

Progress towards U P E: what the survey reveals

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INTRODUCTION

The Aims of the Survey

In accordance with a recommendation of the Seventh Commonwealth Education Conference, held in Accra, the Commonwealth Secretariat undertook a survey of Commonwealth countries in order to assess their progress towards Universal Primary Education. The survey attempted to measure rates of progress towards Universal Primary Education, to discover the means and methods Commonwealth countries were using, to evaluate the major constraints in achieving universality and to shed light on any innovative practices which might speed and facilitate UPE.

The Methods of the Survey

In May 1978, a questionnaire was despatched to some 33 Commonwealth countries. This instrument was prepared in consultation with staff of the University of London Institute of Education. Pressure of time prevented field-testing of the questionnaire and, in the event, some items had limited relevance to some countries. However, most items appeared sufficiently clear for respondents to offer useful answers.

Responses to the Survey

Of the 33 countries surveyed, 15 eventually responded. (Of the 13 countries in the Asia/Pacific Region, 6 responded). Though this response rate appears disappointing, recognition must be given to the extreme pressure under which many Ministries of Education have to work. However, the research is quite severely limited by low levels of response. Recourse to already published reports and development plans leads at least to the probability of including out-of-date statistics. The validity of findings may be so impaired as to make coherent policies for aid and development more difficult.

KEY ISSUES ARISING FROM THE SURVEY

What do countries mean by Universal Primary Education?

The most strict definition of UPE would be Universal Attendance - all the children of a given age group actually attend school. Of the surveyed countries in Asia and the Pacific, Singapore, Fiji and Tonga might lay claim to this definition.

Universal Capacity is a less strict definition of UPE - there are enough school places but, for one reason or another, not all children attend. Perhaps

a significant repeater population prevents universal attendance. Malaysia is an example of a country with universal capacity but problems of access to schooling keep the odd 5 per cent of children out of school.

Universal Accessibility is another definition of UPE - enough places exist but the distribution of schools is unequal. Thus, urban areas may enjoy 100 per cent attendance whilst isolated areas or those with difficult terrain do not have sufficient schools. Papua New Guinea represents a country where low enrolment of girls illustrates another aspect of the access problem.

The question of what is meant by UPE is further illuminated by a discussion of how the term is used in practice.

In some countries UPE has meant the institution of a specific programme. Malaysia offers a good example of this approach. Other countries have adopted a more evolutionary approach where UPE is given a target date and gradual expansion follows until universalization is reached. India exemplifies this approach.

Another major aspect of UPE is that of compulsion. Allied to this is the matter of fees. Normally, countries recognise the difficulty of compulsion when fees are also demanded. Sri Lanka, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Kiribati (from 1980), all compel attendance whilst providing free schooling. Where schooling is voluntary, fees are often required as in India, Malaysia, Singapore and Papua New Guinea. Bangladesh offers free, voluntary primary schooling although school books must be paid for.

There is no technical reason why UPE should be provided only through the medium of formal schools. However, in practice, most of the Asian and Pacific systems surveyed centre their universalization efforts on schools. Probably India has the widest variety of non-formal provision.

Linked to this element in UPE is the matter of age-specific schooling. In the majority of countries surveyed, primary schooling is limited to young children between the ages of 6 or 7 years and 11, 12 or 13 years.

Payment for the provision of UPE is another area of great interest. Central governments may have their efforts supplemented by voluntary agencies, such as missionary societies, or by local community contributions. Countries like Bangladesh, India, Malaysia and Singapore depend very largely on central government finance. Others, like Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Western Samoa receive important contributions from voluntary agencies. In Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, local communities make significant contributions to the provision of primary schooling.

Current practices and progress

The survey reveals that at least seven of the thirteen countries examined have achieved sufficiently high levels of enrolment to claim UPE. Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga and Western Samoa all have enrolment ratios of 90 per cent or more. None of the other six countries is far behind. (Some African countries have enrolments in the 30 per cent to 40 per cent range). Of course, it is precisely when a relatively small percentage remains out of school that the effort required to win them over begins to look uneconomic. Bangladesh, India, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands still have 20 per cent or 30 per cent of their primary school-aged children to enrol. The financial burden imposed by the final effort maybe disproportionately heavy.

