

Educational Change in Asia

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Is some education better than none? How much schooling is needed to have any lasting effect on a boy or girl? Does the result of very short schooling merit the large cost in human endeavour and scarce resources of sending Pakistani or Thai children to school for a few months? These are questions which educational administrators in Asia (and those in the Western world who wish to help them) must ask themselves.

In 1958, there were 10,907,000 children in Grade 1 in schools in India. When this group entered Grade 2 in the following year, it was reduced to 6,630,000. In Grade 3, it had fallen to 5,391,000, and in Grade 4 to 4,589,000. In four years, more than half of the group had left school. Figures for the same period in Pakistan were 2,038,000, falling in Grade 4 to 630,000. In Laos, 43,000 in Grade 1 became 8,000 in Grade 4. In Thailand, the Grade 1 enrolment of 1,281,000 was reduced in four years to 657,000. These figures take no account of the children who never enrol in school. Reliable statistics are not available, but estimates suggest that in Cambodia, for example, 54% of children of primary school age are not enrolled in school. In Burma, the figure may be similar.

Thus, in spite of remarkable progress in recent years, there are still very large numbers of children in Asian countries whose schooling is negligible. Massive expenditure on education does not prevent millions of children from growing up unable to read or write, and without the knowledge and skills which their countries so desperately need.

It would be naive to attribute this tragic wastage of human talent to any single factor. Poverty, hunger and illness are important factors. Poor school buildings, inappropriate curricula, and bad teaching methods contribute to the loss. A factor, however, which

has received little attention is human resistance to change. Much valuable endeavour in education in Asia has been nullified by lack of cooperation on the part of teachers and parents in suburban and village schools. The enormous enthusiasm for education which may be found throughout Asia is matched by a multitude of misconceptions about its aims and methods.

Difficulties arise partly from the gulf between generations, which is more obvious in Asian than in Western countries. A political demonstration in a city in North America is likely to draw all age groups. A similar outbreak in Djakarta or Saigon will probably be staged by school students. Young people attract the attention of political leaders by their noisy demonstrations. There has been much attention given in foreign aid programs to the needs of students in formal education situations, and rather less to attempts to influence those who are unlikely to enter full-time schooling.

It is not proposed to discuss here the advantages of directing general educational programs at the young adult, beyond a comment that the Soviet Union was very successful in its programs for this age group, and obviously thought it worth expending much effort and money on adults who had missed opportunities of schooling when they were younger. The aspect of this question which needs urgent attention is the influence of adults on the schools in Asian countries.

In more developed countries, sociologists have made extensive studies of the effect of parental attitudes on school success. They have shown that the level of aspiration of parents for their children is often decisive in determining the academic attainments of their children. The degree to which parents understand and sympathise with the aims of schools has also been proved to be of great importance in setting levels of achievement for children. This takes on added significance when it is remembered that two-thirds of the adults in Asia are illiterate. Many more have only nominal literacy. In a class of forty children in an elementary school in Indonesia, it is probable that less than five will have parents who have attended school. In a high school, it is likely that only one or two students in a class will have parents who attended a high school.

Rising levels of education throughout the world have created similar relationships in most countries. In the United States, many college students have parents who did not themselves attend college. There are, however, significant differences between the educational gap in Asia, and that in the developed countries. In Asian countries, unschooled parents are likely to be completely illiterate. Many are totally unaware of developments outside their own village. The in-

tensity of their isolation is greater than in Western countries at any time since the Middle Ages.

The pressures for educational growth are stronger in Asian countries than in Europe or North America where there has been a steady development of public education since 1800. The Asian countries are trying to compress a century of educational growth into a decade. The potential rewards for the educated individual are more attractive in Asia. The sons of starving peasants have found their way into positions of great power and wealth through some happy chance which gave them schooling. In the fluid political and administrative world of new independence, there are opportunities for spectacular advancement if a man has at least a minimum of schooling.

The whole atmosphere surrounding schools in Asia is explosive. There are impossible aspirations on the part of parents and children, inefficiency and low morale among many teachers, and urgent ill-coordinated activity on the part of politicians and administrators. The basic cause of this problem is widespread failure to understand the real possibilities of education. Not infrequently, foreign advisers add to the confusion by importing educational theories which have no relevance to nations whose economic and political situation is vastly different from that of their own country.

