

BOOK REVIEW

Literacy and Language in East Asia: Shifting Meanings, Values and Approaches. By Marilyn Kell and Peter Kell (Eds.) (2014), 165pp. ISBN: 978-981-4451-29-1, Singapore and New York: Springer.

'Literacy and Language in East Asia' is volume 24 of the Springer series 'Education in the Asia-Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns and Prospects.' The volume emerged from an international research project on literacy indices, which both the authors were part of. Chapter 1 of the book sets out the 'central problem'; also the focus of the book: East Asian countries such as Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore, are ostensibly on top of global indices of literacy such as the Programme for International Students' Achievement (PISA) or the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), yet the governments and various stakeholders in these countries are anxious about the skills, capabilities and employability of their school graduands. Yet again, the East Asian region is one of tremendous variation in literacy, between countries such as Laos, Cambodia on one end of the spectrum to others like Hong Kong or South Korea on the other. Literacy inequalities persist within the region as well as for specific sub-populations comprising girls, minorities or other historically marginalised groups.

Chapters 2 to 4 frame the book's main arguments. Chapter 2 highlights conceptual problems in defining literacy as a multidimensional, socially and culturally-situated construct. It examines differing assumptions that international organisations like UNESCO or the OECD make about literacy in declarations like the UN General Assembly Declaration on the Literacy Decade (2002) or the UNESCO Literacy for All declaration (1990), and argues that the way literacy is defined invariably tends to privilege certain dominant forms of literacy in certain languages. Chapter 3 and 4 draw on these points, apply them to international high stakes tests like PISA, PIRLS or the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and problematise them. The authors argue that in much of Asia these standardised tests are valorised by the public within the context of strong "test-taking cultures". The uncritical influence of the ensemble of international literacy tests can thus potentially have 'toxic effects' on pedagogy, curriculum, local school reform movements and resource allocation, when high test scores are seen as a proxy for quality of education. Thus the politics of ranking schools and nations through league tables, within a larger discourse of accountability, has in many instances privileged the centralisation of curriculum control.

Chapters 5 and 6, taken together, examine the impact of global testing regimes in the East Asian region and beyond. Through a close analysis of league tables for three widely used tests, PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS, the book examines interestingly the effect that high scoring East Asian countries have had on the US, Europe and Australia. The discourses of high stakes testing regimes have been constructed as 'a race' against these Asian nations, what the authors call the 'Sputnik effect,' echoing the 'crisis' in the US in the late 1950s after the launch of the Soviet space rocket, the Sputnik. The book seeks to unlock the 'success' of some East Asian systems seeing them also rooted socio-culturally in the persistence of test-taking practices which manifest themselves in various forms, such as the *gaokao* or the college entrance examination in China, for instance, or in 'shadow education' an alternative schooling system of 'test-centric' cram schools which co-exists alongside mainstream schooling in Korea and in many other countries.

Chapter 7 contrasts the East Asian educational landscape with the Anglo-American one, especially in terms of "the positioning of the state with regard to education and the economy". East Asian countries on the whole are driven by strong statist policies in nation-building, modernisation and socio-economic development. By contrast, the post-1980s in the "Anglo-American world

saw a reduction in the influence of the state and a shift to a more deregulated economy (p.79).” These contrasts argue against simplistic comparisons between countries which are grounded in fundamentally different educational ethos and testing regimes. The chapter goes on to argue that even within East Asia there is considerable variation in each country’s journey through processes of decolonisation, identity formation, national reconstruction, modernisation and development. This is illustrated in insightful case studies of education and schooling in Hong Kong, Macau, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Indonesia, all of which have been undergoing rapid and dynamic change particularly in the recent past, since the Second World War.

Chapter 8 then addresses the inequalities in economic development and in schooling within the East Asian region. Economically the region is home to the world’s high income economies (including Japan, South Korea or Singapore) as well as some poor or low income economies (such as East Timor), with the majority in the middle income range. These inter-country comparisons are also discussed in light of the Human Development Index in East Asia. The chapter points to the disguised growing inequalities between these countries, as well as more crucially, within these countries; a fact often glossed over in popular media characterisations of the region in terms of the so-called ‘East Asian miracle.’ An important section of this chapter (pp.113-123) discusses inequalities in terms of the quality of life of young people in a region where the population pyramid comprises a large proportion of youth and young adults.

Chapter 9 builds on these arguments by problematising the connection between examination-driven systems and preparation for work. This is a crucial argument, but a curious feature of this chapter is that the authors rely largely (see pp.125-134) on generic employability skills seen in terms of the literature on graduate attributes of Australian universities. Australia is obviously not part of the East Asian region, and certainly has not been treated as such in the rest of the book. The authors claim on p.125 that “many of the arguments that were expressed in Australia have resonance with those that are emergent in East Asia” but cite no evidence for this claim. There are on-going efforts by many Higher Education Quality Assurance organisations in the East Asian region – Thailand and Malaysia being cases in point – that have data on graduate student attributes of their universities, and this could have been drawn on to buttress the important arguments in this chapter.

The final chapter argues that literacy within the East Asian region as a whole needs to be seen in terms of the processes of globalisation, the socio-political and socio-cultural changes in Asia, and that governments and various stakeholders in the region need to take these into account in policy formulation. Certainly, this is a useful counterpoint to the view to literacy that the book has largely dealt with, defined in terms of global tests of literacy which tends to predominate the economic and development literature emanating from policy reports of the OECD, for instance. The impact of the social media, new technologies as well as its influence on literacy in alternative public and private social spaces is evident in the new workplaces and civil society – not just formal education, and thus need to be taken into account in a broader socially relevant policy formulation and deliberations on literacy development in a dynamic East Asia. Here the authors argue that cognizance must be taken of notions of critical literacy and multiliteracies rather than functional literacy with a vocational focus. This is where the book’s subtitle ‘shifting meaning, values and approaches’ plays out. A final point to note is that with the main title of the book being, ‘Literacy and Language in East Asia: in multi- and plurilingual East Asia’, one would have expected to find a discussion on the impact of the regions’ many languages – global, regional, national and local – on literacy in the region. Still, the book as a whole offers powerful insights on literacy in a dynamic region and makes a valuable contribution to fields such as comparative education, literacy studies and sociolinguistics.

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