

*Educational Research Environments in Southeast Asia*. Edited by S. Gopinathan and H. Dean Nielsen. Singapore: Chopmen Press for Southeast Asia Research Review and Advisory Group, in association with the International Development Research Centre of Canada, 1988. Pp. 234.

This useful guide to research in the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand is an essential document for those hopeful investigators — especially from outside the area — who desire to conduct research in Southeast Asia. Through the analysis of internal research environments in the ASEAN countries, this book provides an indispensable aid to those researchers who choose to engage in educational research.

As the editors point out in their initial overview chapter, educational research does not take place in a vacuum. One must be aware of the cultural, social, and political context of the host environment in which the research is taking place. This volume, published by the Southeast Asian Research Review and Advisory Group (SEARRAG), addresses such vital topics as: (1) the type of education research done by institutions within and without Southeast Asia in regard to individual countries; (2) the impact of research on decision-makers and practitioners; and (3) the historical and cultural factors that have influenced the conduct and use of case-studies.

Wisely, realizing the individual nature of research, the editors have elected in the overview chapter to describe each of the five case-studies presented in the volume so as to address the following concerns in relationship to the five ASEAN countries: sociocultural context of educational research, current status of education research, and research dissemination and utilization. Having established these criteria, the introductory chapter proceeds to give a survey of the findings which have been distilled from the case-studies. In addition, the overview chapter includes a summary and concluding section rather than a separate concluding chapter. This is a prudent decision as the five case-studies which follow are highly disparate. Consequently, without this binding chapter, the uninitiated reader who desires to obtain an overview could

easily be submerged by the mass of information presented. Each case-study chapter is a virtual monograph so that the reader interested in more than one country can only be grateful for the foresight exhibited by the editors.

The overview chapter is valuable for the admonitory points it raises for both the ASEAN specialist and the external scholar or researcher. The editors emphasize the following issues. First, the educational research climate tends to reflect priorities set forth by the national government. The governments in question, although seeking full autonomy in the educational sphere, continue to be influenced by the West as a source of training. The editors rightly underline the incongruity inherent in this situation — the use of Western norms of enquiry within a non-Western context. These formal methods of research can run counter to the traditional informal system. Furthermore, the critical inquiry methodology characteristic of Western training is not in accordance with customary modes of social consensus-building. Therefore, built-in tension can arise as researchers from indigenous cultures attempt to apply superficially absorbed Western methodology without an understanding of the surrounding cultural context. A final area of conflict as recounted by the editors involves priority of research. The developing countries of Southeast Asia favour research related to national development over the type of academic research associated with individuals going for advanced degrees (the largest group of researchers).

These assorted conflicts and tensions as related by the editors in their summary chapter are attached to an analysis of the output produced by academic and other researchers — both local and external. A review of research conducted primarily during the 1970s and early 1980s indicates that the stress on academic research by local researchers seeking degrees without the “publish or perish” syndrome has led to a degree of continued dependence on external researchers for applied research. The bulk of research has been concerned with educational problems. National organizations designed to co-ordinate educational research have only recently been developed. Accordingly, although these structures are developing steadily, there are some not unexpected difficulties. These include co-ordinating among different ministries, budget inequities, and

erratic supplies. Overall, research productivity is still relatively low.

The category of dissemination and utilization of research findings is dealt with by the overview and case-studies. At the moment, the use of applied research is still on a local and/or regional scale with subsequent dissemination and utilization beyond the region being limited from the following listed causes: research not connected to the “real world”, narrow focus of the research, political *naïveté* of inexperienced researchers, lack of connectedness between research producer and government consumer, pressures of time *vis-à-vis* quality of research, access to politically sensitive matters, and lack of linkage between researchers and governmental decision-makers.

The editors conclude that the indigenous research of the ASEAN countries continues to be inordinately influenced by North American graduate social science methods (surveys, quantitative methodology, computer-assisted statistics, and so forth) which may not always be appropriate for local settings. Also discussed in both the overview and case-studies are problems involving lack of collegiality and limited communications between government and academe as they affect the research environment. Rarely, from a constructive perspective, has a book emanating from the pristine world of academe spoken with such candour.

Each of the chapters devoted to an ASEAN country provides useful insights on the problem and priorities of the research environment of the particular country chosen. The chapter on Indonesia details both the availability of new facilitating agencies (for example, the National Research Council, and the Agency for Assessment and Application) and obstacles which include lack of research workers, bureaucratic fragmentation, and lack of professional status for research workers. While output remains mediocre for various reasons discussed at great length, the role of the Office of Education, Cultural Research, and Development and its potential to assist the research environment is treated. In Indonesia as well as the other countries covered in the volume, the critical role played by SEARRAG is acknowledged.

