

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

EDUCATION AND THE COMMUNITY

On the basis of a detailed study of community participation in education in the Cook Islands, combined with discussion of their own experiences, participants considered how community participation could help in responding to the major educational problems facing the Pacific region.

Common Problems in Education in the Pacific Region

Among the crucial problems in education the following were felt to be the ones where a closer relationship between education and the community would be especially beneficial:

- (a) Many parents have, for their children, aspirations which are neither in line with the aims of national policy nor realistic in terms of national situations. In particular, many parents want their children to obtain white collar jobs, and see schools as a means of achieving this. At the same time, very few parents have anything to do with the work of the schools, especially in the academic context.
- (b) Many children, when they leave school, are untrained to live and work in their local communities. Often the only opportunity they can see for using the education they have acquired is to leave their homes and seek work or further education in New Zealand or elsewhere. This has left many island communities threatened by loss of numbers, loss of labour and loss of talent. Those who stay behind are prepared for the realities of life in their own communities.
- (c) Many of the education systems which exist in the region are imported, and carry with them inherent values and life styles from the countries of origin. This situation contributes to the rift between school and community, a problem which becomes more acute when two inherited systems of education exist alongside each other as in the New Hebrides.

Community Participation in Education: Regional Patterns and Trends

It was recognized that community participation in education in the Region could be broadly grouped as follows:

- (a) Most planned attempts to achieve participation in education have taken place in formal education settings, especially in schools. In these institutions, community participation has generally been supportive rather than making any direct impact on the development of education. For instance, parental opinion has only female influence on what is taught in schools.
- (b) Some experimental approaches to education, both in and out of school, have been introduced where community participation is planned and built into the educational process.

(c) Some communities have generated educational activities, of a non-formal type, such as cultural, youth and vocational activities.

(d) In communities where traditional structures are strong participation is a fundamental part of traditional patterns of learning.

Participation in Formal Education

(a) The education policies of most countries encourage the establishment of school committees, generally composed of parents of the pupils. The main functions of these committees are fund raising for the school and assistance in the maintenance of school buildings.

(b) In a few countries school committees play a part in the selection and appointment of staff, though generally only on a consultative basis.

(c) School-based parent-teacher associations are also quite widely established.

(d) On a less structured basis many schools rely on community help in their physical operations. This ranges from fund raising for maintenance, new buildings or equipment to actual construction and repair work. Sometimes it also extends to community help in preparing teaching materials.

(e) Some communities and parent groups have actually initiated the setting up of new schools - negotiating release of land, clearing it, raising funds for materials and organizing, or sometimes, undertaking building work.

(f) Community participation is also evident when schools organize social activities, such as the traditional "umukai" or feasts used to welcome visitors to the Cook Islands. These attract a great deal of community support.

(g) A growing trend in several countries is the introduction of cultural or "revival" education, whereby school programmes include traditional arts and crafts (such as singing, dancing, weaving, bead-making) and, to some extent, traditional technologies. In these programmes, the schools attempt to involve members of the community who possess the appropriate traditional skills.

(h) Experiences of community participation in curriculum development as a whole have been limited. Only Fiji reported the existence of a public body where representatives of school authorities, teachers association and religious groups come together to advise the Ministry of Education on general principles for the development of new curricula.

(i) Direct community participation in education policy-making at national or central level is almost non-existent, although the Education Forum in Fiji which consists of elected members of the public, can advise the Ministry of Education on matters related to policy.

New Approaches to Participation in Formal Education

Some governments are developing experimental approaches to education, especially schooling where community participation is an essential factor in

the development and operation of the educational programme. For example, in Papua New Guinea, the "skulanka" programme takes the needs and problems of village life as the starting point and basis for courses for primary school-leavers in an effort to ensure that what is taught is relevant to their future lives. Also, in the new community secondary schools, partnership between the schools and the community is essential from the start, since it is up to the community to take the initiative to raise fees and to select and supervise its younger members in following a secondary-level correspondence course.

Community Participation in Out-of-School and Non-Formal Education

(a) In a number of pre-school programmes in the region the pattern is to encourage or support community-initiated and community-provided pre-schools, to the extent that in some cases even the teacher organizer is selected from among those setting up the scheme.

(b) To encourage co-operative self-help activities among the young, many youth programmes combine participation with informal and non-formal learning. Thus, participation is an integral part of the education provided through the experimental Rural Youth Programme in Fiji.

(c) Community participation is also an integral and inseparable part of many women's programmes. For instance, women's interests groups in the Cook Islands and in the Gilbert Islands adopt a give and take approach to the sharing of knowledge and skills among their members, all of whom are drawn from local communities. However, while in the Cook Islands special attention is given to craft skills in the Gilbert Islands the innovative use of local resources in domestic activities are emphasized.

(d) Participation of the community is fundamental to learning patterns in traditional settings. For instance, in the Tokelau Islands, where formal education was not introduced until 1954, members of the community belong to one or more traditional groupings - the Toeaina (village elders), the Amumage (able bodied men), the Fafine (women's groups), the Kaiga (extended family) and the Fakaitu (village teams). Learning takes place in all these groups, but is particularly encouraged through competitive activities (e.g. sports, gardening, growing things, cleaning up the village), among the Fakaitu. Membership of the Fakaitu crosses the other traditional community groups, and all members join in. From time to time, however, each Fakaitu is changed around so that no team is continuously advantaged or disadvantaged; this ensures that no members are consistently associated with failure.

Strengthening Community Participation in Education

A number of countries in the region have already introduced cultural or "revival" education into schools where, very often, members of the community are involved in transmitting traditional skills.

