

EDUCATION AND THE COMMUNITY: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Problems

Reviewing the problems facing educators in the Pacific Region, the Seminar agreed that all, or some, of the following occur in most countries of the Region:

- growing unemployment, and limited wage earning opportunities among primary school leavers and those with least educational skills;
- educational provision which is out of line with manpower needs for national and community development;
- unrealistic and unattainable aspirations for employment among young people and their parents;
- conflicting demands on education systems and educational resources to provide, on the one hand high-level education for a limited number of top jobs, and on the other, to meet the educational needs of the majority of young people;
- wastage of educational resources on over-production of over-educated youngsters and on a growing number of school drop-outs;
- emigration of educated young people to richer countries;
- unwillingness of many school leavers to return to live in their villages after graduation;
- unpopularity of agricultural work and self employment among the young, in part affecting the low economic returns from such activities;
- concentration of schools and educational expenditure in urban areas and on main islands;
- predominance of urban oriented values in school curricula;
- growing rift between school and home;
- lack of basic structures, such as transport networks and markets for increasing productivity;
- lack of financial and technical resources for introducing essential educational changes

Possible Solutions

In considering solutions to these problems, "self reliance" was seen as an important starting point. To illustrate this, a number of examples were given:

Western Concepts of Unemployment: The applicability of western notions of unemployment in the Pacific Region was questioned. It was pointed out that although many young people in the Region do not have jobs, some of them, at least, are fully occupied, and often play an important part in family and community life, for instance, in family agriculture. It was recommended that terms such as "unemployment" and "self employment" should be used with care, to avoid inherent stigmatisation of those young people who are not "employed" in the Western sense.

Inherited Education Systems: Throughout the Pacific Region, inherited systems of education are widespread. Expansion of these systems has led to a situation where schooling is accessible to most young people. Yet, it has not been matched with corresponding improvements in the potential of school leavers to improve their livelihoods, nor with increased accessibility to relevant further education. Instead, large numbers of young people leave school unable to find employment, or at worst, are unemployable. This, it was agreed, is a reflection on the irrelevance of inherited systems of education which do not serve the needs of the societies where they exist, is inconsistent with national aims, and does not cater to the aspirations of the people.

Political Autonomy: Self reliance was considered a vital factor for achieving the sense of national commitment on which to build for the future. It was generally agreed that political autonomy is essential if decision making at the national level is to cater for and reflect national needs.

Education Policy and Development Goals

Considering educational policy as a whole it was noted that education does not create jobs since the creation of employment opportunities is closely tied to strategies and patterns of economic development. It was therefore agreed that the objectives and implementation of national education policies should be closely linked to local and national goals and plans. In particular, the pre-dominantly rural character of most countries in the Region and the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural communities which exist in one or two countries were seen as fundamental concerns for educational policy-making.

Specific Areas for Educational Change

A number of countries in the Region have reviewed or are about to review their education systems in the light of changing and emerging social and economic circumstances. The following aspects of education were identified as among those where changes have been or can be introduced:

- (a) education and administrative structures;
- (b) teacher training;
- (c) teaching approaches;
- (d) school curricula;
- (e) school facilities, materials and books;
- (f) scholarship systems;
- (g) examination and assessment systems;
- (h) school systems: their structure and their roles in society.

The underlying concern behind any changes, it was suggested, should be the redistribution of resources in education. It was pointed out, for instance, that considerable expenditure goes to relatively unproductive uses such as school buildings, while those buildings already in existence tend to be underutilized. Schools are often used for only a small portion of the day during 36 to 40 weeks of the year. Similarly, churches and other public buildings are often used only intermittently. It was agreed that ways could be found to extend their use for greater community benefit. Savings of this sort would free resources for schemes of more direct benefit to rural youth, such as manpower programmes, post-school vocational programmes, and other job creation schemes. In particular, it was recommended that the urgent problems of unemployed school leavers should be given higher priority within education systems.

