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What does research suggest are the most powerful influences on student learning and what does this mean in Asia?

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Well over 100 delegates attended this seminar in person. Most came from China, but we also welcomed visitors from countries including Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, India and Pakistan. As many again joined online and the debate continues on LinkedIn <http://lnkd.in/zCDZWP>.

We addressed two sets of questions. The first concerned what the evidence is from research on the practices and innovations which make most difference to teaching and learning. At this time of initiative after initiative to improve the quality and relevance of education in our schools – and of impatience to put these initiatives into practice quickly – it has never been more important to find a way of learning from research that is already available before investing in interventions which may not have been shown to be particularly effective.

In the morning we received a presentation by Debra Masters, who is a Director of Visible Learningplus, based in New Zealand, and has worked extensively with John Hattie, the author of *Visible Learning* (2009) and related publications including *Visible Learning for Teachers*. *Visible Learning* brings together the findings of over 800 pieces of “meta-analysis” of the reports of thousands of research projects aiming to quantify the effect of particular factors or changes on student achievement. Hattie devises a numerical index measuring the difference which each intervention makes to student achievement. He seeks to identify factors which make a visible difference – beyond the “hinge point” which distinguishes the really effective from activities which have small effects – as almost all educational interventions do.

Hattie concludes that there is little research evidence that changes to the structures of schools and education systems – much beloved of governments – of themselves make much difference. Such factors as class size, streaming or non-streaming, open space versus closed classrooms, single-sex education versus co-education were all found to make little difference, taken in isolation. The visible differences were made by students and teachers – notably, by students’ expectations of their own learning, the quality of teaching and the commitment of teachers. We saw a video of “visible learning” in action in Stonefield School in New Zealand, where students and teachers were aware of their learning goals and of their

progress and were highly motivated to go further. We saw a five-year-old, Ben, showing his mother how he was getting on with his reading by pointing at a wall-chart with pictures of a bee moving from one hive to the next.

The second set of questions which we discussed was about what this means for Asia, and our discussion of that was led by Dr Huang Liyan, a research fellow at the Guangdong Academy of Education in China. Almost all of the 800+ pieces of meta-analysis cited by Hattie are in English and the majority of the research was carried out in the United States. In *Visible Learning* he says (page 13) “We should not generalize the findings of these meta-analyses to non-English speaking or non-highly developed countries”. Does this matter? Are children the same the world over and is a good teacher a good teacher whether in Boston or Pnom Penh? Or are there culture-specific issues which distinguish effective teaching in Asia-Pacific contexts? Is research on the added value of the kind of homework given to youngsters in New York relevant to homework as practised in China?

The discussion was wide-ranging, but there were eight points that stood out for me. First, there was a shared concern to understand better the research that is available. Many present felt that this was particularly important at a time when governments and educational administrative bodies were asking for evidence-based advice as a matter of urgency.

Second, there was some discussion at the seminar about Hattie’s approach to defining and measuring the effects of particular initiatives, and his concept of “effect size”. One delegate commented that while Hattie reports on correlations between interventions and outcomes, it is difficult to tell what causes what and hence to talk of “effects”. Some felt that the same intervention might have different effects in different contexts.

Third, everyone was impressed by the video from Stonefield School. In particular, we were struck by the articulacy of students and teachers about the process of learning and what was being achieved. There was a buzz about the place that was truly infectious.

Fourth, Debra Masters emphasised the importance of collaboration – between teachers, between students and between teachers and students.

Fifth, there was an interesting discussion about styles of school leadership. Hattie distinguishes between “transformational” and “instructional” leadership, but he does not suggest that one is good and the other bad. Both are needed. Huang Liyan said that leadership style was a “hot topic” in China, where, she suggested, the “instructional” style was more common. Debra Masters emphasised the value of instructional leadership, which she said should not be seen as inferior to the “transformational” style. Both speakers saw leadership as a dispersed role in the school, rather than the exclusive role of the school principal.

The sixth issue was the importance of teachers giving feedback and using formative assessment and evaluation, including evaluation of their own effectiveness as teachers. There was considerable interest in the skills and processes required for this and in the

importance of professional development of teachers if they are to put the most effective actions into practice.

The seventh issue concerned examinations – another “hot topic” in China. There was a lot of discussion about their role and cultural profile in Asia, and of the evidence from research on the limiting effect of too much “teaching to the test”. There was agreement that a range of issues around assessment needed further examination in an Asian context. These included how to develop teachers’ skills in formative assessment and how, in a culture which highly valued success in external exams, the design and content of these exams could support the best teaching and learning.

The eighth and last point concerned the concept of “visible learning”. The translators at the seminar said that there was no obvious way of translating that phrase into Chinese and they used the English phrase throughout the day. Debra Masters concluded her presentation by saying that visible learning occurs when “teachers see learning through the eyes of the student and students see themselves as their own teachers”.

There seemed a consensus at the seminar that Hattie’s advocacy of openness by teachers and learners about processes and outcomes of learning was potentially relevant and of interest in an Asian context. However, some thought that in Asian contexts some interventions might have different effects from their equivalents in the West. It will be fascinating to compare findings from research carried out in Asia, including studies of teaching and learning in a second language.

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Hattie, John A.C., *Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*, Routledge, Oxford and New York, 2009

Hattie, John, *Visible Learning for Teachers: maximising impact on learning*, Routledge, Oxford and New York, 2012