

# COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS OF SECONDARY EDUCATION IN TONGA

Konai H. Thaman  
School of Education, USP.

## INTRODUCTION

Education in general, and schooling in particular, is viewed by many people in the South Pacific as the answer to many of our development and other problems. Political leaders and parents, as well as students, have faith in the 'miracles' which education may be able to perform. Consequently, relatively large proportions (up to 25% in some countries) of national budgets are devoted to education. Yet, as Coombs stated in *The World Educational Crisis*, "education at best has at its disposal only limited time and means for satisfying all the expectations that individuals and society bring to the educational process."<sup>1</sup>

One of the most frustrating problems in education these days is associated with the kinds of expectations people place on schools, particularly secondary schools. They are expected to prepare students for a meaningful life in their societies, 'meaningful' often being defined only in terms of preparing them for wage-earning jobs. On the other hand, those who are charged with the administration of schools tell us that the school curriculum, at least for the first four years of secondary education, aims at providing a general kind of education and not necessarily preparing pupils for specific jobs. The nature of this conflict of opinions is often heightened at times of national budgetary consideration and/or political campaigns and some politicians tend to 'cash in' on the 'people versus school' battle.

But what do people really expect the schools to do for their children? An attempt was made in 1976-77 in Tonga to identify the kinds of expectations people have of the secondary school curriculum, through a community opinion survey of students' unmet educational needs. The survey results indicated a wide range of expectations of secondary education in Tonga, from helping to improve students' command of the English language, through providing technical and commercial skills, to instilling Christian values and modes of conduct.



a Forms 1-4 pattern; a Forms 1-6 pattern; a Forms 1-5 pattern and, in the case of middle schools, a Forms 1 and 2 pattern. Most secondary schools are Forms 1-4 schools usually with a Class 6 (preparatory class) preceding Form 1.

Secondary schooling generally lasts from five to seven years, depending on the type of school attended. While the government provides space for 65%-70% of children who attend the primary school, various Christian missions provide the majority of places (about 90%) in the secondary sector.

In Tonga, primary education is free and compulsory between the ages of 6 and 14. The drop-out rate is very low as more than 80% of primary school graduates find places in secondary schools.

The Tongan Higher Leaving Certificate (T.H.L.C.) is the ultimate aim of many secondary school pupils. This is obtained after success is shown in the T.H.L. examination, which consists of standardized tests attempted by students in a variety of subjects at the end of Form 4. A very low proportion (less than 5%) of those who are successful in the T.H.L.C. continue to Form 5, mainly because either (a) they cannot make the grade; or (b) there are limited places in schools offering School Certificate classes.

Most secondary schools offer the traditional academic subjects: mathematics, science, history and geography, Tongan (Language Studies) and English, the last two being compulsory subjects for the T.H.L.C. A few schools offer non-academic subjects like Tongan crafts, metalwork, woodwork, art, home crafts, shorthand and typing, commercial practice, music and agriculture. However, a great majority of students take mainly the traditional academic subjects since these are often the only subjects available for them in their schools.

Officially, English is the medium of instruction in secondary schools but, in practice, teaching in most secondary schools, at least up to Form 4, is largely in the vernacular language: Tongan.

Many teachers presently teaching in secondary schools, particularly middle schools, have no more than a high school education themselves. Only at the Form 5 and Form 6 levels is there a higher proportion of university-educated and trained secondary school teachers. Many of these teachers are non-Tongans working under various contract, volunteer, or other schemes.

## **EMPLOYERS' OPINIONS**

The views of Tonga's economic community were considered important, particularly in the light of current popular belief that the reason for a rise in the unemployment of school leavers is that schools are offering 'irrelevant' courses. Twenty employers randomly selected from a total of 100 registered

employers in Tongatapu gave their opinions of the secondary school curriculum; 65% of them suggested the need for more schools to provide opportunities for the teaching of technical knowledge and skills.

Home economics, fishing and agriculture were also high on their lists of vital areas in which the schools should provide training for pupils. Only 45% of employers did not want any deletions from the curriculum.

Of those who suggested deletions, four suggested religious subjects. Among other suggestions for deletions were sex education, marching (drills), history and geography. Employers considered the improvement of students' mastery of the English language as one of the schools' most important tasks; 45% suggested a need for improved teaching of English; 20% also wanted improvement in mathematics teaching. Other areas of possible improvement mentioned included Tongan customs, health education and the Tongan language, in that order.

#### **EDUCATION OFFICIALS' OPINIONS**

Like employers, education officials wanted to see more technical subjects taught in secondary schools. 60% of education officials suggested the teaching of more technical subjects, while others suggested swimming, fishing, agriculture and commercial studies as subjects they would like to see added to the present curriculum.

Officials were almost unanimous in not wanting any deletions from the present curriculum. However, opinions were divided as to which areas needed improvement; while 50% suggested English, 40% considered that the teaching of Tongan in the schools needed most improvement.

#### **PASTORS' OPINIONS**

'The church' exerts a strong influence on the lives of a great majority of the Tongan people. Every Tongan belongs to 'a church' and most are active members of their churches. One of the research assistants personally interviewed and/or distributed the questionnaire entitled "People's Ideas about the Schools" (in both Tongan and English) to 53 pastors who were selected at random from lists of pastors obtained from all the major religious denominations in Tonga.