Barriers to Educational Change

- (a) Tradition and custom were recognized as factors which can inhibit change. For instance, some customary systems of land ownership do not allow young members of the community to obtain land for cultivation. Similarly, in some communities all decisions at local level rest with matais or chiefs who, if unenlightened, can seriously hinder the introduction of new programmes. Certainly young people in such situations are rarely allowed to take decisions.
- (b) It was noted that some positive aspects of customary life are being lost as a result of change. For instance, some valuable traditional farming techniques are now neglected or overridden as the impact of modern technologies extends. At the same time, over-emphasis on the introduction of modern techniques brings its own problems, especially if it is not accompanied by training programmes in the maintenance and use of equipment. It was therefore recommended that "technological literacy" should be an important goal for education.
- (c) The economic matrix against which national education policies are to be developed was recognized as an influential factor in educational change. In circumstances of serious economic difficulty, the implementation of desirable educational changes can be inhibited through lack of resources. In other circumstances, full development of economic potential depends on the ability of an education system to provide for the necessary manpower needs. Either way, it was agreed that continued efforts should be made to relate educational policies and practices to assessments of manpower needs for national development.

Pointers for Educational Change

It was generally agreed that greater relevance could be brought to present patterns of education through closer links between schools and the community. Among the possibilities for achieving this the following were given special attention:

Function of Schools

It was agreed that schools have an important part to play as educational resource centres for the community. In particular they can perform three main tasks:

- (a) both students and teachers can serve as resources for community development;

(b) the school can be used not only by children, but also by the adults of the community, so that it becomes a community centre which provides adult education and recreation as well as a centre for education of the young;

(c) teachers can be more active participatory members of the community: together with their pupils they can undertake community activities developed in consultation with members of the community as an integral part of the academic activities of the school.

The first two functions, it was suggested, could be performed by any school, but the combination of all three was considered to be the basis of an education resource centre or community school.

Community Education Resource Centres

The Seminar identified two approaches, not mutually exclusive, for the developing of community education resource centres:

(a) Any existing school can be converted into such a centre at the discretion of, or with the support of the school principal. To do this, it was suggested, the usual staff would probably have to be supplemented with additional staff recruited from within the local community, and would require skills and possibly training in adult education and community work. It was also stressed that any school venturing into the field of community service and community education, especially when limited resources are available, should begin in a small way and then expand by degrees.

(b) A nationwide network of community schools can be established through legislation. This would probably require the backing of a special division within an appropriate ministry. Only in this way was it felt that the necessary emphasis on adult education, the necessary allocation of funds, and the necessary back up services in training and materials production would be available to support the new programme. At the same time, it was recognized that community based resource personnel working in the locality of each centre (for instance, in agriculture, health, co-operatives, fisheries, etc.) could be drawn in to assist in its work, though to do this careful planning would be necessary to ensure experiments in the development of community schools were reported from Papua New Guinea (Rural High School) and the Solomon Islands (New Secondary Schools). In Papua New Guinea an attempt is being made to integrate a formal programme of academic studies which could lead to higher studies, with a non-formal programme closely related to life in the local community. The non-formal programme covers techniques for survival, both traditional and modern, and at the same time exposes the community to ideas for making rural living more efficient, more productive and more comfortable. In the Solomon Islands four new secondary schools have been opened during 1976 to provide an environmentally based vocational education for young people who otherwise would have been unable to find places in other secondary schools. In both cases, it was reported, the underlying purpose of the approach is to strengthen the relationship between education and national development goals. As such an important objective of the community school was imparting skills for employment to the unemployed and, perhaps, unemployable, and to instil attitudes to make young people more productive.

