Education in East Asia

OVERSTRAINED, OUTDATED AND IN NEED OF REFORM

The education systems of Asian nations such as South Korea, Japan and Singapore are the envy of the western world in terms of measured achievements against global standards. But behind the successes, lurk growing problems of inequality, overemphasis on rote learning, academic corruption and graduates poorly prepared for the world of work. Much needs to change.
Successful education policies have played a key role in the economic success of Singapore and South Korea, and both nations consistently score high on international assessments of educational achievement. But as both countries have learned, economic development brings new challenges to educational systems, as growing inequalities in income and opportunities call for new approaches, write S. Gopinathan and Catherine Ramos.

ASIA HAS witnessed remarkable changes in education, especially with regard to the expansion of opportunity. Given the region’s wide diversity, progress has inevitably been uneven. While countries such as Singapore and South Korea have successfully harnessed the power of education to fuel economic growth (Barber & Mourshed, 2007), others have been less successful. There are still too many children in low income Asian countries who do not have access to education, or receive poor quality education if they are enrolled. In this essay we explore how the education issues faced by middle-income countries differ from developed countries, as well as the unintended consequences of policy and policy implementation failure, and the policy options to redress the issues.

Singapore and its education system are justly regarded as one of the major success stories of post-colonial societies. This is true also for South Korea, where educational expansion and diversification supported impressive socio-economic transformation. Today, Singapore and South Korea respectively have a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of US$78,763 and US$33,062 on a purchasing power parity basis (World Bank, 2015). But as they have achieved prosperity and development, economic and social issues have arisen that must be addressed to keep development sustainable and social cohesion intact.

One pressing issue in many countries is inequality. While both Singapore and South Korea saw impressive social mobility gains in the second half of the last century, these gains are now under pressure. This essay argues that while education is a necessary and powerful tool for economic development and prosperity, educational policy alone is not sufficient to move society forward and keep it sustainable. The complexities of globalization and changes in the work world that education policies have been mainly aimed to support make the task more difficult. A skillful reordering of socio-economic policies is necessary if nations are to realize the expected economic returns from education and prevent social issues such as inequality from undermining developmental gains.

**SINGAPORE: TOP-FLIGHT**
Social and educational development in Singapore through education and training has to a large extent been progressive and beneficial. Singapore is widely admired for its efficient economy and government capacity for long-term planning, successful policy implementation and commitment to corruption-free administration. Its citizens are well-housed and well-educated. It could be regarded, as many have said, as the “Switzerland of Asia.” Education development too has been impressive. A very high proportion of students complete 10 years of education and over 75 percent are in some form of post-secondary education. Its universities are world class, as are its technical institutions and polytechnics. In international comparisons, Singaporean students invariably rank in the top 5 (Gopinathan 2007; OECD, 2011), and in recent global school rankings, Singapore came on top, followed by four Asian countries — Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan (BBC News, 2015 May).

The key question facing Singapore today is how to stay competitive (Gopinathan, 1999). Globalization has expanded the reach of big corporations, allowed for greater mobility of capital and talent and for a greater variety of public goods like edu-
cation to be tradable. Though the Singapore economy had always been an open one, globalization forced it to be even freer and pressure increased on the state to be less dominant and directive. A number of neoliberal education policies emphasizing competition, choice and diversity have shifted a system that once provided a common national schooling experience to one providing more differentiated schooling experiences and unequal outcomes. Indeed, the soft authoritarian Singaporean state must now contend with a growing and well educated middle-class and the democratization of information. This has weakened the ability of the dominant technocratic class of politicians and bureaucrats to dictate policy. Growing prosperity also has led to declines in the birth rate, necessitating increases in migrant labor. This, in turn, has led to both an increase in income inequality and growing concern over increasing diversity. The middle class is still aspirational, but increasingly restive and there are calls for greater consultation, more transparency and a stronger social safety net.

