



Chinese students lead PISA rankings.

CLASSICAL EDUCATION: THE KEY TO WESTERN PROSPERITY

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[Education] is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.

HANNAH ARENDT

Culturally, technologically, economically and militarily, Western hegemony is challenged by non-Western countries, especially China. Moreover, a growing proportion of the working-age population are totally inactive – they do not work, study or actively look for work.

A recurring explanation for this relative decline are the tax cuts and deregulation that began in the early 1980s, the effects of which are said to be exacerbated by subsequent globalisation.

But why did the Western hegemony arise in the first place? The explanation is multifaceted, but one thing is certain: one necessary condition was the establishment of efficient schooling which provided basic skills to all pupils, while still being able to impart advanced knowledge to the intellectually gifted, irrespective of their social background.

Why do we go to school?

Schools emerged to teach things that we do not learn naturally on our own. While we learn biologically primary skills – such as walking, talking, listening and understanding everyday rules of behaviour – without explicit instruction, we must go to school to learn to read, count and understand the basics of biology, chemistry and physics. This is so, as Steven Pinker noted in *The Blank Slate*, because we lack the inherited ability to automatically absorb these biologically secondary skills. That

society sees this need as important is emphasised by the fact that it is a statutory duty to go to school at least to the age of 15 or 16 in virtually all countries. Since much of what we need to learn does not come naturally, school cannot always be easy and fun.

Over time, humanity has developed an extensive understanding of how our increasingly complex societies work. Children are born into a world very different from the one that our species inhabited for almost its entire evolutionary history. To survive in and further develop this world as adults, children must acquire extensive knowledge and skills; each new generation must therefore be furnished with relevant knowledge about the 'old' world into which they are born.

It is not just a matter of absorbing verifiable scientific facts and the, above all, mathematical methods developed for that purpose. It is also about communal knowledge, ie the knowledge necessary for an individual to function well in their national context and become part of the cultural community by learning to write and absorbing literature, history and geography. The ethical concepts required to judge what is right and wrong are also important common knowledge.

Proven experience and modern neuroscientific research have taught us that this kind of knowledge is best imparted by skilled teachers. A central pedagogical tool for teaching and understanding is the textbook, combining facts and context in logical progression. A basic consequence of this method of learning is that students acquire important additional skills such as creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. These competencies are not independent but develop largely as a side effect of studies at an increasingly advanced level, where each new level builds on the previous one. Traditional subject divisions and fact-based learning are therefore the best way to build the knowledge needed to solve problems, think critically and develop creativity.

When students and teachers work systematically and long-term to build up the level of knowledge in a subject, the student's non-cognitive skills are simultaneously improved. The most important of these skills are self-discipline, motivation, work ethic, perseverance, reliability, responsibility, punctuality, social skills and emotional stability. Recent research shows that these factors are important not only for success in the labour market but also for living a good life in the broader sense. Non-cognitive skills seem to be at least as important for success as cognitive skills – possibly even more so – and have been shown to be easier to teach.

One of the best and most acclaimed studies was conducted at Stockholm University, based on psychological personality assessments used by the military. The 2011 study by Erik Lindqvist and Roine Vestman, published in the *American Economic Journal*, found that non-cognitive skills outweighed intelligence not only as a predictor of salary levels given different levels of education but even more so as an explanatory factor for why people participate in the workforce and avoid dependency on benefits. This impression is reinforced by recent research from Uppsala University. They find that the importance of non-cognitive skills has risen sharply during the early 2000s as a driver of increased wage dispersion and labour market participation. They find that it is the single most important factor explaining the increased wage differences among college-educated people.

The new view of knowledge: Declining results and systemic threat

Beginning in the United States, the view of what knowledge is and how it is best acquired has gradually shifted in most Western countries. During the post-Second World War period, the classical view of knowledge as the ability to know and master systematically produced and verifiable facts was increasingly questioned in curricula and other governing documents. Instead, a postmodern social constructivist view of knowledge emerged. In Sweden, this view peaked in the 1994 curriculum, but it is essentially still present in the current syllabus and governs many school activities.