While it was generally agreed that developments such as these were desirable, it was also recognized that certain factors must be taken into account when considering the wider implementation of such approaches:

- (i) Some possible functions for community schools or community resource centres might already be carried out by different governmental or non-governmental agencies, so that such a new set-up would be a duplication of effort. However, it was agreed that there is a need for a body at community level, to co-ordinate and bring greater efficiency to the work of all local service agencies. Such centres might serve this purpose.
- (ii) Teachers in community schools need special skills. It was strongly emphasized that their training should include the techniques of community development. In addition, they would need a flexible approach to teaching since flexibility would be an essential part of the community schools as they would be required both to contribute to a wide range of short term and temporary courses, and gauge the need for and pattern of future activities.
- (iii) Parental expectations of education can be a source of difficulty for such educational changes, though parents were seen to have a role in community schools, for instance, helping young people to adjust to post-school life. This may necessitate the introduction of programmes to help bridge the gap between adults and the younger generation. A specific suggestion was that adult education courses could help parents acquire practical skills to enable them to support the young in establishing local businesses.
- (iv) The formal image of some schools, it was felt, could be at odds with plans to extend their use to non-formal education or community extension work. In such situations some adults may resist links with schools. Similarly, some school principals and teachers might resist opening the school to wider community participation, fearing the additional work and problems this could bring.

Changes in School Curricula

A number of changes within existing formal school systems were suggested which, it was agreed, can improve their response to the employment and occupation needs of the young. Among these, curriculum changes figured high, the emphasis being on the need for greater relevance to the situation in which the curriculum would be used. To achieve this, it was agreed that it would be essential for curriculum developers to seek more local participation in curriculum planning. This would avoid confusion among children, parents and teachers, and at the same time would ensure a well founded awareness of the social and cultural environment in school situations. Specific suggestions for desirable changes in school curricula were:

- (a) vocational training and programmes to develop self reliance should begin at primary school level, and should be geared to the idea of self employment, with business practices included as part of the normal work in the classroom;

- (b) use of agriculture as a basis or core for the curriculum of rural schools, with other subjects, such as mathematics, practical science, business and environmental studies, evolving from this central theme;
- (c) introduction of community service, including tutoring schemes, into school work as a means of fostering group activities and co-operation which are more in line with traditional patterns of life than the competitive practices which are encouraged particularly in academic education;
- (d) development of programmes for integrated social studies and social action with full community participation at all stages of evolution and implementation;
- (e) use of simulation games and exercises as a means of bringing reality to learning, for instance, by raising moral issues which young people face in their lives and in making choices;
- (f) making creative use of the environment, such as the sea, by combining education with service and adventure. Thus, at national level in island communities, an educational ship could provide a range of educational and service programmes (seamanship, first aid, fishing) while transporting young people to perform community service projects in different places. This would have the added advantage of developing a sense of national unity.

In considering these, it was emphasized that curriculum changes have many implications which must be recognized from the start. These include adequate trials, regular feedback and evaluation, teacher training and retraining and the development of teaching materials and teachers manuals.

Relationships Between Schools and Parents

It was noted that a central function of education is to prepare people for change. This objective could be achieved through the development of greater co-operation between parents and schools. In particular it was recommended that the schools should make greater effort to go out to meet the parents on their own ground, where they would feel happier to discuss the kind of education they want for their children. It was observed that parents are inhibited from greater participation in schools because they do not have a clear role in their structure.

Plans for educational changes, it was recommended, should include efforts to prepare parents for such changes since otherwise they may resist. This was felt to be especially so in the case of proposals to shift from the academic to more practical approaches, because parents would be inclined to feel that this shift would make their children fit only for lower-level jobs.

Post-School Measures

In considering the problems which face school leavers a number of post-school measures were proposed in response to the situation:

- (a) the implementation of a National Youth Salary whereby all those leaving school were paid a uniform national salary for their first few years at work;

- (b) the introduction of community service/work experience during or after a period of study;
- (c) the possibility of introducing a required break for work experience between leaving school and taking up higher education.

Referring to the latter it was recognized that problems would probably arise because determined parents can find ways to pay for their children to continue their studies at their convenience. The same applies where strict controls are imposed on the number of scholarships a government makes available for overseas study, as is the case in a number of countries in the Region.

Need for Commitment

It was observed that although some significant advances have been made in the search for solutions to educational problems in the Pacific Region, the extent to which these efforts can be hastened and sustained will depend very largely on levels of commitment to effect desired changes, as well as on the provision of funds and trained manpower in individual countries.