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QUDWA 2017

Plenary

Sunday October 8th, 2017

Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills and Special Advisor on Education Policy to Secretary-General, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

The OECD has studied what factors are driving innovation in teaching and how different countries stack up. Mr. Schleicher's specialty is in education assessments and benchmarking as well as policy analysis and advice. Before joining the OECD, Schleicher worked as the director of analysis at the International Association for Educational Achievement.

There are many dichotomies in education today. Technology allows children to have the world's knowledge at their fingertips, yet it does not teach them the critical thinking necessary to put that knowledge in context. Everyone can participate, yet power is becoming increasingly aggregated. Digitalization is homogenizing, but it is also squashing cultural differences. We have become slaves of algorithms, but they can also be very empowering. What does this mean for the teaching profession?

"We no longer teach for a lifetime," Mr. Schleicher said. "So we need to develop skills to help us find our own way and increase our capacity to relate to people who think differently. Compare this to the current school curriculum, which in trying to squeeze everything in ends up with something very shallow. Yet [some administrators'] response to this richer world is to squeeze more into the box."

Educators need to make better use of resources, to pair the intelligence of computers with human knowledge such as ethics and civics. They need to teach a topic at greater depth and to teach the applications of that topic to other fields. Time should be devoted to disciplines such as philosophy, so that the knowledge students gain can be put in context, and science, so that the knowledge is gained through a rigorous process. According to an OECD study, 98% of teachers say that students learn best by finding the solution on their own, yet the prevalence of memorization is still high. And it is not the countries that fit a stereotype that are using rote-learning techniques; China is just average, but Western countries are higher than they should be.





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“Memorization is less useful as problems become more difficult and as tastes become more complex,” Mr. Schleicher said. “If we want students to walk their own path, we must equip them with the tools.” Mr. Schleicher also deplored the poverty of curricula, saying that the subjects they incorporate are typically “shadows of the richness of the world,” and that schooling was an artificial world unto itself. “Children start as scientists,” he said, “and find that science has become a small part of the world after a life at school. Education should be about design, ethics, and the social sphere, rather than mere topics.”

The areas the OECD identified as key to success in 21st century education are:

1. An emphasis on internal motivation
2. Public confidence in the profession
3. A system grounded in knowledge
4. A collaborative culture

Mr. Schleicher noted that Poland, for example, is strong in all three areas. Italy is strong in the third category (think Da Vinci or Galileo), but teachers tend to work in isolation there. The United Arab Emirates was strong in professional collaboration but needs improvement in autonomy and preparation. It is time to take the findings of the OECD study and others to governments around the world. “They should then align their policies and practices and allow teachers and students to be at the heart of the design of the curriculum,” Mr. Schleicher said.

Alarminglly, Mr. Schleicher found that his research showed that three-quarters of teachers consider their school an innovation-hostile environment, even as neuroscience supports innovations such as collaborative environments as opposed to standardization and conformity.

In the past, countries could choose the elite students for special education because the economy and government only needed a few, but for the “Fourth Industrial Revolution” will need everybody to have knowledge. This means that teachers must be sensitive to individual differences and learning must be more collaborative. “It is about finding passions and what the student can be really good,” Mr. Schleicher said. “It will be about students having control over the pace of their learning.”

Teachers will need to collaborate more amongst themselves, and share each other’s best practices. Integration between teachers and students will increase with technology use.

“Technology can have negative applications, but it can amplify great teaching and it will never replace it.”





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Above all, Mr. Schleicher said, “learning is a process, not a place. The heart of teaching is always relational: to be a tutor, facilitator and counsellor.”

