

EDUCATION IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION: ISSUES, CONCERNS AND PROSPECTS

Volume 39

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Education in Malaysia

Developments and Challenges

 Springer

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Foreword

Since the end of the colonial period in the 1950s and 1960s, newly independent countries' governments have seen education as an important component in their attempts to create new nation states, especially where there are conflicting ethnic and linguistic groups and where there has clearly been a legacy of one or more groups having benefitted from the education policies of the colonial power. Malaysia is a very good example of this scenario. Not only is it a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society, especially when all the indigenous groups that make up East Malaysia are included rather than just the major groups in Peninsular Malaysia, but British colonial policy clearly benefitted urban groups over rural ones and also benefitted the urban Chinese over the Malays whose country it originally was before the British encouraged Tamil Indian and Chinese immigration to work in key parts of the colonial economy, most notably the rubber plantations and the tin mines. These historical, racial and economic aspects are clearly examined in different chapters in the series of essays that make up this excellent, informative and analytical book.

Language policies, however laudable their purposes, are rarely harmonious and are usually contested. Malaysia is no exception to this rule. While there is only one chapter [Chap. 8] which is devoted to language issues per se in Sarawak, nearly every chapter touches on language policies in one way or another. They have influenced the main medium of instruction in schools, and thus the structure of the entire school system. They have also had a bearing on the medium for teaching particular subjects, most notably science and mathematics. Policy here has changed and changed again but not necessarily for pedagogical reasons. If it has been perceived by the ruling Malay political elite that Malay students are falling behind or are disadvantaged by a particular policy then that policy is changed. For any observer of the Malaysian educational scene it has been clear that positive discrimination has played a key role in favouring the *bumiputras* (Malays) over any other group ever since independence in 1957. Positive discrimination for the Malays – which inevitably means negative discrimination towards other ethnic groups – has been used in terms of special funding for particular institutions, such as technical colleges, but it has been used to favour Malays in terms of examination requirements, much to the chagrin of the Chinese. It has also been used to encourage poorer parents to recognise

the importance of education for their children, and in this respect it has proved very successful. Some critics would argue that such positive discrimination policies which favour one ethnic group over others are akin to 'pork barrel' politics as used in the USA to woo voters, and to the extent that the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party has dominated Malaysian politics almost since independence then it has been incredibly successful.

Political influence, however, is not simply confined to language policies. In the Malaysian context, as several authors in this volume point out, it reaches into areas of the curriculum, to reforms, or lack of reforms, to the structure of the education system, particularly in the area of the higher education system where too many key appointments are given to political figures, or those with affiliations to the ruling party, rather than to those who have the specific skills needed. The result has been a stagnation rather than real innovation. Several authors express a certain frustration with this situation. Again, however, it must be stressed that Malaysia is not unique in this.

Perhaps one crucial area where real reform rather than political rhetoric is needed is that of the role of the teacher in the classroom. Even if the syllabus or the curriculum is changed, if the teachers are not properly equipped to change their teaching approaches and still continue with a rote system or an instruction approach with little real involvement and participation on the part of the students so that they can really understand the topic being studied rather than simply regurgitating what they have been taught, then there can be few substantial improvements. Unfortunately, this situation has not been helped by a resurgence of a more Islamic influence which is often opposed to inquiry methods of teaching and presses for a more didactic approach. This is a problem that only sensitive debate and discussion as opposed to dogma can resolve. Teachers should also be rewarded on merit not by how long they have been in the teaching profession. Such changes would need a complete change in mind set both by those at the top of the system and by teachers in the classroom. Unless, or until, this happens too many students will finish their education without fulfilling their potential, and Malaysia will continue to fall behind in the international league tables (see Chap. 6).

Another important side effect of political intervention is that the education system remains far too centralised despite promises to introduce greater decentralisation. The merits of centralisation vs. decentralisation, and variations on this topic, have been debated in international forums over the past few decades, and while there is a general feeling that the greater the decentralisation of a system towards local autonomy and accountability the more successful the educational outcomes are likely to be, there is also a great reluctance on the part of the central government, in this case the Federal Government, to cede too much control, especially where there are ethnic divisions or urban/rural divisions which are particularly noticeable between West Malaysia and East Malaysia. This is a debate that will be ongoing for many years to come. The contributions to this volume on this theme are well worth reading because of the issues that the authors raise.

Since the early 1960s, National Economic and Development Plans have been linked with National Education Plans in most developing and post-colonial countries.

The creation of the International Institute for Educational Planning in Paris is a testament to this trend and a recognition that it is not only socialist countries that have needed to integrate economic targets with education targets. As economists began to argue that there were real economic benefits from educating a population to as high a level as possible, governments took this on board and began to move towards universal primary education, then universal secondary education and more recently Education for All (EFA) which also incorporates adult education and training. Malaysia's Education Plans and her Economic Development Plans have steadily become ever more ambitious, with the goal of making Malaysia a high-income economic powerhouse by 2020. This is unlikely to happen because of the economic crisis of the late 1990s and the financial crash of 2007/8, but the focus of travel is clear. The country's achievements in terms of universal primary enrolments and near universal secondary enrolments are impressive, but enrolments are only part of the solution. It is the outcomes that are far more important, and here there are genuine concerns, as several authors in this book point out. Equality of enrolments, whether in terms of gender or rural/urban disparities, might look impressive – and this is what the political classes will point to – but it is the quality of the student outcomes that is far more important. It is here that there are concerns.

