

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

Volume 44

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Engaging in Educational Research

Revisiting Policy and Practice in Bangladesh

 Springer

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Foreword

Research is an essential part of education, and education itself demands continuous research for advancement and application. The 18 essays in this volume are all based on research by individuals connected with education and committed to the promotion of learning. They have examined all available data, made empirical investigations, and studied literature on the subjects of their research. Their findings are significant and should be of value to educationalists, policy-makers, teachers, and tertiary students, in a word to all interested in education in Bangladesh. In each of the essays there is a warm invitation to further research.

The two principal areas under focus are, as they ought to be, quality and equity. In education, quality comes first, but equity is almost of equal importance in the particular context of Bangladesh. For one thing, education is a universal birthright; for another, Bangladesh as a state is founded on the democratic promise of ensuring equal opportunity to all citizens, irrespective of class and creed. Moreover, the backwardness of the country and the inadequacy of material resources in relation to its large population make it absolutely necessary that every citizen is developed in skill and ability through learning. Ideally, access should be free.

Quality of education depends on several factors, most of which have been discussed in the essays. Curriculum, infrastructure, methods, and environment have their special value, but quality depends, as indicated in these essays, primarily on the teachers. Teachers must be qualified and trained; they should have proper aptitude and commitment. We in Bangladesh need to bring the most talented of our men and women to the teaching profession. There is a claim that 25% of the annual budget and at least 4% of the GDP should be allocated to education. The claim is amply justified on the simple ground that in our circumstances education is the most productive sector for investment—certainly more than civil administration and military defense. Investment in education would, among other things, create directly and consequentially employment which is a *sine qua non* for economic development. Teachers are not mere conduits of learning, they are viable heroes whom the students would like to admire and emulate. It would, therefore, be necessary to make the profession honorable – governmentally as well as socially, and honor

would depend not on words but on the personal respect accorded to them in terms of both prestige and financial provision. A poor teacher is not an effective teacher.

Of the hindrances of quality in education, the most subversive has been the process of transferring the test of learning from the classroom to the examination hall. Ever since its beginning, modern education in the country has been examination-oriented. The orientation has not declined; on the contrary, it has grown over the years owing, peculiarly, to the inclination of the authorities to have result without working for it. Apart from reliance on examination certificates as the most reliable measure of knowledge-acquisition, the number of public examination itself has increased to the continual detriment of classroom teaching and to the corresponding delight of the coaching centers and guidebook makers.

Examinations are, of course, a necessary part of education, but public examinations should not be the sole indicator of academic achievement. It is because of the overriding importance given to it that examination-hall activity dominates over classroom teaching. Experiments, many of them unnecessary, have been made with the examination system. One of these is the introduction of the so-called creative question setting. The introduction ignores the fact that it is teaching that needs creativity and not question setting and that innovations demand the ground to be prepared. The result has been harmful. Teachers found that creative questions are not easy to invent and went to guidebooks for help. Students and their guardians got the message. The market for guidebooks widened and the use of textbooks shrunk. The multiple choice question system has emerged as yet another bugbear. Whereas academically the system is no substitute for answers in writing, what the authorities have discovered, much to their disappointment, is that it lends itself conveniently to the leaking of question papers along with the answers in numbers.

One of the challenging areas is English language learning. The time-honored method of grammar translation has recently been replaced by communicative method. Although the merits of direct communication are well established, it has not been working well in our context. As is pointed out in one of the essays, the primary drawback is the lack of trained teachers. To add to the ailment, there is the fact that the system functions better in the schools with students drawn from the privileged sections of the society, contributing to the widening of the existing social cleavage. Clearly, there is a good case for returning to the old grammar-translation method.

The decline in science education is worthy of attention. The most obvious reason for the decline is its comparative lack of commercial value. But science is important; for it not only gives knowledge but also helps to develop curiosity and the ability to think critically. Commerce works in determining students' choice of study. Indeed commerce is ubiquitous in its presence. Thanks to the operation of capitalism, education is increasingly becoming a commodity; it is being bought and sold, and quality education remains unaffordable for the less privileged. That privatization of learning is on the rise is, of course, all of a piece with the principles on which the state is functioning nowadays. It is disheartening, to say the least, that the study of humanities is also suffering on account of its unprofitability.

The problem of ensuring equity persists, turning from bad to worse. The state is expected to intervene, but it does not, because the state itself is capitalist both in ideology and practice. Society is unequal, so is access to education. In Bangladesh we have fought for a social revolution but have failed to achieve the goal. That accounts for many of our educational weaknesses including the overwhelming one of inequity. How can you have equity in an unequal society?

It bears no refutation that considered from the point of social benefit what ails education in Bangladesh today is its division into three disparate streams based, overly, on the separation of the classes. We have the English medium teaching designated for the rich, the Bengali medium for the poor, and Islamist Madrasahs for the poor. Naturally the English medium dominates. This is a phenomenon that needs very thorough going into not only the interest of education but also that of the well-being of the people. Inequity is destructive, and to employ education in widening the social gulf instead of bridging, it is tantamount to a preparation for future anarchy.

To turn to the question of quality, education does not endure nor does it become creative unless given through the medium of the mother language. One of the research papers in this book reveals that even in the teaching of English the use of Bengali in the classroom can be a help rather than a hindrance. Unfortunately, Bengali is not being used as the medium in the way and to the degree it ought to be. This may look strange to outsiders, but the peculiar fact of the matter is that in neglecting to use the mother language we are failing to provide the best possible education to our learners.

One hears of the rise of fundamentalist religious militancy in the country. Not surprisingly, the militants are drawn from those reared in the English and the Madrasahs streams. This happens because the two have a subterranean linkage in their dissociation from the culture, history, and environment of the country. This dissociation is due, primarily, to our failure to make use of the mother language in the educational upbringing of the students.

These are some of the issues connected with quality and equity. We would expect researchers to explore these areas in depth. That is a future prospect. Meanwhile, what we have before us is an excellent work. Let us congratulate the four editors and their fellow educationalists on the remarkable volume they have offered us. We have reasons to be grateful to them.

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Serajul Islam Choudhury

Series Editors' Introduction

This volume by Chowdhury, Sarkar, Mojumder, and Roshid on *Engaging in Educational Research: Revisiting Policy and Practice in Bangladesh* is the latest book to be published in the long-standing Springer Book Series 'Education in the Asia Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns and Prospects'. The first volume in this Springer series was published in 2002, with this book by Chowdhury et al. being the 44th volume to be published to date.

This book is an important contribution to the available research literature on education in Bangladesh because it provides up-to-date information on key aspects of education and schooling in that country. After providing an overview of Bangladesh as a country, and the evolution of its schooling system, the authors document major changes that have occurred in Bangladesh over the past decade or so, with particular reference to globalisation and internationalisation, which impact on the content, organisation and management of education.

The 18 chapters that comprise this book are organised under three main themes: access, equity and quality; reformation of curriculum, assessment and teacher development; and higher education, employability and economic growth. The contents of the book refers to primary, secondary and tertiary education, Islamic schools (Madrasah Education), teacher education, English language education and non-formal education.

In terms of the Springer Book Series, in which this volume is published, the various topics dealt with in the 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 interaction between technology and education; 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 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 particularly 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 are home to some 63% of the world's population of 7 billion. Countries with the largest populations (China, 1.4 billion; India, 1.3 billion) and the most rapidly growing mega-cities 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 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 direct or through Springer to publish their own volume in the series, since we are always willing to assist prospective authors shape their manuscripts in ways that make them suitable for publication in this series.

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