow from medicine, we should adopt the idea of side effects. Any intervention or strategy we are trying to research and prove or disprove, should consider the unintended consequences. We need to approach this like they do in medicine—if side effects outweigh the benefits, we should note that. We need to be forward about what side effect a particular method might have caused.

What do you see as one of or the most pressing issue related to educational change today?

A public, national debate about the purpose of education and how to measure good education. Right now, we are not debating the goal or the purpose of education, as if is understood. We need to focus on what 21st century education system should be.