

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION: COOK ISLANDS

Ngereteina Puna
Secretary of Education, Ministry of Health and Education
Rarotonga, Cook Islands.

Purpose

This paper examines how the community participates in the education process of the Cook Islands through:

- (a) imparting community skills and experience to schools;
- (b) evolving closer working relationships between community and school.

Background

The 15 main islands that form the group known as the Cook Islands are widely scattered. Statutorily the Cook Islands are defined as all the islands which lie between 8° and 23° South and 156° and 167° West. This rectangle has an area of 751,000 square miles but the total area of land mass within it is only 93 square miles. The islands of the Southern Group are of volcanic origin while those in the Northern Group are true atolls.

Cook Island Maoris are Polynesians. The basic language of the Group is Maori, but almost everyone speaks English as a second language. Approximately half of the total population of 20,000 live on Rarotonga, the capital island of the Group. Cook Islanders are New Zealand citizens and have free access to that country.

The Cook Islands became a British protectorate in 1883 with a Federal Parliament established in 1892 and annexation by New Zealand in 1901. Political changes which began in 1947 led to the General Election in 1965 and the present Constitution of Self-Government. The Cook Islands hold general elections every four years to elect 22 members to the Legislative Assembly. The Assembly elects a Premier and a Cabinet of up to six Ministers. Voting age is 18 years. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II is Head of State, and New Zealand is represented in the Cook Islands by the New Zealand Representative, resident in Rarotonga. Local government includes Island Councils, Vaka (District) Councils and Village Committees on each of the inhabited islands.

Education is free and compulsory in the Cook Islands between the ages of six and fifteen years. Approximately 7,000 children attend primary and secondary schools and about 300 teachers, 35 of whom are New Zealand expatriates. Private schools are run by the Catholic and Seventh-Day Adventist missions and cater for about 500 students.

Government Policy

Education is one of the main arms of Community Development which is defined as: the processes by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of the nation, and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress. This community involvement and participation is one of the bases in the establishment of education policies in the Cook Islands.

Community Participation in Education

During the "good old days", there was very little participation by the community in the affairs of the school. Curriculum was dictated from without, and there was very little attempt to make it relevant to the needs of the country. School compounds were out-of-bounds to the general public unless admitted by invitation. One of the few times members of the public were called upon for their services was when new coconut thatches were needed for some classrooms. This situation is changing gradually.

Evolving Closer Working Relationships between Community and Schools

School Associations: The 1966 Education Act made provisions for the establishment of a School Association, a type of parent/teacher association, for each Government School in the Cook Islands. The functions and powers of a School Association are:

- (a) To represent the community in school affairs of a general interest;
- (b) To co-operate with the Department of Education, Principal and staff in promoting the welfare and improvement of the school;
- (c) To assist in the effective maintenance of school grounds, buildings, equipment and amenities;
- (d) To raise and maintain funds to be used by the School Association for any of the purposes contained in (a), (b) and (c) above.

The executive arm of the School Association is the School Committee which is elected by members annually. The Committee consists of a chairman, a secretary, a treasurer and ordinary members according to roll numbers. The principal of the school, a teachers' representative and an Island Council member are ex officio members of the Committee.

Ownership of School: The Government builds the school and provides staff, basic equipment and general supplies but the School Committee is given the responsibility to look after the school in every way. The use of the school outside of school hours and during the school holidays is left to the discretion of the School Committee and the principal. The Committee, parents and the community, together with the teachers, carry out maintenance work in the school on a voluntary basis, with the Education Department supplying the necessary materials only. There are two basic principles involved here: the first is that the community knows that the school belongs to them and it is up to them to make it a good attractive school; secondly, maximum use is made of school buildings and facilities.

Appointment of Principal: Because the Government wants to ensure full co-operation between community and school, the School Committee is consulted for their choice of principal from the list of applicants before an appointment is made to this key post.

Special Parental Assistance: Apart from calling upon the community's muscles and brawn, their brains are also capitalized upon. Many parents with special talents are very keen to offer their services to the school and these are readily welcomed by the principal and teachers.

Education Week: During the week beginning first Monday in June (Queen's birthday week), all schools run Education Week programmes. Parents, guardians, friends, and members of the community receive special invitations to come and see the schools in operation and to participate in some of the programmes.

Parents' Day: Towards the end of the school year, each school sets aside one special day for the parents of the children. Special programmes in the classrooms, sports field, entertainment (cultural items) and fund raising activities are arranged by the school and its School Committee. Prizes for school work are also awarded to pupils during this time. This is regarded more or less as "rounding off" for the school but, more importantly, it provides a further opportunity to encourage community participation in the affairs of their school.

