

BOOK REVIEW: ARILD TJELDVOLL – “CAN NORWAY LEARN FROM CHINA? SCHOOL QUALITY”

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Arild Tjeldvoll, being of the opinion that the academic quality of the Norwegian school has decayed over the past forty years, advises us to take an educational glance outside the country borders, trying to understand why other countries have succeeded in achieving secondary school quality. He conveys his own long years' experiences with schooling in China and Norway, opposing Norway, trapped with a teaching profession based on recruitment over many years of academically weak graduates from secondary school and teacher colleges with questionable quality, to East Asia, with its hardworking students, respected teachers, committed parents, Confucian educational thinking, as well as the impressive economic development and social cohesion.

In his very interesting travelogue, the author focuses on the education culture in China, where, being a visiting professor, a university teacher and a father of teenage students, he experienced a fundamentally different learning culture than in Norway. As he points out, pupils in schools in East Asia, university students and parents are extremely motivated for learning efforts. The ultimate goal for parents is the university and an assumed good life afterwards, whereas vocational education has traditionally a low status. In this context, he observes that the common denominators for the East Asian countries are a strong economic and technological development as well as the market economy, whereas a central cultural common denominator for the population as a whole is the strong motivation to learn. In the author's opinion, the source of this fact

is the moral philosopher Confucius, who hailed learning as the greatest of all virtues to develop human moral character and social harmony. The educational model following from his thinking may be the soft power that is the core of China's current development to an economic superpower and cultural expansion.

The book is divided into two main sections. In the *China Section*, the author tries to identify what sort of specific curriculum the Confucianism affected. He also presents the examination system that has been associated with Confucianism, namely the *Imperial Examination*. He then reflects on how political history relates to education and the examination system and shows how China is now trying to use its Confucian educational soft power to strengthen its cultural influence internationally. Then, in the *Norway Section*, he undertakes a review of the Norwegian school development after World War II, trying to highlight the reasons why Norwegian schools have increasingly lost professional quality. Using the reality in Hong Kong as a starting point to recall a picture of the perception of school quality within various educational traditions, he attempts to contrast the learning culture of “The Confucian Lands” to the primary learning cultures that have dominated in the West, from Plato in ancient times and up until today. In the next part of the book, the author provides a basic overview of what is school quality and why its understanding varies between countries and cultural areas.

The target groups of the book are parents and grandparents, as those who are deeply concerned with quality in Norwegian schools, as well as politicians, bureaucrats and business people. As the author points out, his considerations are triggered by two ambitious intentions. Firstly, he likes to contribute to making parents and grandparents familiar with what is educational quality internationally, to make them able to advise their loved ones in the best way. Secondly, he wants to challenge them to think about other people, those who may be less conscious or have fewer resources but, despite their modest intellectual starting points, manage to get access to a knowledge school with quality.

In his opinion, a good school requires a leader who can find teachers making students themselves wanting to learn. As he clearly states, his vision of the optimal knowledge school, based on his experiences and observations in China, Hong Kong, Xiamen international school and our neighbouring countries, Finland and England, taking the best from four curriculum-traditions: Encyclopaedism, Essentialism, Confucianism and Progressivism, is unrealistic, both politically and practically. The benefit, however, may be that such a school picture provides ideas as to what might be possible to change in the difficult world of reality. The three major preconditions for his optimal school vision are a school market outside the public school, a shortened teacher education linked to the university's disciplinary departments and highly paid headmasters and teachers hired on contract.

The book raises very current problems, not only for Norway but also for the other European countries. The author's impressive experience at the international level is a valuable contribution to the contemporary discussion on the school education model. Being a mother of a teenage daughter and an academic lecturer, I read this publication with great interest. The author's considerations stimulate thinking not only about the condition of today's school education but also about the current challenges that modern parents face in the context of the modern world.