

STRATEGIES FOR OPTIMISING THE INPUT OF TEACHERS TO CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN KIRIBATI

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Introduction

Secondary school teachers in Kiribati have been playing a significant role in curriculum development. This article highlights the key issues that need to be addressed in order to optimise their input.

History

Up to and including 1988, curriculum development for the various subjects was the responsibility of Heads of Department at King George VI/ Elaine Bernacchi Secondary School (KGV/EBS), with assistance from teachers there and at other schools. The inadequacies and unfairness of this arrangement had long been recognised (Ministry of Education, 1986) but little could be done since there was no secondary section in the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU). The expatriate teachers were actually charged with conducting regular curriculum development exercises in addition to teaching.

Over the years, local teachers assumed headship of departments, including those of English, Mathematics and - for a short time - Science. Following the recommendations of the Secondary Education Conference (Ministry of Education, 1986) and the Mangubhai Report (1988), a Curriculum Development Unit Secondary (CDUS) was established in 1989. It had two staff members and was initially located at the headquarters of the Ministry of Education (ME). In 1992, the CDUS was amalgamated with the older CDU Primary to form a Curriculum Development and Resources Centre (CDRC) with a total of nine staff. Three of these are writers for secondary school curriculum but their training was in primary education. No secondary teacher responded when the CDRC vacancies were advertised. Instead, qualified and experienced secondary teachers continue to leave the profession for public administration positions to the extent that approximately 40 per cent of the staff at KGV/EBS are unqualified (i.e. untrained and/or have no appropriate academic qualification) to teach at secondary level (Ministry of Education, 1992; Baba et al. 1992). These are indeed alarming indicators.

No country can afford to ignore this loud message!

With the CDRC fully operational, teachers at KGV/EBS felt that curriculum development for the entire country was not part of their work, hence their demands for compensation when they were called upon to engage in the exercise (KGV/EBS, 1990). The Ministry needed the services of these teachers but found it difficult to convince the Ministry of Finance and the Public Service Division to meet the teachers' demands. After years of negotiation, the teachers threatened to boycott curriculum writing workshops and the marking of national examination scripts in the early months of 1990.

Teachers should be the key people in the process of curriculum research and development (Stenhouse, 1975). Existing circumstances in Kiribati provide excellent potential for teachers to play a central role in curriculum development and not be merely relegated to the periphery. Principals should play a facilitating role in the exercise, as pointed out by Sharma (1992), and others should be consulted as and when necessary. In the absence of enough writers and appropriate experts at the CDRC, as well as the unlikelihood of expansion within the current planning period (Ministry of Finance & Economic Planning, 1992), secondary teachers will continue to occupy pivotal positions in the curriculum development process. They will have excellent opportunities to make significant inputs into the process - unlike the situation in some countries where teachers are simply on the receiving end of the curriculum package. As Kirion (1991:51) aptly puts it, "they [the teachers] call the tunes; we [the CDRC] ensure the tunes are played." (parentheses added)

Problems

Many qualified and experienced teachers, often with some understanding of curriculum theory and practice, have left the teaching profession. Many of those who remain have no formal teacher training (Ministry of Education, 1992), and are unhappy about their working conditions (KGV/

EBS,1990) and lack of curriculum resources (Ministry of Education, 1986).

With many qualified and experienced teachers no longer practising, the responsibility for curriculum development will tend to fall on the shoulders of a few people. In addition, the more experienced and qualified of the remaining teachers are often given responsibilities for teaching upper forms, administration, boarding duties and school-community liaison and the professional responsibility for national education exercises such as marking of national and regional examination scripts which involve candidates from other schools. These are going to tax the productivity and creativity of these teachers. Without appropriate compensation, refusing to participate or leaving the profession will become an attractive option.

Strategies

Teachers have key roles to play in guiding students' learning. One of these roles is participation in curriculum development. Clearly, there is a need to retain and develop the remaining teachers and to enhance the retention rate in the future. The following suggestions are offered.

Keeping abreast of the latest developments in relevant fields can be easily facilitated through addresses by visiting experts/consultants, in-school staff development, short workshops, subscriptions to appropriate journals and sponsored extension studies. One excellent way (though frequently ignored) is having officials who have just returned from professional conferences brief staff.

There is a need to review the National Conditions of Service which, in an attempt to provide blanket coverage of the entire public service, has sacrificed the individualism of the many professions, including teaching (Public Service Division, 1980). In general, it gives a biased weighting to details concerning blue-collar workers at the expense of white-collar workers. Consequently, it is either vague or silent on many of the issues that teachers deem essential. Such a review should consider better job descriptions which cater for the peculiarities of teaching, provide qualitative improvement in supervisory opportunity and practice, and give greater recognition to the professionalism of teachers.

Curriculum studies should be made a core discipline in any teacher training programme. The University of the South Pacific's assistance in this area, especially to Tarawa Teachers' College and in-service programmes, is vital. This would ensure that graduates are adequately equipped with the skills needed for handling curriculum development tasks with confidence and competence, thereby maximising effectiveness and efficiency.

The participation of local teachers in curriculum development would help ensure that a culturally relevant curriculum is developed. Helu-Thaman (1992: 3-5) has argued very convincingly for this. Participation cannot occur instantaneously. There must be deliberate and on-going efforts on the part of educational planners to facilitate participation by providing relevant skills, opportunities and guidance. A practical implication here is that these planners need to acquire the skills first. For a culturally relevant curriculum, training and sensitisation of teachers must occur both in the formal classroom and out in what Geoffrey Henry (1992:14) calls "the University of Life" - the society itself.

Long term strategies should include the acquisition of appropriate equipment, recruitment of qualified staff and specialised training overseas.

Kiribati, like most developing countries, suffers from an economic predicament of a heavy dependency on foreign aid. This dependence influences local programmes. Curriculum development in Kiribati is heavily dependent on foreign aid, giving rise to aid-dictated nature and timing of activities. Long term planning is essential to ensure effective utilisation and management of aid, co-ordination of individual projects and that local priorities are met. Aid planning must, therefore, take full cognisance of teachers' needs, interests and aspirations regarding curriculum content.

Conclusion

The participation of local teachers in curriculum development is essential. As key resources in curriculum development, secondary teachers in Kiribati need to be supported to ensure that their professional competence is enhanced and their morale improved. Teachers' confidence must be systematically enhanced, proper conditions provided and appropriate rewards for their

contributions must also be given to promote greater motivation and satisfaction. Several strategies for achieving this have been suggested in this paper.

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