According to this 'new' view, knowledge is created in a social context. In the long run, such a view of knowledge ends up in a state where nothing is perceived as objective knowledge, which is entirely at odds with the classical view of knowledge as the mastery of facts about the outside world and competence in reading, writing and arithmetic. The tendency is reinforced by the postmodern analysis that has greatly inspired curricula and which sees its main task as being to reveal, or 'deconstruct', the language of power that hides within seemingly neutral reasoning. In some cases, this goes so far that science and the scientific method are presented as a smokescreen for power.

This new view of knowledge has helped to undermine the educational mission of schools. The responsibility for students' development was increasingly transferred to students themselves, while the teacher was demoted to some sort of supervisor. If it is no longer considered possible

to acquire knowledge about the world independently of the individual, this will have transformative effects for the school. To fully understand something, each student must, according to this view, construct his or her own knowledge. This is believed to be most effective if the child from an early age proceeds actively from his or her own experiences, using their own methods and conducting their own investigations.

The ensuing pedagogy also emphasises discussing and questioning the subject of study while *at the same time* acquiring the basics of that subject. Subjects are not presented as having a core that students are expected to learn, nor is it a priority task for teachers to impart knowledge. One of the saddest consequences of this approach is that schools no longer strive to offer each student the opportunity to acquire the knowledge of the most influential adults – knowledge on which these adults build their influence.

Nor do schools focus as before on non-cognitive skills, even though self-discipline, reliability and work ethic benefit both those who continue their education at a higher level and those who start working. The lack of non-cognitive skills may partly explain why young people find it difficult to get jobs at the same time as employers cannot recruit even for jobs that do not require many years of formal education. In a study asking more than 8,000 Swedish business leaders what they considered to be the main reasons why young people find it more difficult to get a job than older people, nine out of ten pointed in an open answer to the lack of social skills. Younger people were also considered to have a negative attitude, be bad at time management and often have a basic reluctance to work.

It is important not to moralise about the lack of these skills. Young people's attitudes are a product of the environment in which they grow up – an environment created by adults. It is the responsibility of those adults to prepare the young for (working) life. Non-cognitive skills must also be taught, and the earlier this starts the better. As already noted, the best way to do so is at school through well-planned, structured teaching within a clearly defined subject framework and in a settled environment that facilitates concentration. Unfortunately, the prevailing view of knowledge stands in the way of this.

The postmodern view also stands in the way of teaching about what Jonah Goldberg aptly calls 'the miracle' in his 2018 book *Suicide of the West*. Despite our biology we have *socially constructed* a market order of contracts, impersonal rules, rule of law, individualism, personal freedom

and meritocracy. This social construction is what has enabled the explosion in standard of living, longevity and human flourishing that we now take for granted. However, since this system is at odds with how we are genetically programmed, it is fragile and will be incessantly attacked by collectivist ideologies in various forms.

To withstand the lure of collectivist ideas and the forces of tribalism that always linger just below the surface, students must be taught about the workings of this system and the extraordinary historical struggle behind its attainment. Learning about the huge personal costs incurred by innumerable people in previous generations in this struggle will inculcate a feeling of gratitude and pride or even awe of being born into this system. In short, to preserve the system to which we owe our individual freedom and social welfare, our schools must teach children about its uniqueness and create an awareness of its fragility, thus filling young students with a sense of responsibility to preserve and carry this system forward as adults.

Instead, the postmodern social constructivist view of knowledge enhanced by the tenets of identity politics not only stands in the way of knowledge acquisition but also allows group loyalty to take precedence over the individual. As a result, it stirs resentment and leads to contempt and shame towards the very system that is unrivalled both in terms of its capacity to produce broad-based prosperity and offer avenues for human flourishing.

Asian students excel

One consequence of the school throwing in the towel is the growing importance of the family in teaching non-cognitive skills. This takes place largely through children's participation in structured activities such as sport, dance and music. This is often expensive and requires parental engagement and commitment, with the result that it happens in far from all families. This is another reason why schools today fail to mitigate – and even reinforce – the significance of children's social background for how they fare in adult life.