PRIVATE TUTORS AND THE EQUITY ISSUE

In South Korea, another developed country with high educational attainment, the major educational issues are linked to economic or employment opportunities. For example, the introduction of English as a compulsory subject as early as the third year of elementary school was meant to reduce the cost of private English education to parents and to provide for equal opportunity. But since learning English was positioned as a way to benefit from better employment opportunities, demand for places at private English centers, even at kindergarten level, has risen, thus increasing the economic burden on parents instead of reducing it (Yoon, 2014). Another policy that yielded the opposite result was the creation of elite high schools with the aim of preventing brain drain via early overseas study and to restore confidence in public education (Yoon, 2014). This policy, again, resulted in increased spending on private education because parents saw it as an opportunity to better prepare their children for the entrance examinations for elite universities. Yoon (2014) concluded that this happened because the policy of diversifying education through expanding elite schools overlooked the fact that “every parent regards their children as elite, and invests in education without reservation.” The OECD (2014, p.27) reports that South Korea’s share of students participating in after-school tutoring is the second highest among OECD countries and is highly correlated to family income:

Equal opportunity is undermined by the heavy reliance on private tutoring to enter high-ranking universities, which has an inordinate impact on job prospects and future income. The role of private tutoring, which creates cycles of poverty and wealth that endure over generations should be scaled back...

In Singapore as in South Korea, costs of private tuition impact differently on different income groups. For example, South Korea’s private tutoring affects opportunities in education unequally. Lee (2005) has recommended negating private tutoring as a specific policy criterion when evaluating the relevance and effectiveness of education policy. However, addressing the issue of private tutoring is not easy because it stems from a lack of confidence in public schooling to help students get high-wage jobs. While both Singapore and South Korea rank high in international assessments, parents in both countries do not believe that public schools alone can help their children get into elite schools or high-wage jobs. The goal of landing high-wage jobs is reasonable, because there is a large wage gap between regular and non-regular South Korean workers, even if they have comparable skills. South Korea is the third highest OECD country on overall wage dispersion (OECD, 2014), with the US and Israel being 1st and 2nd, respectively. Policy recommendations to address this issue include “reducing employment protection for regular workers while increasing social insurance coverage and training for the non-regular workers, and raising employment rates especially for women by creating high-quality part-time jobs and improving the quality of childcare” (OECD, 2014, p.33). Thus, the empirical link between education and employment and wages makes it clear that successful educational policy outcomes will need to be tied to other policies beyond the education sector, as observed by Cheon et al (2013, p.3):

Establishment size, tenure [job stability], employment types, which are related to labor institutions, were also important in wage inequality. This means that extending educational opportunities is not enough [emphasis added] and changes in economic and industrial structure and the labor market institutions are important to reduce overall wage inequality in Korea.

COPING WITH INEQUALITY

Singapore, as one of the world’s most open economies, is vulnerable to global economic shifts. With a small population base, it has had to welcome migrants, but this has caused discontent among some citizens. The middle class is well educated but anxious about economic opportunities for its children. Singapore, as with many other developed economies, is now grappling with increases in income inequality (see Figure 1) and concerns that social mobility has slowed (Ng, 2015). The most recent key education policy responses seem principally designed to address the issue of inequality. In Singapore, though the achievement gaps between the three dominant ethnic groups have declined, the Malay-Muslim community, which constitutes some 15 percent of the population, is still underperforming, over-represented at technical colleges and underrepresented at universities (Tan, 1997).
Accepting that poverty limits the ability to utilize opportunity, government taxation policies have become more progressive and redistributive and wage top-ups for the lowest paid workers have become the norm.

The government has also recognized the value of early intervention and has invested quickly and substantially in improving early childhood education. It has also expanded financial assistance for needy students. Another initiative has been to increase places in universities from around 28 percent of the cohort to 40 percent by 2020. The government has long insisted that universities must be high-quality institutions and that an industrializing economy requires a steady supply of high-quality middle-level manpower best provided by technical institutes and polytechnics. However, existing differentials in status and income between diploma and degree holders has led many diploma holders to seek upgrading opportunities at their own cost.

