

“Teach Your Children Well”

by

Dan Ben-David

Israel’s “do-over” election in September is taking place in the midst of a particularly bountiful season for demagogues the world over. How could it be that in the 21st century, such rampant intentional misdirection and outright lies are having such a hold? The answer is related, among other things, to the primary casualties from economic crises and misperception regarding the difference between altruistic and self-serving behavior.

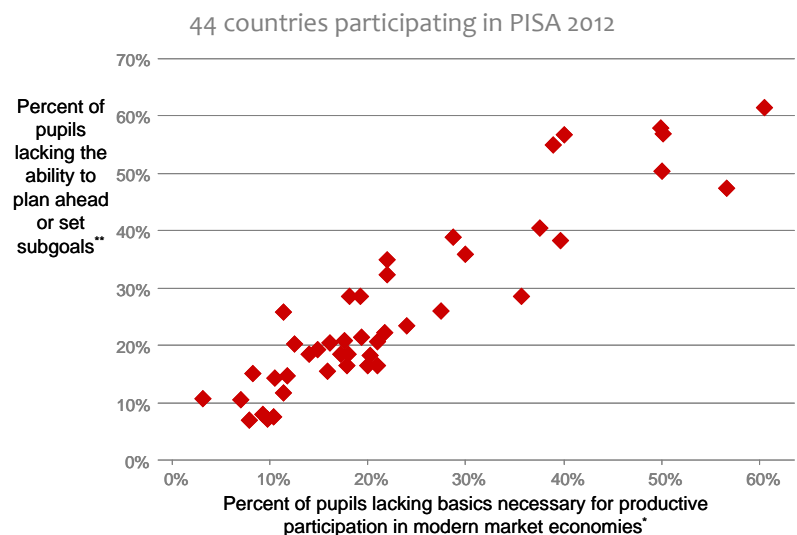
Increasing labor productivity (the amount produced in one hour) is the main key to improving the living standards of individuals and of entire countries. The upshot of this is that a growing economy needs an increasingly educated and skilled labor force – and a decreasing share of less-educated and unskilled workers. The latter group is largely composed of adults who received a poor education as children, and who have since become adults. But when a country provides a deficient education to a large share of its children, it falls victim to an additional phenomenon.

As shown in the graph, there is a very strong and clear link between the share of pupils lacking the basics necessary for productive participation in modern market economies and the share of pupils lacking the ability to plan ahead or to set subgoals.

In democratic countries, where the vote of each person carries equal weight, the provision of shoddy education to large population segments returns like a boomerang during recessionary periods. The most poorly educated and least skilled workers tend to suffer the most negative effects in an economic downturns. These people demand rapid solutions, and understandably so. The strong link between low levels of knowledge that substantially increase economic vulnerability, and the difficulty in understanding the long term implications of actions implemented today, provides fertile ground for demagogues.

It is no coincidence that in the aftermath of last decade’s Great Recession – the worst encountered in the developed world since the 1930s – leaders are elected on the basis of claims that directly contradict facts, but are considered to hold intuitively regardless. That’s how

Relationship between low knowledge levels in core subjects and inability to plan ahead



* average share of pupils scoring at or below level one in math, science and reading.

** share of pupils scoring at or below level 1 in problem-solving.

Source: Dan Ben-David, Shoresh Institution and Tel-Aviv University

Data: PISA

demagogues are able to “sell” policies that exacerbate the difficulties faced by their supporters – not to mention the rest of the nation – while deflecting blame for the outcomes on to others.

The fundamental message that all democracies intent on survival must learn can be found in the title of one of the greatest hits of the 1970s: “Teach Your Children Well” by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. Providing poor people with the tools and the conditions that are necessary for success in a competitive labor market and for life in a modern country is not a favor performed on their behalf. In a democracy, the country needs them no less than they need it.