The classical view of knowledge is not in opposition to a questioning approach, or for that matter creativity. On the contrary, critical thinking and creativity presuppose that students have acquired sufficient knowledge of the subject they are questioning. Doing this in the wrong order is

like putting the cart before the horse. It is often claimed that although Swedish and other Western students do not excel in knowledge tests, they are more creative than students from countries that still have a school system based on a classical view of knowledge and traditional teaching methods. However, the results of the creativity test that was part of the 2012 PISA survey run counter to that supposition. Six Asian societies (Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, China and Taiwan) topped the list. The United States and Sweden placed 14th and 20th, respectively, out of 28 participating OECD countries.

In Sweden, the teaching staff understood that the new view of knowledge and pedagogy would lead to impaired knowledge, and they managed to slow down the transition for a considerable time. Nevertheless, there were early indications that students' knowledge and reading ability declined in primary schools. As early as the 1970s, several parliamentary motions in Sweden contained alarming descriptions of school conditions. Initially, high-performing students were affected more than low-performing ones. Over time, this was gradually reversed.

In both the major international surveys of educational achievement, PISA and TIMSS, the results are far worse in the major Western countries compared with the top-performing Asian societies: South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore and China (which placed first in all fields in the 2018 PISA survey). The low proportion who attain the advanced level in mathematics compared to leading Asian countries is particularly remarkable. On closer inspection, the fact that Asia comes out on top is not so surprising. Without high-quality schools based on the classical view of knowledge, the rapid development of several Asian countries would hardly have been possible. In more and more key areas, Asian nations have become, or are in the process of becoming, technological leaders.

Conclusions

Economic integration and globalisation have lifted billions of people out of extreme poverty by allowing people in poorer countries to enjoy the fruits of an international division of labour and of knowledge transfer through investment and other exchanges with more advanced economies. When inequality is measured based on the world's population as a whole, globalisation has led to a sharp reduction in inequality. At the

same time, inequality within the richest countries has increased. The latter is inevitable, at least in the short term, as global development increases the pressure for transformation and restructuring and reduces the value of some professional skills and occupations.

In the long run, the quality of a nation's school system is crucial for its prosperity. The school system must be able to give the most talented and motivated students a high level of valuable knowledge as well as raise the less gifted. A reasonably fair distribution of incomes cannot be achieved unless the school system also imparts valuable knowledge to students who are less gifted or come from a socio-economically deprived family background.

In that long run, this promotes innovation and technological development, which is of the utmost importance for economic growth and social welfare. Empirical research points to a strong positive relationship between the results of international educational achievement tests and economic growth. A school system that is good at imparting knowledge succeeds with this at the same time as it strengthens students' non-cognitive skills, such as ability to concentrate, diligence and perseverance. The decisive factor is therefore not the number of years in school but how the school succeeds in imparting relevant knowledge and skills to its students.

In the future there will continue to be jobs that do not require higher education but which need the employee to be responsible, have the right attitude, arrive on time and treat customers well. This is basically good news: educational requirements are not rising so fast that no-one without a college degree will find employment. But when schools no longer initiate students into a world that is to be shared and further developed in collaboration with others, society must instead rely on parents' ability to do so. As a result, children's social backgrounds play an even greater role; schools fail to play the expected compensatory role.

I have asserted that the view of knowledge is the most crucial institution of any school system, determining content of curricula and teaching methods. Curing the malaise of Western school systems requires a return to the classical view of knowledge, updated and adjusted to current circumstances but still based on concrete course curricula and teacher-led instruction. Doing so would also entail teaching new generations what it has inherited, that the liberal market order is a fragile social construction and why it is worth treasuring.

As the quotation that begins this essay makes clear, Hannah Arendt warned of what was happening as early as 1954. We see the result in the form of increased income differences and increasing social exclusion in leading Western countries. The most important explanation for the growing income disparities in the West, as well as the shift in power towards East Asia and especially China, is perhaps not neoliberalism and deregulation but the ideologised and destructive view of knowledge that has been allowed to undermine Western school systems.

It is entirely realistic to implement a return to the classical view of knowledge, and the positive consequences would be felt quickly. It is also a ‘free lunch’—students’ knowledge would be improved across the board. By returning to the school system’s original purpose, one would also remedy many of the psychosocial problems that today’s system creates among both students and teachers. But this presupposes that we dare to give back to schools the responsibility, in Arendt’s words, to prepare students ‘for the task of renewing a common world’. If we did so, one crucial building block in a strategy aimed at reasserting the primacy of the West would be reinstated.