In an age of globalisation and ever increasing use of technology, if a country like Malaysia is to achieve what it hopes to, namely to become a key international hub in South East Asia, there needs to be considerable improvement in educational achievement and in the ability to use modern technology. Steps are being taken to address these shortcomings. For example, there have been genuine attempts to improve the technical and vocational aspects of education (Chap. 9) and to expand, and diversify, higher education provision (Chap. 4) both by allowing private enterprises to establish higher education institutions and by diversifying the type of courses available, as well as by allowing international universities to establish outposts in Malaysia in specially designated areas. Unfortunately, progress is being hampered by political interference in different areas such as the management and administrative structures that have been alluded to earlier.

This overview and foreword cannot hope to do justice to the complexities and issues facing the education system in Malaysia. These have been raised and discussed in the following chapters and are well worth reading, for each of the authors, while at times critical of what they perceive to be issues in need of a solution, is deeply committed to seeing the quality and outcomes of the Malaysian education improve so that Malaysia can fulfil its dream of becoming one of the leading countries in the South East Asia region.

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January 2017

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Series Editors' Introduction

This interesting and informative book by Moses Samuel, Meng Yew Tee and Lorraine Pe Symaco, *Education in Malaysia: Developments and Challenges*, is the latest volume to be published in the long-standing Springer Book Series 'Education in the Asia Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns and Prospects'. The first book in this Springer series was published in 2002, with this volume by Moses Samuel et al. being the 39th volume to be published to date.

This ten-chapter volume provides a country case study of key aspects of education and schooling in Malaysia. After an overview of the current education landscape in Malaysia, the various contributors to this book examine a wide range of developments and challenges facing education in Malaysia, including race-based policies and practices, the interrelationship between education and politics, the reform of higher education, teachers and teaching, approaches to reengineering the school curriculum, the role of indigenous languages in schools, skills development for employability, and possible future directions for education in Malaysia.

The book is a comprehensive and fascinating case study of the role of education and schools in a transition country as it moved from being a colony of Britain to becoming a fully fledged, independent country. Together the chapters provide a portrait of the historical, racial and economic aspects of what is a complex multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society.

The various topics examined in this Springer Book Series are wide-ranging and varied in coverage, with an emphasis on cutting-edge developments, best practices and education innovations for development. Topics examined include environmental education and education for sustainable development; the reform of primary, secondary and teacher education; innovative approaches to education assessment; alternative education; most effective ways to achieve quality and highly relevant education for all; active ageing through active learning; case studies of education and schooling systems in various countries in the region; cross country and cross cultural studies of education and schooling; and the sociology of teachers as an occupational group, to mention just a few. More information about this series is available at <http://www.springer.com/series/6969>

All volumes in this book series aim to meet the interests and priorities of a diverse education audience including researchers, policy makers and practitioners; tertiary students; teachers at all levels within education systems; and members of the public who are interested in better understanding cutting-edge developments in education and schooling in Asia-Pacific.

The reason why this book series has been devoted exclusively to examining various aspects of education and schooling in the Asia-Pacific region is that this is a challenging region which is renowned for its size, diversity and complexity, whether it be geographical, socio-economic, cultural, political or developmental. Education and schooling in countries throughout the region impact on every aspect of people's lives, including employment, labour force considerations, education and training, cultural orientation, and attitudes and values. Asia and the Pacific is home to some 63% of the world's population of seven billion. Countries with the largest populations (China, 1.4 billion; India, 1.3 billion) and the most rapidly growing megacities are to be found in the region, as are countries with relatively small populations (Bhutan, 755,000; the island of Niue, 1600).

Levels of economic and socio-political development vary widely, with some of the richest countries (such as Japan) and some of the poorest countries on earth (such as Bangladesh). Asia contains the largest number of poor of any region in the world, the incidence of those living below the poverty line remaining as high as 40% in some countries in Asia. At the same time, many countries in Asia are experiencing a period of great economic growth and social development. However, inclusive growth remains elusive, as does growth that is sustainable and does not destroy the quality of the environment. The growing prominence of Asian economies and corporations, together with globalisation and technological innovation, is leading to long-term changes in trade, business and labour markets, to the sociology of populations within (and between) countries. There is a rebalancing of power, centred on Asia and the Pacific region, with the Asian Development Bank in Manila declaring that the twenty-first century will be 'the Century of Asia-Pacific'.

We believe that this book series makes a useful contribution to knowledge sharing about education and schooling in Asia-Pacific. Any readers of this or other volumes in the series who have an idea for writing their own book (or editing a book) on any aspect of education and/or schooling that is relevant to the region are enthusiastically encouraged to approach the series editors either directly or through Springer to publish their own volume in the series, since we are always willing to assist prospective authors in shaping their manuscripts in ways that make them suitable for publication in this series.

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