A wider aspect of the problem of financial burdens concerns the teacher supply situation, particularly in countries where UPE is centred on formal schools, as mentioned above. Many of the countries surveyed have a high percentage of the teaching force unqualified. This is a major problem in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. In a number of countries double-shift school systems operate. Other characteristics of the countries surveyed include strengthened inspection and advisory services in Malaysia and Fiji, curriculum renewal and increased opportunities for in-service teacher education in Tonga, Solomon Islands and Western Samoa.

All governments have to make choices in their planning of education. What is of note in reviewing progress in Commonwealth countries of Asia and the Pacific is that the majority of countries surveyed rank UPE high amongst the competing demands on their limited resources.

Constraints in Universalizing Primary Education

A remarkably uniform picture is presented by all the countries responding to questionnaire items concerning constraints in and brakes on universalization. All countries comment on the high cost inherent in universalizing primary schooling. Countries like India are already spending over 28 per cent of their annual national budgets on education. Additional allocations of resources are unlikely to be forthcoming. In order to achieve UPE by 1980-85, Asian countries would have to devote 4.3 per cent of their GNP to education. Bangladesh currently devotes 1.2 per cent, Sri Lanka 2.7 per cent, Western Samoa, with 91 per cent enrolment, devotes 6.3 per cent of the GNP to education. It is apparent that unless objectives are scaled down or rephased, or less costly types of education are developed, then the cost constraint will continue to hold back universalization. Locally raised contributions to the costs of schooling are an increasingly attractive answer to the financial problems of UPE.

Problems of teacher supply, teacher qualification and retention also figure prominently in questionnaire responses. These questions are naturally linked to that of costs. As the large numbers of unqualified teachers currently in post are up-graded and trained, so the salary bill is increased. Sri Lanka faces a problem of large numbers of unqualified teachers. Fiji and the Solomon Islands have had to use "crash" training programmes for teachers.

Poor physical facilities, a particular problem in countries like Bangladesh, present a further constraint.

Wastage in all its guises - repetition, drop-out and school-leaver unemployment - acts as a considerable challenge to universalizers. These problems are not exclusive to attempts at UPE but do present a daunting prospect for countries which already have major difficulties in this area. Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Solomon Islands and Western Samoa all have wastage problems.

The quality of schooling is mentioned by a number of countries as a cause for concern in universalization. Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Papua New Guinea and Tonga all record a need for improvement in the quality of schooling.

Problems of irrelevant curricula are also mentioned in the survey as constraints in universalization. The entry to school of much larger numbers of children, representing perhaps for the first time the complete range of ability, may render a bookish and inappropriate curriculum quite meaningless to many pupils.

Additional constraints operating to keep children out of school may include geographical and communication problems, scattered or nomadic population, over-centralisation of control and weak administration. Further problems include poor school and population mapping, social and religious constraints and generally low levels of adult literacy which affect parental enthusiasm for schooling.

Innovations and Alternatives in UPE

In general it can be stated that the survey did not reveal any startling innovations which all countries seeking universalization might profitably adopt. It may well be that the secret of successful universalization might be in the application of a number of familiar and complementary techniques. Double-shift systems, as used in Bangladesh, Singapore and elsewhere, appear attractive. However, if teachers are given additional payments for additional shifts, costs may still prove high. Other ways of manipulating the time factor include alternate-day attendance and shortening the school time-table to allow for extra shifts within more or less the same overall school day. Teacher "wear and tear" cannot be ignored in double shift solutions.

Use of unqualified "teacher aides" and increasing the ratio of pupils to teachers represent further alternative. India is experimenting with upgraded primary schools and non-formal provision. Radio and television have also been used. The Sri Lankan developments in non-formal schooling to cater for drop-outs and the establishment of "People's Education Centres" are also worthy of note.

In summary, it can be said that most of the countries surveyed are following a fairly conventional path of formal-school development as the main means of universalization. The great question is whether those countries furthest from the UPE target can afford to invest more in formal schools.

MAJOR POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

Educational authorities such as Beeby and Phillips, whilst recognising the faults and shortcomings of formal school systems, declare that schools remain the most viable means of achieving UPE. Given this premise, and bearing in mind the suggestions above, the major questions which developing countries must tackle are:

- (a) How can we use our school systems more effectively?
- (b) How can we ensure value for money?
- (c) What is the role of non-formal schooling in UPE?

These questions subsume more detailed questions concerning pupils, teachers, buildings, methods of teaching and learning, materials available and the administration of education; but we must leave these detailed questions to the time allocated to group discussion.