A US-Policy-Minded Book Review of Clever Lands

Lucy Crehan, Ubound | ISBN 9781783524914
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Lessons across cultures

As an American policy student reading Lucy Crehan's poignant firsthand account of education systems across the globe, I was constantly asking myself: *What can we apply here at home?*

Crehan summarizes her learnings from abroad in **five key principles** for promoting high performance and equity in an education system. As we soak in these lessons, it is important to also take careful note of the cultural caveats Crehan drops throughout her chapters.

Why do Finnish seven-year-olds pore over Donald Duck?

PRINCIPLE 1: *Get children ready early*

The first of Crehan's principles focuses on what she calls *pre-education*. This means teaching students foundational concepts: letters correspond to sounds, and certain letter groupings make different sounds. The result is a child more poised to read when the time comes.

This principle has been supported by countless studies in the States: early education is the best explainer of future achievement. However, policymakers should not necessarily replicate Finland's model of beginning reading instruction at age 7: Finnish words are spelled like they sound, whereas English ones don't, making fluency a more strenuous endeavor for English-learners. Once again, a cultural nuance – language – blocks the 'copy/paste.'

Atama warui – no 'bad heads'

PRINCIPLE 2: *Design for mastery. Help children learn, not go through the motions*

Another striking takeaway from Crehan's travels was the emphasis on mastery in the Asian systems: students are required to memorize incredible amounts of information at a young age. At the same time, replicating memorization in the US would be harder, as the Asian language characters are often more diverse and complex, training the long-term memories that can handle over 100,000 digits of *pi*.[1]

Why don't the Japanese applaud their primary school children?

PRINCIPLE 3: *Support challenges for students rather than making concessions to low-performers*

Well, the Japanese do applaud young children, but rarely as individuals. Japanese primary school students are sorted into small groups called *han*, and all accountability is linked to a student's *han*. Crehan argues that, culturally, this creates a sense of equality of ability – that is, no one individual is inherently smarter than another, and teachers believe that all of their students are equally able to succeed.

Specific practices like *han* will probably not be implemented in the States tomorrow, but Crehan *does*

[1] In an amusing aside Crehan recalls of a Japanese world-record holder who remembered over 111,000 digits of *pi*.

offer a concrete recommendation for global policymakers. Believing that a student is not capable of achievement at a young age is an incredible concession based on an outdated understanding of intelligence as fixed. Therefore, Crehan recommends **sorting students by ability no earlier than ages 15-16**.

Professional freedom

PRINCIPLE 4: *Treat teachers as professionals*

Teachers who are treated as professionals are more effective. For example, well-qualified Finnish teachers who have completed a five-year education degree feel that helicoptering their routines is overly invasive and disrespectful. Crehan goes as far as to say that many Finnish teachers "would consider leaving the profession were they to lose" their professional autonomy.

Teacher professionalization is one of the few areas that seems to be low-hanging fruit for implementation in the US. Crehan notes that in order to make sure teachers are qualified, 'rigorous teacher training programs' should be required, which would reduce the need for strict oversight.

Canadian families send children to families of schools

PRINCIPLE 5: *Combine school accountability with school support to makes schools more effective*

Crehan notes that an effective means of maintaining accountability in schools and making sure best practices are shared, is by clustering schools, as is done in Canada, Singapore, Shanghai, and Japan. If there was a network that was privy to and invested in the practices and success of a group of schools, Crehan believes that schools will be more effective.

Some policy takeaways would be to continue supporting areas that have district superintendents and make sure that no schools are stranded without a strong network.

Principles ≠ Policy Blueprints

While Crehan offers her policy suggestions, I found that constant barrier to generalizing results from one country to the US is often **culture**.

Consider charter schools in the Harlem Children's Zone trying to apply learnings from Japan's intensive education system to improve outcomes for their students: a *huge* confounding variable is that, in Japan, "parents, particularly mothers, are expected to be heavily involved in the education of children in Japan, and they take this very seriously" (85). As Geoffrey Canada, a lead organizer of HCZ describes, one of the main root causes of educational troubles in Harlem is that an emphasis on education is lacking as a major part of cultural expectations!

However, even with just these five broad principles, we have more direction with respect to education policy. Without blueprints, but with great writing and firsthand stories, Lucy Crehan reminds us policy wonks to do our homework, and keep up with global research into education.