THE MIDDLE-INCOME CHALLENGE

While high-income countries such as South Korea and Singapore have been successful with their educational expansion and development, middle-income countries have not realized their full potential. For example, in the last 20 years, the Philippines has introduced broad and significant education reforms, but with limited success. This is due, for example, to the partial implementation of decentralized governance of basic education and inadequate policy initiatives in learning and pedagogy (Bautista, Bernardo, & Ocampo, 2010). The same can be said of Malaysia in terms of the gap between policy intent and insufficient capacity at all levels of implementation (UNESCO, 2013). Other identified educational issues in Malaysia include (1) concentration of authority at the central level, hindering sector performance, innovation and creativity at the lower levels; (2) certain policies (assessment, curriculum and Technical and Vocational Education and Training) as a source of equity issues; and (3) insufficient co-ordination of policies and programs resulting in duplication and inconsistent policy-making (UNESCO, 2013).

Implementation failures are not the only issue that prevents much needed improvements in education. In the Philippines, there are factors beyond the remit of the education department that have affected schooling, for example, poverty and health, i.e. the nutritional status of children. Thus, despite free places in elementary and high school, many Filipino children fail to go to school because they have no money for food or transport. According to a report by the Philippine Statistics Office (2015), one in every 10 — or about 4 million — Filipino children and youth were out-of-school in 2013, and the main reasons for not attending school were: entered union or marriage (22.9 percent), insufficient income to send child to school (19.2 percent) and lack of interest in attending school (19.1 percent). This points to the importance of other institutions including local government departments in addressing these issues.

While high income and middle income countries in Asia may confront different types of educational issues, both face inequality related to education and employment outcomes such as low-wage work and relatively high wage dispersion. Given the issues linking education and employment to equity, many studies by international organizations (ADB, 2013, 2012; ILO, 2011; OECD, 2011; Fredriksen, 2008; UNESCO, 2014) have showcased the success factors needed in education and training for employability and development. The key success factors include integrative strategies for education and industrial policy, clarity of vision and commitment to educational goals, focus on equity and shared responsibility among key stakeholders.

In Singapore, for instance, manpower development can be summarized in three main themes: development (keeping the workforce competitive and employable), augmentation (getting the necessary foreign talent to supplement and boost the requirements of the economy) and conversion (training and channeling the Singaporean workforce into key growth sectors) (Oman-Gani and Tuo, 2000).

NEW INITIATIVES

Recently, the Singapore government launched the SkillsFuture initiative, an ambitious effort to lessen the preoccupation with degrees and one intended for mid-career workers is the study award to deepen their skills in future growth sectors, with monetary awards of $5,000 for 2,000 individuals per year, which is on top of the usual course subsidies. The culture of continuous improvement, leadership, and vision seems to be among the key attributes of successful educational development in Singapore:

From Singapore’s beginning, education has been seen as central to building both the economy and the nation. The objective was to serve as the engine of human capital to drive economic growth. The ability of the government to successfully match supply with demand of education and skills is a major source of Singapore’s competitive advantage. Other elements in its success include a clear vision and belief in the centrality of education for students and the nation; persistent political leadership and alignment between policy and practice; a focus on building teacher and leadership capacity to deliver reforms at the school level; ambitious standards and assessments; and a culture of continuous improvement and future orientation that benchmarks educational practices against the best in the world (OECD, 2011, p.159).

Recent educational policies in developed and
developing countries have been mainly aimed at supporting the work world and economic development, which suggests that in tackling certain education issues, the expected economic outcomes in terms of wages and employability cannot be secured via educational policy alone. It will require a combination of social and economic policies, and maybe for some countries that includes changes in public perceptions. As Estévez-Abe (2014) noted, “even with the best school system, a certain percentage of the population will never go to university or graduate from upper-secondary schools with valuable skill sets. When the overall educational levels are high as in Nordic countries, setting wage floors for the most unskilled jobs—a small percentage of jobs in such an economy—might be an acceptable and viable form of building an inclusive society” (p.62).

A national agenda such as wage compression is a challenging task requiring a huge amount of socio-economic-political capital to adopt wage policy, industrial agreements and employment protection. Half-hearted measures are unlikely to succeed, because the various institutional mechanisms need to be reinforced by each other before they become effective (Sung & Ramos, 2013). However, this is a task and policy challenge that cannot be avoided. Performance in PISA will mean little if immense pressure is put on parents and students to perform well in exams beyond education policy to both meet the challenges of globalization and create more inclusive societies. Middle-income countries and equal societies. Middle-income countries can benefit from the experiences of high-income countries and are better placed to be alert to unintended consequences.

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