In their anxiety to raise the educational level of their countries as quickly as possible, administrators have allowed their planning to run far ahead of the ideas and understanding of their people. New schools have been established, and opportunities for education have been provided for the first time. After a few years, it has become obvious that the schools were not achieving the objectives set for them because neither teachers nor parents understood these objectives. Too often, general disillusionment with education followed, and schools were neglected.

It is particularly easy for foreign advisers (and even local officials) to move rapidly on the surface of educational change without looking down to see the nature of the current which is carrying them along. Suggested changes may be accepted without question, but they can easily become changes in form and not in spirit. Old ideas continue under new names, or a mixture of old and new produces a disorganized and ineffective program.

Foreign advisers and government officials are valuable catalysts in the process of educational change, but the vital ingredient is the support of the people of the country. It is a common error to over-estimate the power of legislation. Educationists, exhausted by a prolonged struggle to convince legislators of the desirability of their proposals, feel that the battle is won when the appropriate

legislative action has been taken. An educational system may be remodelled on paper in a few weeks: fifty years may be insufficient time to convert these theoretical changes into schools, classes, and methods.

In his first year in the classroom, a teacher learns how slowly children change established habits. All learning theories are based on careful preparation for change, clear explanations, and methodical follow-up work. It is strange that when teachers become education administrators, they so often expect other teachers and parents to learn new methods and new attitudes quickly and effectively without preparation, explanation or follow-up.

In semi-literate communities, the issuing of press statements or the distribution of booklets has little value in the creation of a climate of opinion favourable to educational reform. Teachers' journals and refresher courses for teachers are only slightly more effective. There is no substitute for sustained personal contact in changing thought patterns in developing countries. It is slow and tedious. It can be expensive. But it is successful.

Village people in Asia and the Pacific islands are accustomed to rely on talk for the transaction of business, for general communication, and for entertainment. For them, talk fulfils many of the functions of the newspaper, radio, television and films in more advanced communities. Much of their learning is done through conversation. Decisions are made in conversation.

Recognizing the importance of oral communication in semi-literate societies, some authorities in Asian countries send government officers to give lectures in villages. This is not conversation, and is markedly less effective than a genuine conversational approach. Village societies often have elaborate traditions for talking sessions, especially with regard to the introduction of business matters affecting the village. A casual, tentative manner is required. A whole evening may pass with little more than a mention of the object of the visit, but this does not indicate any lack of interest or failure to appreciate the importance of the subject. On the contrary, it may show that the topic is of such great importance that much thought is required before it can be discussed fully.

It is easy to become impatient with these methods, but the visitor who uses them finds himself amply repaid. Channels of communication which are known and respected are invariably more effective than hasty, high-pressure techniques.

Foreign educationists and young local government officials in Asian countries frequently misjudge the influence of older people in village communities. They believe that it is not economical at this stage of development to waste time converting people who are past

the age of compulsory schooling. The country, they explain, will ride to technological progress on the shoulders of educated young people. Growth in opportunities for schooling will gradually eliminate illiteracy, and provide adults who are more receptive to new ideas.

This unrealistic approach is responsible for the backwardness hidden behind a shabby facade of technical achievement in areas where enthusiasm has outweighed common sense in educational planning. Men and women with little education who are still under thirty years of age will continue to influence their villages for the next forty years, and may still be obstructing change in the year 2000. If no action is taken to influence their attitudes to education, they will remain a very serious obstacle to all reform movements. In spite of the bewilderment of older people in the face of technological change, the real power in the Asian village remains with people who are middle-aged or old, and there is no reason to believe that the under-twenties will ever dominate local life, however much their political activities may influence national governments.

It should also be remembered that few Asian countries can expect to achieve genuine literacy for the whole population during this century. In every developing country, a sizeable group of people escapes compulsory schooling or remains in school for only a brief period. They continue to reinforce the undereducated and prejudiced section of the adult community.

There is a need for a new kind of worker in education, an ambassador for educational progress. This worker would stand between the planner and those who must carry out the plans, explaining and interpreting to village teachers and parents, and advising officials. He would carry ideas from briefings in capital cities to meetings in suburbs and villages. The present superintendent of schools or district inspector is not well suited by position or training to undertake this work. He is a person of authority, a man concerned with rules and organizations. Although many school superintendents have been excellent ambassadors for change, this task should be undertaken by men or women who have it as their special responsibility.