Open Invitation: All parents and guardians of school pupils are given an open invitation by the principals and teachers to visit the school to discuss the progress and problems relating to their children. This invitation which stands throughout the school year also gives parents an added opportunity to have a look around the school.

The Community is the School: That "the community is the school, the road and tracks its corridors", is one philosophy that is being encouraged among the schools. The process of drawing the school and community together is seen as a two-way process. In this particular instance the school is encouraged to go out into the community for educational study visits and to undertake community and welfare projects.

Publicity: The media of the press and radio are seen as two of the most powerful ways of keeping the public informed of what is going on in the field of education. New items appear regularly in the daily newspaper and radio, and school broadcasts and educational programmes are popular features of the daily radio broadcast.

Curriculum Development: One of the main aims of the Government in the field of education is to provide a curriculum in the schools which is relevant to the needs of the community and nation. Members of the community are co-opted on to various committees for curriculum development in an attempt to keep the views of the community always in sight. In the case of education innovations (e.g. introduction of Christian education in Government schools and the re-introduction of stringent disciplinary measures) meetings of community leaders and School Committees are called to discuss the issues and to provide guidance.

Imparting Community Skills and Experience to Schools

Much of what has been discussed in connection with working relationships between community and schools applies under this section. Therefore, here

I would simply like to discuss one specific area of our school curriculum, "culture education". This is because culture education sets the pattern which we aim to follow in harnessing the skills and experience of our various communities for the benefit of the school children of this country.

Culture Education: One of the main objectives of culture education in the Cook Islands as specified in the 1975 Education Policy Statement is: "to preserve and propagate aspects of our culture through the inclusion of cultural subjects and activities as basic components of our education programme". In order to do this successfully, community elders and experts in such aspects of culture as the Tumu Korero are actively encouraged to participate in the teaching of culture. Teachers and children are also encouraged to participate in cultural and other community activities.

Since the introduction last year, of annual Cultural Festivals for primary and secondary schools, the level of interest shown by the communities in the teaching of culture to their schools has risen tremendously. Elders and other culture experts come forward readily to offer their services to the schools on a voluntary basis and their presence in the schools has served to enrich the cultural education of our children. Thus, whereas in the past, teachers have tended to attempt to teach Maori culture on their own, now they welcome the assistance given by the experts in the community.

Traditional Crafts: This is one aspect of our culture that is disappearing in Rarotonga. The arts of making hats, fans, mats, thatches, baskets, and other things from local materials are disappearing because no conscious effort is being made to teach these to our school children. It is suggested that, perhaps, one of the reasons why the Outer Islands are pursuing this craft programme is because unlike Rarotonga imported craft materials are unavailable.

Oratory: This is an art that is also in danger of disappearing. Chants for ceremonial occasions like the investiture of a chief, chants for games, traditional proverbial sayings which are pregnant with meaning, genealogical recitations and other ingredients for good traditional oratory need to be handed on to the younger generation. Each village or island has experts in these areas. Competitions between the schools and islands give opportunities for these experts to go into the schools and help their schools to win.

Conclusion

Perhaps, there has been a tendency on my part to idealize, to a certain extent, the situation here in the Cook Islands. If this is the case, it is simply because there is the desire here to see that "the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of the nation, and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress".

SUPPLEMENT TO MR PUNA'S PAPER

by Mrs Louise Graham (President of the Cook Islands Women's Federation)

NON-FORMAL EDUCATION:

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE COOK ISLANDS WOMEN'S FEDERATION

In addition to efforts by the Ministry of Health and Education to encourage community participation in schools, the Cook Islands Women's Federation undertakes a range of educational programmes, with special reference to women at community level.

The overall aim of the Federation is to encourage a spirit of togetherness and understanding among the women of the Cook Islands. To this end, there are 46 women's groups; 17 on Rarotonga and 29 in the other islands. The Federation concentrates on maintaining traditional culture, reviving the art of weaving and sharing experiences to beautify the home. It works with girls and young women in schools, teaching them the art of traditional weaving using local materials as well as about food and nutrition.

It encourages its own members to develop community projects through an annual conference where ideas are exchanged and skills of organizing and running meetings are acquired.

The Federation has experienced various problems in its work. On the one hand many of the young people prefer distraction such as sports and the cinema to learning about their culture. On the other hand, difficulties with communications in the outer islands means limit the exchange of local craft work and raw materials.