

Best Practices Are the Worst

Picking the anecdotes you want to believe

Surpassing Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the World's Leading Systems

Edited by Marc Tucker

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288 pages.

As reviewed by Jay P. Greene

“Best practices” is the worst practice. The idea that we should examine successful organizations and then imitate what they do if we also want to be successful is something that first took hold in the business world but has now unfortunately spread to the field of education. If imitation were the path to excellence, art museums would be filled with paint-by-number works.

The fundamental flaw of a “best practices” approach, as any student in a half-decent research-design course would know, is that it suffers from what is called “selection on the dependent variable.” If you only look at successful organizations, then you have no variation in the dependent variable: they all have good outcomes. When you look at the things that successful organizations are doing, you have no idea whether each one of those things caused the good outcomes, had no effect on success, or was actually an impediment that held organizations back from being even more successful. An appropriate research design would have variation in the dependent variable; some have good outcomes and some have bad ones. To identify factors that contribute to good outcomes, you would, at a minimum, want to see those factors more likely to be present where there was success and less so where there was not.

“Best practices” lacks scientific credibility, but it has been a proven path

to fame and fortune for pop-management gurus like Tom Peters, with *In Search of Excellence*, and Jim Collins, with *Good to Great*. The fact that many of the “best” companies they featured subsequently went belly-up—like Atari and Wang Computers, lauded by Peters, and Circuit City and Fannie Mae, by Collins—has done nothing to impede their high-fee lecture tours. Sometimes people just want to hear a confident person with shiny teeth tell them appealing stories about the secrets to success.

With *Surpassing Shanghai*, Marc Tucker hopes to join the ranks of the “best practices” gurus. He, along with a few of his colleagues at the National Center on Education and the Economy, has examined the education systems in some other countries with successful outcomes so that the U.S. can become similarly successful. Tucker coauthors the chapter on Japan, as well as an introductory and two concluding chapters. Tucker’s collaborators write chapters featuring Shanghai, Finland, Singapore, and Canada. Their approach to greatness in American education, as Linda Darling-Hammond phrases it in the foreword, is to ensure that “our strategies must emulate the best of what has been accomplished in public education both from here and abroad.”

But how do we know what those best practices are? The chapters on high-achieving countries describe some of what those countries are doing, but the characteristics they feature may have nothing to do with success or may even be a hindrance to greater success. Since the authors must pick and choose what characteristics they highlight, it is also quite possible that countries have successful education systems because of factors not mentioned at all. Since there is no scientific method to identifying the

critical features of success in the best-practices approach, we simply have to trust the authority of the authors that they have correctly identified the relevant factors and have properly perceived the causal relationships.

But *Surpassing Shanghai* is even worse than the typical best-practices work, because Tucker’s concluding chapters, in which he summarizes the common best practices and draws policy recommendations, have almost no connection to the preceding chapters on each country. That is, the case studies of Shanghai, Finland, Japan, Singapore, and Canada attempt to identify the secrets to success in each country, a dubious-enough enterprise, and then Tucker promptly ignores all of the other chapters when making his general recommendations.

Tucker does claim to be drawing on the insights of his coauthors, but he never actually references the other chapters in detail. He never names his coauthors or specifically draws on them for his conclusions. In fact, much of what Tucker claims as common lessons of what his coauthors have observed from successful countries is contradicted in chapters that appear earlier in the book. And some of the common lessons they do identify, Tucker chooses to ignore.

For example, every country case study in *Surpassing Shanghai*, with the exception of the one on Japan coauthored by Marc Tucker, emphasizes the importance of decentralization in producing success. In Shanghai the local school system “received permission to create its own higher education entrance examination. This heralded a trend of exam decentralization, which was key to localized curricula.” The chapter on Finland describes the importance of the decision “to devolve increasing levels of authority

and responsibility for education from the Ministry of Education to municipalities and schools.... [T]here were no central initiatives that the government was trying to push through the system.” Singapore is similarly described: “Moving away from the centralized top-down system of control, schools were organized into geographic clusters and given more autonomy.... It was felt that no single accountability model could fit all schools. Each school therefore set its own goals and annually assesses its progress toward meeting them...” And the chapter on Canada teaches us that “the most striking feature of the Canadian system is its decentralization.”

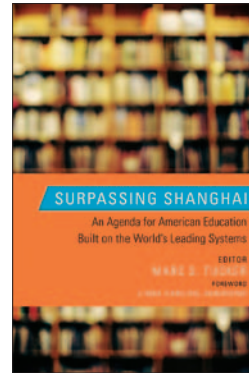
Tucker makes no mention of this common decentralization theme in his conclusions and recommendations. Instead, he claims the opposite as the common lesson of successful countries: “students must all meet a common basic education standard aligned to a national or provincial curriculum... Further, in these countries, the materials prepared by textbook publishers and the publishers of supplementary materials are aligned with the national curriculum framework.” And “every high-performing country...has a unit of government that is clearly in charge of elementary and secondary education...In such countries, the ministry has an obligation to concern itself with the design of the system as a whole...”

Conversely, Tucker emphasizes that “the dominant elements of the American education reform agenda” are noticeably absent from high-performing countries, including “the use of market mechanisms, such as charter schools and vouchers....” But if Tucker had read the chapter on Shanghai, he would have found a description of a system by which “students choose

schools in other neighborhoods by paying a sponsorship fee. It is the Chinese version of school choice, a hot issue in the United States.” And although the chapter on Canada fails to make any mention of it, Canada has an extensive system of school choice, offering options that vary by language and religious denomination. According to recently published research by David Card, Martin Dooley, and Abigail Payne, competition among these options is a significant contributor to academic achievement in Canada.

There is a reason that promoters of best-practices approaches are called “gurus.” Their expertise must be derived from a mystical sphere, because it cannot be based on a scientific appraisal of the evidence. Marc Tucker makes no apology for his nonscientific approach. In fact, he denounces “the clinical research model used in medical research” when assessing education policies. The problem, he explains, is that no country would consent to “randomly assigning entire national populations to the education systems of another country or to certain features of the education system of another country.” On the contrary, countries, states, and localities can and do randomly assign “certain features of the education system,” and we have learned quite a lot from that scientific process. In the international arena, Tucker may want to familiarize himself with the excellent work being done by Michael Kremer and Karthik Muralidharan utilizing random assignment around the globe.

In addition, social scientists have developed practices to observe and control for differences in the absence



of random assignment that have allowed extensive and productive analyses of the effectiveness of educational practices in different countries. In particular, the recent work of Ludger Woessmann, Martin West, and Eric Hanushek has utilized the PISA and TIMSS

international test results that Tucker finds so valuable, but they have done so with the scientific methods that Tucker rejects. Even well-constructed case study research, like that done by Charles Glenn, can draw useful lessons across countries. The problem with the best-practices approach is not entirely that it depends on case studies, but that by avoiding variation in the dependent variable it prevents any scientific identification of causation.

Tucker’s hostility to scientific approaches is more understandable, given that his graduate training was in theater rather than a social science. Perhaps that is also why Tucker’s book reminds me so much of *The Music Man*. Tucker is like “Professor” Harold Hill come to town to sell us a bill of goods. His expertise is self-appointed, and his method, the equivalent of “the think system,” is obvious quackery. And the Gates Foundation, which has for some reason backed Tucker and his organization with millions of dollars, must be playing the residents of River City, because they have bought this pitch and are pouring their savings into a band that can never play music except in a fantasy finale.

Best practices really are the worst.

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