Uneducated people seldom have any real conception of the effect of education on their children. They are persuaded or compelled to purchase education by officials who assume that the values of education are so obvious that they need no explanation. Too often those who provide education for a village community have themselves given little thought to the results of providing schools. They have, without thought, accepted the view that any process which is called education must automatically benefit all who are involved in it. This fiction is a real danger to progress in Asian countries,

where unsuitable forms of schooling have already been positively harmful. It is necessary for all who provide or pay for education to realize that it can only be beneficial if it is carefully geared to community needs. They should also understand that they are making a long-term investment which may not bring any tangible dividends for several decades.

The village teacher in Asian countries occupies a central place in the development of an appreciation of the true values of education. As a government employee, he can be compelled to follow any method or practice chosen by the authorities, but if he does so without understanding or enthusiasm, there is little prospect that the change will be effective. Nor will there be any support from village people if the teacher is resistant to new ideas.

Village teachers have a limited understanding of the broader problems of education. The official memoranda which they receive from headquarters, and the instructions given by inspectors, are seldom helpful in understanding the implications of policies which they are required to follow. Teachers, like other people in the village, need to discuss new ideas with someone who is able to set them in a familiar context.

Education authorities who are desperately short of trained personnel will not easily be persuaded to divert men and women who could serve as administrators or teachers into advisory work where results are difficult to assess. But as lack of understanding and resistance to change brings more educational programmes to a halt, governments will find no alternative to increasing their allocations of men and money for public relations work in the field of education.

In the business world, public relations was once interpreted as high-pressure salesmanship, and convincing people against their better judgment. Reputable business firms now reject this approach in favour of genuine information services about their products. Education authorities, and particularly those in the developing countries, urgently need full-time personnel capable of making the equivalent of market-surveys for various types and levels of schooling, and then providing a climate of opinion favourable to the acceptance of schools and their methods. New ideas in education merit the same care and preparation which commercial enterprises give to launching new products.

Special attention should be given to presenting the financial implications of an educational change. It is from lack of knowledge of this aspect that much hostility arises. When a government makes a decision to raise the minimum school leaving age, the cost of new buildings and extra teachers is seldom realized beyond a narrow group of planners. Nor are the possible benefits made known to

the people of the country. Much unnecessary conflict arises from lack of information about proposed reforms of this kind.

The people of any country should be involved in its educational planning. The fact that the majority of the population is illiterate or semi-literate does not relieve a government of responsibility for consulting with them. It is they, and not the government, who must ultimately make the changes which are being planned. If they are not in some measure partners in the planning, they will resist and nullify the plans when implementation is attempted.

No mention has yet been made of the problem of creating an understanding of educational problems at the highest levels of administration and government in developing countries. Neither politicians nor senior government officials can be expected to have read widely about modern developments in education. How are they to be informed about proposed changes, and persuaded to support them?

This is a problem which constantly confronts the foreign adviser. He is required to simplify, to explain, to justify changes which appear to him so obviously necessary that no explanation should be required. Many advisers are ill-prepared for this task. They can produce without difficulty reasons for change which would be instantly accepted in their home country, but they are mystified when these arguments are brushed aside as irrelevant in an Asian country. A businessman would say that they cannot adapt their sales technique to a new market.

There is good reason to believe that more detailed orientation courses are needed for all education advisers sent to developing countries. They need to study very carefully the market for their wares: to know the political, social, economic, and religious climate of the developing country far better than can be learned from the reading of guide-books and attendance at lectures for a few weeks. Several months' residence in the country before taking up educational duties would not be wasted if the adviser was given an opportunity to study and reflect on the life of the people and the views of their leaders.

Education in any Asian country is a giant enterprise involving large numbers of people. It would be a tragedy, if, in the haste to secure progress, the cooperative nature of this enterprise was overlooked. In some fields of human endeavour, it may occasionally be possible to make spectacular advances by means of orders followed without comprehension. In education, this is never possible. The arts of explanation and persuasion are inseparable from leadership and planning in education, and this has never been more true than in the developing countries of Asia.