

Review

## Blending East and West for holistic education

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Education is under pressure to respond to the changing modern world. Education system worldwide aims to develop students into well-rounded citizens and help them become creative problem-solvers. Several theories have been proposed in the research literature which emphasizes the importance of social and cultural context to creativity. Eastern and Western world are extremely complex and differentiated both politically and historically. Their educational systems are two fundamentally different approaches to teaching and learning. It is a common thinking that Eastern society is reserved and conservative whereas Western society is more creative and assertive. The holistic approach develops students to be critical, confident and independent (Patel, 2003). This article aims to compare and evaluate these differences, in view of achieving holistic education focusing on the fullest possible development of the individuals.

**Key words:** Education system, Eastern and Western system, creativity, society, culture, holistic education.

### INTRODUCTION

Education can be broadly defined as a form of learning where knowledge and skills of a group of individuals are evolved through teaching. Systems of schooling involve institutionalized teaching and learning in relation to a set curriculum, which itself is established according to a predetermined purpose and vision of the schools. Education system worldwide aims to develop students into well-rounded citizens, and help them become creative problem-solvers, independent thinkers and innovators. Research proposed by Putz-Plecko (2008); Bussey, M., Bjurstrom, Åse E., Sannum, Miriam (2011); KEA (2009) emphasize on the interconnectedness of social and cultural context to creativity. Pedagogy and actions for sustainability are linked in the overall learning

experience and global-local continuum is central to our thinking. As noted by Åse (2011), learning expands our human potential alerting us to possibilities in our environment to which we have previously been blind and place brings meaning and relevance to our actions. This article looks into educational systems in East and West in view of achieving holistic education focusing on the fullest possible development of the individuals.

### Connection between East and West

Eastern and western world are extremely complex and differentiated both politically and historically. Eppert and

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Wang (2008) noted in their book, *Cross Cultural Studies in Curriculum: Eastern Thought, Educational Insights*, a deep connection and inter-relationship between the East and the West. This book written by curriculum scholars exposes the complexity and diversity of these notions by carefully tracing aspects of the historical and cultural exchange between East and West. Miller (1997) explains in his book, *What Are Schools For?*, how the modern worldview associated with capitalism and scientific reductionism underlies conventional assumptions about schools, teaching, and learning. Miller then demonstrates that holistic education, grounded in a fundamentally different worldview, reflects very different assumptions about education and schooling. Using a broad American Studies perspective that draws on research in social and intellectual history as well as a critical interpretation of educational theory, Miller identifies key cultural themes that have influenced the purpose, structure, and methods of modern educational institutions. Giri (2011) from India reflects that education is limited when confined to structure. He notes that the challenge in Indian education system '...to realise that ... education is an activity and process of learning and co-learning.' He adds that our conventional educational systems reflect the fragmentation of modern subjectivity and society [with learning] mainly confined to rudimentary aspects of skill-training and mental education [which] ... does not touch all the dimensions of life and society. Keeping in mind these viewpoints, the question that rises is that what is the ideal education system for this modern world?

Although many educational policies and reforms are borrowed from one another, the western and eastern educational systems are two fundamentally different approaches to teaching and learning. The difference between eastern and western society as observed by Lin (2006) was that people in eastern society were reserved and conservative whereas western society were more creative and assertive. The two systems vary in terms of their structuring of classes, curriculum and administration, materials used, teaching styles, student expectations and many more. This article aims to compare and evaluate these differences in view of achieving well-rounded citizens.

### **Holistic development - The goal**

Holistic education focuses on the fullest possible development of the person, encouraging individuals to become the very best or finest that they can be and enabling them to experience all they can from life and reach their goals (Forbes, 2003). Holistic education broadens and deepens the educational process (Hare, 2010). This not only helps in promoting positive attitudes towards learning but also develops social skills necessary for facing the modern world we live in. Education must take into account socio-cultural changes and challenges. A holistic worldview embraces the wholeness of our

humanity, and integrates, rather than isolates, our diverse human possibilities (Gallegos, 2001). Education system worldwide aims to achieve this goal for every individual through the programs offered by them.

The dynamic approach to learning through holistic education aims for students to understand the various concepts in academics as well as discover for themselves the importance of values, of relationships, of life skills and the impact that the students have on each other. In holistic education the classroom is often seen as a community, which is within the larger community of the school, which is within the larger community of the village, town, or city, and which is, by extension, within the larger community of humanity (Forbes, 1996). The holistic approach develops students to be critical, confident and independent (Patel, 2003). To summarize, holistic education aspires to educate and develop the child as a whole instead of just academically, a goal that should always be kept in mind.

### **Comparing the two systems- Eastern and Western**

This section aims to look into some of the notable differences between the eastern and western educational systems. The main difference between eastern (particularly China and India) and western system of education (particularly USA) would be its prime focus. The former uses teacher-centered classes where the teacher is the only authority and questions are brought up only for the teachers to answer. Students are not participative, do not involve in the process of learning, mostly feel not motivated enough and tend to become passive. Lecture is the main mode of instruction. On the contrary, the latter uses student-centered classes where the students are able to express opinions and share ideas thereby actively participating in the learning and teaching process.