Malaysia faces a similar situation. This chapter makes clear that the constraints of time and budget inevitably affect the quality of educational

research. This chapter is especially helpful to the would-be researcher as it lists specific sources pertinent to future research such as *Education in Malaysian Studies: Present Knowledge and Research Trends*. The obstacles include the lack of a review system for research and lack of structural support.

The chapter on the research environment in the Philippines is exhaustive and gives a comprehensive review of educational research conducted in the country between 1912 and 1982. It also furnishes a systematic review of the educational research structure in the Philippines such as colleges, universities, and centres for research (supported by the Fund for Assistance to Private Education), governmental research institutions, and governmental bureaus which include agencies which do research such as the Child and Youth Research Center and the National Education Testing Center. Finally, the chapter deals with non-governmental research institutions such as the Regional Center for Education Innovation and Technology and Filipino professional associations such as the Philippines Association for Graduate Education.

The research climate, this chapter concludes, is promising. The authors believe that the cumulative effect of the agencies engaged in research has been to bring the research climate to the point where organized research can go beyond the graduate school–Western model matrix into a truly autonomous position. The newly formed National Council for Educational Research and Development should, the authors maintain, provide the necessary impetus. Still, problems remain. The linkage problems mentioned in connection with the earlier chapters must still be overcome and international dissemination and utilization is still embryonic. The appendices attached to this chapter which identify research needs are a real boon for researchers. However, in the time that has elapsed since publication, further research areas and needs have emerged and additional documentation would only serve to enhance the already encyclopaedic list supplied.

The chapter on Singapore covers the period 1945–74 before treating its main focus in time — 1974–84. It devotes the major part of its attention to the impact of the three principal institutions which support research in Singapore: the Ministry of Education especially its Research

and Testing Division; the Institute of Education affiliated with the National University of Singapore; and the Regional English Language Centre. It also covers the results of a survey of researchers with regard to the research environment.

The concluding section in this chapter reviews journals which function as outlets for dissemination of research in Singapore and recent developments including the formation of the Educational Research Association. The prognosis for the research environment in Singapore appears relatively optimistic. However, collegiality, networking, and the nexus between research and policy implementation are still somewhat inchoate.

The final chapter on Thailand was undertaken in response to specific SEARRAG criteria. Thailand, as the only non-colonized country examined, has some differences as well as similarities with the other countries examined in this volume. It has been exposed to non-traditional methods of inquiry less systematically than the other ASEAN countries during their colonial period. Therefore, the conflict that might be inherent in a traditional versus Western context — although not totally absent — has not developed in the same manner as in other countries.

Information about the Thai research climate was derived from a questionnaire and from the major research agencies — the Ministry of Education (MOE), National Research Council, National Education Commission (NEC), and the Office of University Affairs. Based on these sources, much of the improvement which has taken place has been due to the progress of planning at the NEC and the increase of work at MOE. The official emphasis on research for promotion in the university system (which is part of the Civil Service) has increased the quantity if not the quality of research. The weaknesses which inhibit the dissemination and utilization of material are similar to other ASEAN countries — limited rate of research, mismatching of statistical methods to local conditions, and lack of communication between researchers and policy-makers.

After offering suggestions for improving research and reviewing recent encouraging trends in terms of government support, the authors are optimistic. While they acknowledge negative factors such as relatively low levels of co-ordination between academics and practi-

tioners and the overabundance of research just for promotion undertaken by researchers as members of the Civil Service bureaucracy, the authors remain positive. They point to recent studies which appear to illustrate increasing research competence as well as official flexibility.

Overall, this work is an essential primer for all those academics, public officials, foundation officers, and the general public, who want information on the topic. One can only point to two omissions which could further strengthen an already masterful book. First, an index would help the general reader who may be somewhat bewildered by the profusion of organizational names and acronyms which abound in this extremely well-detailed and authoritative book. Second, and this is really commentary and not a reservation, as the book deals mostly with the 1970s and early and mid-1980s, a follow-up volume is necessary for a rapidly changing situation. Again, this is not a criticism but an acknowledgement that an area as dynamic and rapidly changing as Southeast Asia needs a decennial update. This reviewer has little doubt that the staff of SEARRAG who produced this invaluable text will oblige and produce a future volume. Undoubtedly, it will match the standard of thoroughness set in this present edition. As an introduction to the research climate in Southeast Asia, I would unhesitatingly recommend this encyclopaedic yet readable and clearly written book.

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