

Cliff Meyers is UNICEF's Regional Advisor on Education for the east Asia and Pacific region, which includes North Korea, Mongolia, China, the Mekong, Thailand, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, and Timor. Rebecca Leech interviews him on his experience promoting education in developing countries.

RL: You were in Melbourne recently to give the keynote address at the 2006 Early Childhood Education Conference. What do you see as being the key issues in early childhood learning in the east Asia and Pacific region, and are these the same issues that face Australia?

CM: I want to look at the combination of nutrition and stimulation for children, which is absolutely applicable both in my region and here in Australia. I think a child can be well nourished, but if it is never played with, never touched, never stimulated, never held and not breastfed, that child's developmental levels will lag. It's not just nutrition; you really do need the stimulation and care.

Unfortunately, you can't ensure that in every country in east Asia and the Pacific. In some countries, less than ten per cent of children have any type of early learning before primary school. They're just not ready for the school experience, and as a result you have high drop-off and repetition rates in the first few grades. If children can get nutrition and care from their families before they get to school, that makes all the difference in the world.

RL: What progress has been made in education in your region?

CM: In 1970, of all the regions in the world, this region had the most children out of school. Fifty million children were out of school in east Asia and the Pacific. Today, it's fewer than ten million. In terms of access and enrolment, we are really doing great, but there are still problems.

One issue comes from who is being left out of school. If you look at the issue from a child rights perspective, that all children are bearers of rights, these countries should not have any child out of school. If you look at who is out of school, you'll find it is the poorest of the poor, it's ethnic minorities, it's children with disabilities, and we still have quite a way to go to reach all those groups.

The other big issue is the quality of the education the children are getting. Levels of teacher training in Australia are far advanced to what you would find in Laos or Cambodia, where a high school graduate with one year of teacher training is considered a qualified teacher.

Also, the curriculum content can be irrelevant; it won't help these children in their lives. It is based on the notion that they will be civil servants employed by the government, but there are no such jobs. They are being educated for a reality that no longer exists.

It's not enough to just build a school, you have to have the community recognise that child-centred learning and games at school are also healthy and good; that examination systems don't require rote memorisation; that really you want to encourage critical thinking. So there needs to be a real shift in the fundamentals of these traditional education systems in many developing countries.

RL: How have you achieved these improvements in enrolment rates?

CM: Improvements have been made as the countries themselves recognise the importance of a basic education. UNICEF has helped in that by doing research, by proving to the leaders of various countries that it does make a difference to invest in education.

East Timor may be having great unrest right now, but the government has put about thirty-five per cent of its national budget into education. On the hand, Myanmar, Burma, is not investing in the education of its children and it is very hard to convince them to do so.

RL: What specific problems does the unrest in East Timor pose to your work?

CM: Everything grinds to a halt when you have such civil unrest. We are thankful that schools are not being targeted. In the last instance of unrest over independence, we saw many school buildings were burnt and there has been a very active campaign to rebuild that infrastructure. Thankfully it hasn't been damaged in the latest unrest. The classrooms are standing for children to return to, but if you've got communal violence where some groups are fighting other groups and then you expect them to all sit down in a classroom, that can be a real challenge.

Education has a role to play in bringing back normality. It's a challenge for the teachers, but I think Timor will have a real chance to have a positive outcome at the end of the day.

RL: What sort of outcomes can students expect? You mentioned that the curricula in some schools does not prepare students for the reality of life in a developing country; assuming they stay in school, what sort of career prospects have these students got?

CM: In the less-developed countries, like Laos, Cambodia or Timor, there are no employment opportunities. In those cases, delinking education from employment makes sense. You want education to lead to the capacity for lifelong learning, to happiness in the home, to a self-sustaining independent lifestyle. Education should be focussing on life in a rural community where students will make their livelihood from farming. It should be acknowledging the context in which there are no jobs.

In a lot of countries, the curriculum is the heritage of a colonial past. It mirrors the rich countries of the west.

All countries, more or less, are following similar learning curriculum paths; in fact, a lot of less-developed countries have more difficult curricula than you find in somewhere like the United States. There are such high demands on young children; it's just so unfair.

RL: Do the developing countries have higher expectations of education? If not everyone has been educated, are education authorities trying to make the most of those who get the opportunity?

CM: If you're the head of a curriculum department or a minister for education, you don't want to say, 'No, our children should be learning less than this.' That would kind of send the wrong message. There is a lot of pride in these countries that their children can master these skills and do these tasks, but if what you're testing is not the application of the concept but the memorisation of the specific problems from the textbook, then you're not really teaching geometry, you're teaching memorisation of a few set problems.

Meanwhile, you've got global learning achievement studies that ask the very same questions to all the countries participating, and of course you see developed countries doing so much better, mainly because the context of the questions favours anyone who lives in that type of a milieu; but, one of the things shown by studies such as PISA is the gap between the average score and the lowest quintile of scores. The ideal will be that students would be able to learn to their maximum ability, but you wouldn't want to see gaps between the low scores and the high scores. In Korea, for example, you don't have much of a difference between the low scores and the average; but in Australia, it's a big stretch.

RL: Why is there a wide gap between the lowest scores and the average scores for students in Australia?

CM: There are a number of explanations: one is the dichotomy of the public and private school sectors; another is the multi-ethnic nature of Australia, as compared to the homogeneity of Korea. Australia has a relatively large Indigenous population; you have migrants who aren't as proficient in English; a mix, so you can expect a wider range in scores.

RL: There has been controversy recently in Australia over the poor conditions of schools in Indigenous communities...

CM: Schools in poorer communities somehow have poorer facilities and poorer libraries and so on, and it's a self-fulfilling cycle that the poorer the area, the less attention it gets, when it should be the exact opposite.

There's a great story I have from Laos. A village bonded together and they built the school. They put in a lot of resources, and a lot of time and energy. And a teacher was sent. The teacher lasted about two years before it was just too difficult. And the teacher left. The school has now been three years without a teacher. The kids congregate at the school, but there are no books and there is no teacher. So the headmaster, the village head, finally wrote to the provincial education authority and said, 'We built our school. We would now like to sell our school back to the government.'

RL: If many of the schools in your region are under-resourced, what do you make of the moves by the federal government in Australia to amend the migration act so that children who arrive in Australia seeking asylum can be removed to detention centres in the Pacific such as Nauru or Manus Island?

CM: I think it's good for Nauru, because they certainly do need to augment their national economy and I'm sure there is good compensation from the Australian government to the government of Nauru.

The key thing is that the children not be separated from family and loved ones, that they be kept in a child-friendly environment, and that they have access to schooling and education and care. If those things can be provided in the context of a detention facility, then it's hard to be too critical of a national policy or legislation. If those things aren't provided then I think we do need to make sure that these children are well taken care of. It doesn't matter if they are Australian or not, they happen to now be on these shores, and in the best interest of the child, sometimes you have to be a little bit open-minded.

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