Learning in the two systems also varies in terms of how the students learn. In the East, the prime focus of learning is on the exams and grades. As noted by Lin (2006), in eastern world, knowledge is mainly book based and students learn by memorizing facts. Although this helps in performing tasks that require quick and precise thinking, but due to the lack of time, this knowledge is often forgotten after a short period of time. There is a lack of efficiency in applying, analyzing while solving a problem. Certificates and high scores are the main outcome with which the students are consumed into a competitive world. Western system takes a different approach which is comparatively relaxed and aims for deeper understanding of a concept. Pupils are encouraged to make mistakes and are seduced into errors which they reflect upon and remediate for themselves or with the teachers help (Ridgway, 1988). The system focuses on honing skills and promotes using logical thinking, discussions and research work. Western system encourages students to pursue their true

interests, producing a broad range of skills and areas of expertise.

Eastern system emphasizes a great deal on conformity with rules and regulations that the students must follow. There is a set pattern seen as an outcome of the school in producing engineers and doctors which are highly respected. While other occupations that are out of ordinary or norm such as artists may be considered low or degraded. A famous quote by Albert Einstein says, 'Imagination is more important than knowledge, for knowledge is limited whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution.' Western system encourages individual talent and performance. Here originality is greatly stressed upon in contrast to eastern grading system where uniformity is preferred.

In the East, many schools have large class size of 40-60 students as compared to a much smaller classroom in the west where it's often no more than 25-30 students. Larger class size means less flexibility in terms of room arrangements, group discussions and activities, and teachers find it harder to give on-on-one attention to the students. Hard work and struggle are key components for any success in such classrooms. On the other hand, with a small class in hand, teacher is able to differentiate instruction more effectively to cater the learning needs of the students. One on one focus is much appreciated by the teacher and student alike.

Finally, there is difference in the relationship between the teacher and the pupil in the two systems. As a teacher is seen as an authoritarian in the east, learning happens in a one way direction leading to a less interactive class. Although teachers are revered and respected, there is a lack of openness and freeness between the teacher and the student. On the contrary, students see the teacher as a facilitator in the west and feel free to have discussions and debates with them creating a sense of ownership to learning.

### **Creating a blended education system**

Educational systems need to look beyond the socio-cultural barriers and promote the growth creative well-rounded individuals. Dineen, Samuel, & Livesey (2005) identified eight factors that influence student creativity. These were: (1) physical environment, (2) timing and scheduling, (3) teaching style and approach, (4) teaching methods, (5) project or task, (6) assessment and feedback, (7) learner motivation and attitudes to learning, (7) prior relevant skills, and (8) prior relevant knowledge. Keeping this in mind, students need to be given opportunities to be creative pairing it up with achievable learning goals.

The teaching approach needs to be encouraging to with an acceptance of uncertainty and the possibility of failure. Students need to feel respected and valued for their efforts and performance. The teacher-learner

relationship determines the level of interaction and vibrant learning, and thus influences student creativity. A variety of teaching methods needs to be used to create an environment of excitement, joy, enthusiasm and commitment. In order to adequately prepare children and young people for vocational and social life, educational institutions must not only understand changes in needs but anticipate them (Putz-Plecko, 2008). Taking hold of curriculum for oneself requires no longer simply "delivering someone else's mail" (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 2000) ; it requires re-reading that mail in terms of the requirements arising in this moment with this student, right now.

It is worth noticing that in general, western education encourages individuals to pursue their true interests by honing a broad range of skills and areas of expertise, and eastern education promotes an efficient way of training them to perform tasks that require quick and precise thinking. Keeping holistic education as the goal, the following could be considered to blend the system of east and west in order to bring out an individual's fullest potential:

### **Memorization, a key component of learning**

Memorization is an important part of learning (Brown, 2014). It is a myth in the west that memorization is not a cognitive process. Famous developmental psychologists Jean Piaget held that children process and interpret new understanding in terms of their old understandings of ordered relations; only when this understanding is fully achieved can the child remember the new knowledge accurately. Thus, memory reflects and depends on the entire cognitive structure. Memory becomes active understanding rather than in a static or passive state (Miller, 2002). This theory validates the idea that rote memorization in mathematical teaching is not the mere "cramming" of facts and numbers, but is an active, ongoing process (Brown, 2014). According to Rosenshine and colleagues (1986), the retention and application of previously learned knowledge and skills comes about through constant learning. Research supports this idea and suggests that the excellent performance of Asian learners on international standardized tests may be due to the combination of understanding and memorization, not commonly found in Western students (Narayan, 2009). So, memorizing needs to be tied up with the need to apply and use the knowledge that has been previously learned. Practice and tests in frequent intervals will motivate students to achieve their learning goals, imbibe the learning and maximize their chances of academic success.

