

Looking East | Dhaka Tribune

today's paper >> op-ed >> published: 00:14 march 3, 2014

Looking East
M Niaz Asadullah

Dhaka Tribune

When a country like the UK takes China seriously, educationists in Bangladesh can't overlook this

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East Asian countries are once again making headlines in international media. This time it's not because of their double digit economic growth rates. Rather, it's for topping global league tables for educational outcomes.

In 2012, more than half a million 15-year-old children from Asia, Europe, and North America took part in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study. When the results were announced, China (Shanghai) secured the top position. The top 10 countries also included Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and South Korea. Out of 65 countries, the UK was ranked 26th in math.

Not so long ago, China was a laggard in secondary education even compared to some of its Asian neighbours. Therefore its rise as the highest achiever in secondary education, and that too in all domains of learning – math, reading, and science – have surprised many.

For a developing country as vast and diverse as China, comparing student performance in a city like Shanghai with that of an entire country like the UK is somewhat inappropriate. A large number of Chinese children still don't participate in secondary education, even in urban areas, whilst participation is universal in the UK and the US.

Nonetheless, some of the variations in learning outcomes observed across the UK and China students provide food for thought for policymakers around the world, including Bangladesh. According to a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published last year, only 3% of 15-year-old European children reach the highest level of math performance compared to 30% in Shanghai.

Most shocking however is the finding that “children of cleaners in Shanghai and Singapore outperform the sons and daughters of UK doctors and lawyers in global math tests.”

The rise of quality secondary schools in East Asia has not gone unnoticed among policymakers in Europe. Worried about its “sliding” standard in secondary education, Liz Truss, the minister for education in the UK, has gone as far as advocating that the UK needs to look East and borrow teaching and learning techniques that are “made in China.” Her conviction had taken her to China last week where she inspected schools in person.

At the heart of China’s education revival is the renewed focus on teacher quality. The shortage of trained and effective teachers in developing countries has also been highlighted as a global problem by this year’s UNESCO report on Education for All.

China succeeded not only in filling this gap by hiring the right teachers to educate children, the institutional mechanism was also there to hold teachers accountable. Chinese teachers have to ensure that they assist children who fall behind in terms of performance, irrespective of whether they belong to a small group or a large classroom.

Whilst the UK, still praised by many Bangladeshi parents for its “world class” school system, is keen to learn from East Asia’s recent success, these international developments have not caused any debate in Bangladesh. The reason is quite obvious – Bangladeshi schools do not participate in international assessment exercises similar to the PISA test.

This is not because our vernacular secondary schools are performing too satisfactorily to require outside inspection. If anything, facts suggest the opposite. According to the 2012 ISAS report prepared by the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education of the Bangladesh government, as high as 22% of our secondary schools are either poorly-performing or not performing at all. No action was taken against these schools so that a year later, follow-up assessment returned a similar percentage of non-performing schools.

Performance gaps are even bigger when rural-urban comparisons are made. This is consistent with existing independent assessment of rural secondary schools in Bangladesh. Even within the rural area, test scores vary by a big margin according to the children’s economic background.

Bangladesh has already forged an effective development partnership with China in many areas, and is currently seeking Chinese support to bridge our infrastructure deficit. Considering China’s educational progress, we should extend this policy of “looking East” for education-management as well by borrowing good teaching and learning practices from the region.

When a country like the UK takes China seriously, educationists in Bangladesh can’t overlook this regional success story. Of course in many ways our education challenge is complex. In addition to the problem of high dropouts from primary education cycle, enrolling children in secondary schools remains outside the choice set of most Bangladeshi factory workers and cleaners.

More importantly, low quality at all levels of education remains the most difficult of all challenges. Simply increasing budgetary allocation doesn’t always lead to improved learning outcomes. This is where continued regional exchange of ideas for educational development is crucial. Lessons from Chinese schools can be informative towards designing interventions to close the quality gap in our education system.

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M Niaz Asadullah is a Professor of Economics at Malaya University (Kuala Lumpur) and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.



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