

Education For All—The Chinese Way

In the years between 1949-89 China achieved genuine progress in the field of universal primary education. For example, the enrolment rate had risen so much that it went from around the 20 per cent it was in 1949 to an astonishing 97 per cent in 1989. In the same period, a total of 164 million people became literate, on average, 4 million people a year with the result the proportion of illiterates and semi-illiterates to total population dropped from 80 per cent to 20 per cent.

Post-literacy education has also managed to move forward in the three years from 1986-88 resulting in some 150 million farmers in rural areas, and almost 30 million young workers in the urban parts receiving 50 hours or more of technical and vocational training. Against such a record of success it seems inconceivable there are any problems remaining to be resolved, but problems there are for there are still an estimated 220 million illiterates in the country, 92 per cent of them in rural areas and of them, 70 per cent are women. The number of illiterates between the ages of 15 and 40 years, for instance, is now 72 million, a figure which conceals the many school drop-outs said to be in the region of two million a year. This means that, in all, about 2.7 million children between the ages of 7-11 years are not in school, 83 per cent of them girls.

The major problems which have emerged at the primary stage are the high percentage of repeaters, ranging from 39 per cent in Grade 1 to 21 per cent in Grade 5. The drop-out rate remains high as the proportion of first graders who complete the five-year primary course varied, in the 1980s, between 75 and 80 per cent. However, it is broadly true to say that in China of every 10 children, nine go to school, six complete their schooling and three graduate with good standing.

However there are sharp disparities between the different regions both in primary education as well as adult literacy, and similar disparities exist between city and country, men and women, boys and girls indicating that such imbalances still remain the major hurdle in moving towards basic education for all despite the huge strides China has obviously taken in the past forty years. Although this has given an added momentum to the aims China has set for herself during this decade, there are still many obstacles which remain to be overcome in order to reach their goal but, given the achievements, there seems no doubt that they will get there in the end.

In pursuing education for all we might try and go the Chinese way.