

Trends in Educational Reform in the Asia-Pacific Region*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Educational reform in the Asia-Pacific region, which is one of the fastest developing areas in the world, is receiving strong and intensive local and global attention. Since the 1990s, huge national resources have been invested in education and related initiatives in nearly every country in the region for bringing about substantial improvement and development in many different aspects of society (Cheng & Townsend, 2000). Unfortunately, many countries are still very disappointed with their education systems in view of the challenges of the new century. In order to redress the problems in their education systems, more and more reforms are now proposed to improve the practice and effectiveness of education at different levels. The major question to be asked is: what lessons can be learnt and shared from these ongoing educational reforms in the region such that we can avoid repeating failure, thus, preparing for policy formulation and implementation of educational changes in each of our own countries?

Particularly for policy makers, educators and researchers, the following questions should receive due attention in considering educational reform.

- What are the major trends and characteristics of the ongoing educational reforms in this region? The answer to this question will furnish a basis for delineating an overall profile for understanding the direction, nature and progress of the national initiatives and efforts in the region.
- What are the major challenges that the policy makers and educators are facing in the current educational reforms particularly in such a new era of globalisation, information technology, competition and the knowledge-driven

* Parts of the material in this article were adapted from Cheng (2001d), Cheng (1999b) and Cheng and Townsend (2000). (See also *Challenges for Research into Educational Reform in the Asia-Pacific Region*).

economy? The answers will provide a common ground for sharing the concerns, discussing issues, exchanging ideas and even developing related strategies to cope with the challenges.

- What implications can be drawn from these trends and challenges for research? The answers may bridge the gaps between research and policy-making, for a knowledge base can then be built by research to inform policy-making and practice.

In response to the concerns with educational reforms in the region, a group of scholars in the region had already begun in 1997 to organise a symposium of country reports to describe and analyse the educational changes and developments that had occurred in mainland China, Hong Kong, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand. These reports were then edited and published as a special issue in *School Effectiveness and School Improvement: An International Journal of Research, Policy and Practice* (Cheng, 1999a).

Following this issue, a broader and larger regional effort was organised in 1999 to continue the discussion on educational change and development. In addition to the country reports from Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, P.R. China, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand for sharing among a wide readership are country reports from Australia, New Zealand and the Islands in the South Western Pacific. These reports were then edited and published in the form of a book chapter in *Educational Change and Development in the Asia-Pacific Region: Challenges for the Future* (Townsend & Cheng, 2000).

These scholarly efforts are not undertaken in a vacuum, as the educational reforms in the region have received increasing attention from both national and international organisations. In October 2000, the National Institute for Educational Policy Research of Japan and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) organised an international seminar on educational research for improved policy and practice in the Asia-Pacific region. At the conference, participants from different countries and organisations in the region presented their country reports on educational reform and discussed the current issues regarding the relationship between educational research and policy making. The reports were from a wide range of countries and areas in the region, including Australia, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Lao P.D.R., Malaysia, New Zealand, Philippines, Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam.

With the support of delegations from more than 16 countries, the Hong Kong Institute of Education also organised in February 2001 an international forum on educational reform in the region. The plenary country reports revealed a wide range of experiences and progress of educational reforms in different countries and areas in the region. At the forum, educators, policy makers, researchers and practitioners had intensive and stimulating discussion on the trends and directions of educational reforms in individual countries and the whole region, in response to the impact of globalisation and technology,

the demand for localisation and the expectations of individualisation in education in the new century.

In July 2001, the Office of the National Education Commission in Thailand organised another international forum on educational reform, with the support of a number of national and international organisations. Again, this international forum represented the continuing national and regional effort and commitment to educational development and change with a hope of meeting the challenges of the new millennium. The representatives of selected countries, in the region with some from the United Kingdom and the United States, reported their country experiences in formulating and implementing educational reforms and related strategies.

Since 1998, the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education and Development* (*APJTED*) has published numerous articles and country reports on the change and development in teacher education in the region. The articles, particularly country reports at the symposium of Korea (2000, Vol. 3, No. 1), of Singapore (1999, Vol. 2, No. 1), of Malaysia (2000, Vol. 3, No. 2), of Australia (Vol. 1, No. 2) and of China (Vol. 4, No. 2), as well as those from Taiwan, Thailand and India, are being released in *APJTED*, and are an important source of information for understanding the context and issues of educational reform in these countries.

2. MAJOR TRENDS IN ONGOING EDUCATIONAL REFORM

The above country reports and documents become the updated, comprehensive and relevant sources of information for understanding the trends and issues of educational reform in the region. Based on these reports and documents, this article aims to provide an overview of the trends in educational reform in the Asia-Pacific region in recent years. It addresses the first of the three questions posed in the preceding section, with the other two questions (regarding challenges and implications from these trends for research) to be addressed in a later chapter in the closing section of this Handbook (see *Challenges for Research into Educational Reform in the Asia-Pacific Region*).

After reviewing the above reports with reference to Cheng (1999a) and Cheng and Townsend (2000), some major trends of ongoing educational reforms in the region can be observed and are discussed in the following paragraphs. The discussion that follows is guided by a conceptual framework for a four-level analysis which reflects the scope, focus and general nature of the trends, as shown in Figure 1. In brief, at the macro-level, the main trends include: (a) towards re-establishing new national visions and educational aims; (b) towards restructuring the education system at different levels; and (c) towards market-driving, privatising and diversifying education. At the meso-level, (d) towards parental and community involvement in education and management is a salient trend. At the site-level, the major trends are: (e) towards ensuring education quality, standards and accountability; (f) towards decentralisation and school-based management; and (g) towards enhancement of teacher quality and continuous lifelong professional development of teachers and principals. At the

The International Handbook of Educational Research in
the Asia-Pacific Region

Keeves, J.P.; Watanabe, R. (Eds.)

2003, XXXVIII, 1426 p. In 2 volumes, not available
separately., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1007-1