

Curriculum Relevance-Conceptual Frames of Reference

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Introduction

'Relevance' as applied to educational curricula has been a buzz-word in developing societies for the past 150 years. Numerous unsuccessful attempts to make education ostensibly 'relevant' have come and gone since independence (e.g. Cooksey 1986, Vulliamy 1987). The tired, worn-out clichés about formal schooling having been an ideological imposition by colonial powers continue to abound as excuses for failing to come to grips with the problem (*cf* Malasa 1996, Watson 1985). This paper challenges some entrenched assumptions about educational relevance and presents an alternative approach to the broad issue.

Beyond Curriculum

A library could be stocked with books, papers, editorials and articles to the effect that schooling has 'failed' young people in developing societies, and making the case either explicitly or implicitly that the fault lies with the curriculum. The simplistic reasoning that follows is that the 'problem' can accordingly be solved by changing curricula; the most common way of doing so is through vocationalisation. Today, as in the last century, this is an unwise move: students, parents, teachers and administrators tend to adopt negative views towards what is invariably seen as a second-rate option (Psacharopoulos 1986, Selvaratnam 1988, Vlaardingerbroek 1995).

The problems of urban drift, 'educated unemployment' and their concomitants are largely brought about by the very existence of schooling in developing societies. The status of 'unemployment' is one such product: a villager living a traditional life can hardly be regarded as 'unemployed' until that same person has a formal educational certificate, when s/he is regarded as such by people who view education merely as a stepping stone to salaried employment in the formal economic sector. Formal schooling raises expectations, and thus fosters urban

lemming-drives of schooled youth (e.g. Bray & Cooper 1979). The perceived nexus between formal schooling and formal sector employment is not a product of some hideous colonial conspiracy: it exists because people have long equated 'development' with income generation through formal economic activities. This is why people will forgo valuable child labour and pay school fees, the anticipated trade-off being with children's subsequent entry to the formal economic sector. However, the informal economy is by far the more important in most developing societies, by virtue of its close association with the subsistence economy and its affecting almost every member of society.

The real problem, then, is an economic one - particularly the mosaic nature of income distribution. As I have argued elsewhere (Vlaardingerbroek 1996a), the fundamental problem is rural underdevelopment, which is also the main impetus for the insatiable social demand for formal education, or to be precise, the certification associated with it. A 'return to tradition' is no solution; people want an improvement on living conditions associated with the traditional life - hence the preoccupation with formal education as a **way out** of the traditional environment (Knamiller 1984, provides a perceptive analysis). But the situation is like a dog chasing its tail: whenever a given level of certification becomes wide-spread, it loses its value as a 'job ticket', and pressure mounts for increased access to the next higher level (King 1989). The core issue has little, if anything, to do with curriculum: it is that the formal economy cannot hope to absorb every educated youngster in most agrarian nations for the foreseeable future, regardless of what type of education is provided. School is a reflection of the wider society; what happens at school is symptomatic, rather than causal, of what is going on 'out there' beyond the classroom (Robson 1987). Approaching the problem by manipulating curricula is akin to rearranging the deck-chairs as the Titanic sinks. The extent to which changing curricula translates into behavioural change

is also highly debatable. In the area of health, Vlaardingerbroek and Buchanan (1993) found little evidence that 'the message gets through' in the context of formal instruction, and were directed towards factors associated with where youngsters lived rather than what they had been taught, to explain their data. Conversely, the value of ostensibly 'irrelevant' schooling must also be reassessed. Much of the progress made by Sri Lanka in social development over the past decades has been attributed to what has generally been very 'conventional' education - the key has been access for the poor, particularly to primary schooling, rather than curriculum content (Isenman 1980). Ironically, Sri Lanka's vocationalisation 'experiment' fared no better than did most (Gunawardena 1991). These instances, and many others, suggest that education *in isolation* is not a potent agent of economic or social development.

So What Is To Be Done?

If rural underdevelopment is the essential problem, then rural transformation becomes the 'solution' to the development malaise - including the misperceived role of education therein - that characterises so many agrarian societies. The misguided, overheated expansion of formal education may be counter-productive if it channels funds away from such essential services as primary health care to redress the often appalling statistics associated with rural life, or away from the infrastructural development that would help people raise their incomes.

Curriculum is a subset of schooling, which is a subset of education, which is a subset of public sector activity, funded principally by taxes. Planners should approach these in reverse order, beginning with the place of education in the national budget, and ending with curriculum issues, in order to be able to appropriately contextualise each of these entities. Being a public expenditure, education needs to be viewed as a public **investment** with which measurable returns should be associated. In the case of developing nations, the global objective of all public sector activities is 'development', which entails economic modernisation - principally the diversification of economic

activity away from subsistence activities, and the raising of incomes - and social development, initially through the meeting of people's basic needs. These include **elementary** education, which Streeten (1981) identified as a societal investment in development at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum: for example, the literacy and numeracy equivalents of about four years of primary schooling translate into higher incomes for small farmers (see e.g. Jamison & Moock 1984).

As a general statement for agrarian developing societies, the 'relevance' of primary schooling is most clearly delineated by informal economic activities and basic human needs, while that of secondary schooling relates more to the formal economic sector and non-elementary human needs. The identification of thresholds at which economic benefits of formal schooling accrue and diminish is an important analytical tool in assigning education a proper niche in a given society. This has conventionally involved the measurement of synthetic cohorts' earnings streams by bands representing completed cycles of formal schooling (Psacharopoulos 1973). I have recently carried out work in Papua New Guinea that extends these techniques to include the informal economic sector, and achievement data at the lower secondary level (Vlaardingerbroek 1996b). Such monitoring exercises can provide succinct policy guidelines. As each developing society presents a unique convergence of economic, cultural and social factors, there are no universal prescriptions for the size or structure of education systems in those societies. Each needs to be assessed in the light of fiscal constraints, public perceptions and expectations, and the overall development status that forms the backdrop to schooling in that society.

Some readers may regard this approach as mercenary and neglectful of 'rights'. But 'rights' are vacuous without a society's ability to finance them, either directly through public provision, or indirectly through providing the means by which people can earn enough to meet their own needs. It is a government's responsibility and duty to the people to spend what fiscal resources it has in such a way as to optimize these rights in the most equitable

manner. This implies an approach quite unlike the *ad hoc* 'more is better' attitude that appears to have prevailed in many developing societies towards educational provision, particularly when a quantity/quality trade-off is involved that may be politically expedient but can result in the inadvertent jeopardising of pivotal development objectives, such as the production of a highly skilled indigenous scientific and technological cadre (Vlaardingerbroek & Olney 1994). It is also pertinent to point out that there is no education system anywhere, be it in developing or advanced industrial societies, that does not have bottle-necks at critical points.

To attempt to forge a link between syllabi and development-related sectors is beyond the scope of this article. Readers who are interested in this issue may consult Vlaardingerbroek (1996a) in which, with reference to science education, it is suggested that technology education could provide one such link within the context of a 'relevant' (i.e. rural development-oriented) education structure.

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