### **Assessment techniques and strategies**

Improved and effective test taking strategies are needed

in the modern schools whereby the stress and pressure on the students is reduced. The dilemma that Huang (2014) sees in America with test taking is how to allow the top students to move forward by not holding back their creativity. In China, the dilemma he sees is emphasis on too much test taking at the younger levels, hurting higher education in China. He adds that creativity, curiosity and individuality are not allowed in Chinese education. Huang's book on the secrets of the Extraordinary success of Asian-American kids takes an in-depth approach to the race, from the starting line to the finish line, and how best to prepare students. He believes that although curiosity and critical thinking is the passport to that Nobel Prize, some testing is important to hit milestones.

### **Creativity and critical thinking, super elements of the learning process**

Creativity in learning is about fostering "flexibility, openness for the new, the ability to adapt or to see new ways of doing things and the courage to face the unexpected" (Cropley, 2001). Creativity brings about individuality and helps one to freely express them. Creativity in Chinese is composed of two characters 创 and 造 where '创': To break free from convention; '造': To make a realistic assessment (Huang, 2014). If one can only 'break free from convention' but can't 'make a realistic assessment'; or, on the other hand, if one can only 'make a realistic assessment' but can't 'break free from convention'; then the action is not an example of 'creativity', he adds. So, being flexible is the key to work on effective assessment strategies to support the creative methodology to teaching and instruction.

The students need to be given freedom, many opportunities to ask questions and explore the concepts for better understanding. This develops the student's aptitude to critically think and come up with logical explanations. Critical thinking is a skill that is impossible to teach directly but should be interwoven with the content of the curriculum.

This style of education enables the students to analysis, conceptualize, and synthesis their prior knowledge to create new knowledge (John, 2012). This promotes the development of an individual as creative problem- solvers and critical thinkers. Educational system need to support and train teachers in equipping them with teaching tools to support such an environment. Teachers play a decisive role in awakening and encouraging creative potential. They provide examples in the way they teach and through their personality (Putz-Plecko, 2008). Educators need to use rich and open questions to structure the learning process thus making it enjoyable, fun and memorable for the students allowing them to exercise higher level thinking skills rather than shallow rote learning.

### **Regarding teachers as facilitators and guide**

Teachers need to be looked at from a different angle now. Great strides can be made so long as educators do whatever it takes to reach learners (Clapper, 2009). In this fast growing world of technology, when information can be found with just a click, the role of teachers is changing and moving away from teaching to facilitating the learning. A facilitator helps guide individuals build on their prior skills and learn new ones. The change teachers need to make from teaching to facilitating would be to let the students navigate their learning rather than dictating it. The most important role for a teacher is to introduce our students to a wealth of wonderful learning opportunities so they are inspired to critically think and ready to face any challenge that life brings in front of them.

### **Utilizing and updating with the latest technology as a boon to effective learning**

Connecting with the latest resource and technology available to make learning interesting is another key element in an effective classroom. New technology may seem to be a challenge and hinder the natural mode of teaching for a few but could also be used as a tool for better education through imbibing and practicing its utilization. Tools such as educational websites, projector, and smart board provide teachers with a method in which they can actively engage their students in the learning process. Whatever strategy is used, the facilitator of learning will ensure that it is one that will allow learners to become actively engaged with the construction of learning and not be a passive tool of teaching (Clapper, 2009).

Teachers need to keep themselves updated with the latest innovations in educational technology to utilize various tools such as educative websites like Khan Academy, Quizlet, etc. We need to move away from instructivism which is definitely more teacher and institutionally centered and towards constructivism which sees the teacher step aside to a new role as facilitator, pairing students with peers, learning processes, and another at key moments based on data and observation while the students create their own knowledge and even early learning pathways. Better yet, we need to move to connectivism which is similar to constructivism, the difference here lies in the central role of relationships and networks as primary sources in connectivism. However, we do not want to create robots but individuals who creatively face the unique challenges that life has in store with great rigor.

### **Parental involvement**

In any educational system East or West, it takes a team

approach to support and bring out the fullest potential in a child. Parental involvement is a largely untapped and valuable resource for schools. As John (2012) noted, they must communicate with both their children and their children's teachers in positive meaningful ways (TEAM – together everyone achieves more).

They can become more involved in helping their children improve their schoolwork, providing encouragement, arranging for appropriate study time and space, modeling desired behavior (such as reading for pleasure), monitoring homework, and actively tutoring their children at home (Cotton and Wikelund, 1989). This is the key to success for any educational system.

## CONCLUSION

Holistic education is a thoughtful response to the ecological, cultural, and moral challenges of our age (Gallegos, 2001). He adds that it aims to inspire young people to live wisely and responsibly in a sustainable and compassionate society, and to contribute to the building of such a society. The educational challenge ahead of us is to pass on the rich diversity of culture and ways of knowing to future generations (Wildman, P. and Inayatullah, S., 1996). Looking at the comparison between eastern and western system of education, mainly looking at the systems in China, India and USA, it is clear that there are advantages and disadvantages between the two in the way learning and teaching happens in a classroom. There is no "right way" to teach, several debates and discussions made to support holistic education. The school systems need to adopt different teaching styles and strategies for helping students learn more effectively. So the question is, 'How can we make a system which promotes the best learning and produces a holistic development in our students'? The answer could be achieved by blending the two, a hybrid model as Huang (2014) puts it.

## Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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