In order to increase community participation in education, certain pre-requisites were seen to be necessary: the public must be aware of national goals, philosophy and plans; present education systems need to be examined and adapted to national goals and plans; new approaches and systems of education must build in community participation right from the initial stages; structures are required to ensure that educational administrators and planners

are consistently aware of community views; structures are necessary at school level to ensure that community participation is an integral part of the school process.

Although increased community participation in education is desirable, it is necessary to proceed with caution to ensure that activities to promote participation do not create community polarization. It was recognized that certain community characteristics, especially those related to politics, religion and race, can play either a positive or a negative part in this. It was therefore suggested that "entry points" for increased participation should be in areas of compatibility, and in activities where the whole community could participate without disagreement.

The need to seek a balance between the modern and the traditional in education, especially in relation to family life, work, skills and culture was stressed. In particular, increased emphasis on the revival of cultural activities was seen as one way to offset the stresses and strains associated with change. Similarly, it was felt that in multi-racial societies the differences that exist between cultures could be the starting point for learning respect for different ways of life and different values.

Measures to Increase Community Participation in Education

To increase community participation in education the following specific measures were identified:

(a) Public Education

It was felt that the media should be used extensively to inform the community about government philosophy, goals, policies and plans, especially in education, and that as far as possible this should be done in local vernacular. Moreover, community agencies of all sorts (churches, pre-school centres, commercial interests) should be encouraged to disseminate information in the community about goals and policies of government.

(b) Public Participation in Educational Policy-Making

The establishment of educational councils or forums, as in Fiji, can involve representatives of the community in the formulation of education policies. Similarly, advisory groups can be set up to set guidelines for curriculum development.

(c) Participation in Curriculum Development

Some form of community participation in curriculum development was felt to be desirable although curriculum construction was recognized as specialist work. In addition to national-level advisory groups to establish guidelines for curriculum development, two possible patterns for community participation in curriculum development were cited: proposals can be sought at, and passed from, school board level through provincial to the national level. (It was recognized that proposals dealt with this way would have little immediate effect upon day to day school work.) Alternatively, more immediate modifications of syllabuses can occur in decentralized systems where adjustments to needs and problems arising out of the environment can quite quickly be incorporated into school programmes.

It was felt that each of these approaches was valid and, in each case, would vary according to national structures and policies for education. However, it was agreed that built-in flexibility was desirable so that teaching programmes could be readily adapted to differing local conditions.

(d) Participation in Schools

It was suggested that community participation in schools should be on as wide a basis as possible since there seems to be a correlation between the degree of community participation and the breadth of responsibilities undertaken by the community. It was felt that participation in schools with a more academic orientation, though traditionally low, was just as important as in other school settings and should be encouraged. The following proposals were made on increasing community participation at school level.

(i) School staff should make more effort to contact parents. While regular parents' day or similar functions were seen as one approach, it was agreed that the formality of many schools put many parents off attending such functions. Instead, it was suggested that teachers should be positively encouraged to meet parents in community and family situations. For instance, by taking part in community activities they could meet parents informally, and thus build up good relationships as a basis to encouraging greater parental involvement in school programmes.

(ii) School committees should be strengthened and given wider responsibilities so that the schools become more significant focal points and a source of pride in communities. For instance, school committees can advise on the selection of school principals and staff. Such committees can also be encouraged to take more initiative in the setting up and management of schools.

(iii) Barriers between school and community can be overcome if the work of the school makes a distinct contribution to life in the community. For instance, syllabuses could be designed so as to require pupils to participate in community service, community-based work experience, social surveys or other activities which involve community resources.

(e) Teachers' Role

To achieve increased community participation in schools, it was agreed that the teachers' role and, thus, teacher preparation should be re-examined. In particular, it was noted that:

(i) teachers should be trained in community development techniques so that they can organize activities which involve their pupils in serving local communities;

(ii) teacher training should concentrate on producing teachers who are able to co-ordinate a wide range of learning experiences based on the resources available in the community;

(iii) teacher training should include courses on government plans and government policies, and their implications for education;

(iv) serving teachers should be kept up-to-date in government planning and policy-making, and especially on the implications of these for education.

(f) Pre-Schools

Most countries in the region have pre-school programmes which consist, in general, of worthwhile activities. However, it was noted that some efforts to introduce pre-schooling had been undertaken without a clear definition of purpose. Quasi-primary schools running primarily formal activities were felt to be most inappropriate. Instead, it was agreed that the purposes of pre-school education should be to socialize children, to develop their motor skills and listening skills and to provide opportunities for creative activities. Pre-schools pursuing such objectives offered possibilities for increasing community participation in education. Indeed, it was noted that pre-schools can be, and have already been developed as predominantly community-based operations; parents are involved in day-to-day activities as well as in the physical and funding aspects of the pre-schools' operations. It was suggested that ways of linking pre-schools to other community facilities, such as health centres, was a good way to facilitate community participation.

Further, it was recommended that increased research efforts should be made to develop appropriate aims and objectives, materials and programmes in pre-school education in the Pacific region.

(g) Non-Formal and Out-of-School Education

It was agreed that greater emphasis on non-formal and out-of-school education methods and approaches would lead to increased community participation in education. Expansion could take place either through a strengthening and broadening of existing groups in the community or, alternatively, through the initiation of new community-level initiatives. Such expansion might be encouraged by short-term expertise and training and leadership development programmes for participants and organizers. At the same time, the development of a sound operational base and a carefully planned approach were seen as essential, with the achievement of self-reliance being both a central aim in all assistance and an important target for education as a whole.