

Foreword

This book owes its origin to a resolution at the Ninth Conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Education, held in Cyprus in 1984. The Ministers paid special attention to the topic 'Resources for Education and their Cost-Effective Use'. They requested the Commonwealth Secretariat to analyse ways in which (a) extra resources could be raised for education, and (b) existing resources could be used more effectively.

Under the second heading, the Secretariat organised a workshop in New Zealand in November 1986 to discuss the cost-effectiveness of small schools. The meeting received some financial support from the Economic Development Institute of the World Bank, and was attended by delegates from Commonwealth countries throughout the Pacific region.

This book is one of the workshop's products. It is chiefly designed for educational administrators at national and regional levels.

The Focus of the Book

Almost all countries contain regions which are thinly populated, and in developing nations the potential number of pupils is further reduced by low enrolment rates. Such contexts are the chief focus of this book. It compares small schools with large ones, and notes their contrasting social, economic and educational features.

Urban centres may have small schools too. Some cater for children of minority languages, races or religions; others cater for children with particular talents, for example in music or the arts; and others cater for children with physical and mental handicaps. Although such schools have their own special needs and are outside the main focus of the book, some points are relevant to them too. On the positive side, for example, they are likely to have highly personalised atmospheres which cater to the needs of individual

children, and they can have strong links with their communities. And on the negative side the urban schools are just as likely as rural ones to have low pupil: teacher ratios and high unit costs; they may find it hard to teach a broad curriculum with a limited staff; and they may have to combine classes and thus engage in multigrade teaching.

The International Perspective

As readers go through the book, it will also become clear that many features of small schools are truly international. Differences of course arise from the social and economic circumstances of individual communities, but much analysis is applicable to all cultures and nations. This fact greatly helps understanding of the issues. Although some countries have weak research traditions and are short of detailed information, studies from other countries may have general applicability.

At the same time, the book also draws out a number of contrasts. For example, most rich countries have already achieved universal primary and secondary education; and have long-established small schools which are now threatened by falling birth rates and movements of population. In these countries, arguments about small schools frequently focus on whether to close ones that already exist. By contrast, the majority of poor countries are yet to achieve universal primary education, and are even further away from universal secondary education. Governments in these countries need ways to reach marginal groups, and in many cases are still trying to *open* small schools.

Likewise, many Third World societies are more self-reliant and can organise self-help boarding facilities in a way that is not possible in First World societies. On the other hand, poor countries lack the necessary infrastructure to operate effective distance teaching mechanisms of the type found in some rich countries. Sometimes, therefore, it is important to note different national contexts. Strategies that are possible and desirable in Chile or France may not be at all appropriate in Vanuatu or Mali, and vice versa.

Finally, it will be noted that the book takes examples from both Commonwealth and other countries. Although of course the Com-

monwealth Secretariat operates chiefly to serve the Commonwealth, we consider it important both to disseminate our own experiences and to learn from others.

Peter R.C. Williams,
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