As might be expected, pastors strongly favoured schools giving more attention to moral and religious education: in fact, 52 of the 53 interviewed

suggested some form of moral and/or Christian education. A fair number of them, 32%, would have liked to see more emphasis on the teaching of Tongan customs and traditions. Unlike education officials and employers, only 17 out of the 53 were satisfied with the present curriculum and wanted no deletions.

37% of the pastors did not want children to learn European dancing (non-traditional dances). This is a very interesting response, particularly given the fact that in no secondary school (except one) is European dancing taught, as such; most schoolchildren learn European dancing at public dance halls or during infrequent school-based social get-togethers. This reaction may imply a caution towards the introduction of foreign values and behaviour.

In response to what should be taught more effectively, the pastors thought that technical subjects (77%), English (75%) and home economics (56%) needed improved teaching.

## **PARENTS' OPINIONS**

The opinions of parents were regarded as significant since they represented the views of adults who are involved with the informal education of children.

Heavily populated sections of Nuku'alofa and the village of Ha'ateiho were chosen and a random sample was obtained from each of them. Altogether, 135 parents were interviewed; all had children who were currently attending primary or secondary school or both, or had children living with them who were attending secondary school. There were no marked differences in opinions between the parents in Nuku'alofa and those at Ha'ateiho, so for the rest of this report parents in both areas will be treated as one group.

The total sample of parents represents mostly the 'lower' occupational group, that is, those whose occupations (in the west) involve little formal preparation and are often regarded as of low prestige.

The survey results showed an overwhelming emphasis by Tongan parents on religious and moral learning. These two things were seen as closely related; one — moral behaviour — was seen as a result of the other — good religious training. It was evident, therefore, that a high proportion of parents (55%) see, as one of the schools' most important tasks, the provision of a good, sound foundation in religious and Christian ethics. Other important requests included courses in home craft and home economics, technical subjects and Tongan culture and traditions.

51% of the parents did not want to eliminate anything from the present school

curriculum, although 22% of them, like the pastors, indicated their objection to children learning modern European dancing. Eight of the parents thought that sports should be eliminated because they were hazardous to children.

As with previous groups, parents expected the teaching of English to be improved: 37% of parents (about 37 of the respondents) cited English as the subject most in need of improved teaching. Again, parents' concern for proper conduct of children was very apparent; 22% cited religion and 27% cited children's conduct as areas where improved teaching was necessary.

### **STUDENTS' OPINIONS**

295 secondary school students filled in the questionnaire entitled "Students' Ideas about the School". They were chosen in a way that would represent the viewpoints of both government and mission schools and both co-educational and single-sex schools.

23% of the students said there was nothing that they wanted to learn that the school was not offering. However, of those who viewed the curriculum as inadequate, ten cited the need for schools to facilitate the development of knowledge and skills in two main areas: commercial studies and technical education.

A relatively small number of students, compared with other groups, requested more opportunities to study religion or Tongan culture and traditions.

Although the subjects which students wished to include in the school curriculum might already be included, they may have been prevented from studying them. Possible reasons for this could be (1) that the student may know that the desired subject is in the school curriculum but finds himself in the wrong academic stream or class; (2) that the student's present course of study is already full and he cannot add to it the other things he wishes to study; or (3) that the student may wish to continue with a subject he liked lower down the school but finds that it is not available at a higher grade level. All these have significant implications for the tasks of such people as educational guidance officers, timetabling staff and school-leaving curriculum officers.

There were marked differences of opinion between boys and girls relating to the kinds of subjects they would like to study. Almost all students who cited those subjects listed under commercial education were girls (80% of students); a few boys (32%) wanted to learn book-keeping and accounting.

However, all but two students who cited those subjects listed under technical education were boys.

A high proportion (69%) of students did not wish to eliminate anything from the present school curriculum. However, it is interesting to note that among those subjects students did not want to be offered was Tongan language (a compulsory subject in all schools up to Form 4). It seemed, from the responses students gave, that their complaints about the curriculum were about subjects (1) they could not master; (2) that were taught by persons they did not like; or (3) which they felt teachers were unable to make interesting and worthwhile.

Of the 295 Form 4 students who filled in the questionnaire, 180 (61%) cited English as the subject most in need of improved teaching. This reaction is similar to that of the other sub-groups already discussed. Other areas students felt needed improvement included mathematics and science.

It is perhaps useful at this point to consider the validity of the students' judgements of the school curriculum. How seriously should we regard students' criticisms of the quality of teaching, for example? Those who hold a negative opinion may say that the students are not mature enough to judge how well they are being taught, or that the students might have given high ratings to teachers who are friendly and easy-going and low ratings to those who expect them to work hard. Perhaps such people would have preferred students to have taken a variety of tests (such as achievement tests) and if they scored high, the conclusion might be that the instruction they received was of a high quality; the opposite would presumably be true if the students scored low.

While it is possible that the results of achievement tests may be important, students do not universally give high ratings to teachers simply for friendliness and 'softness'. It is the belief here that students can make useful evaluations of the teaching they receive and therefore it is important that students' opinions be noted by education officials and teacher educators, as well as teachers themselves.

A student's opinion about whether he is learning efficiently, or being taught efficiently, reflects not only some measure of truth about how he is pursuing learning goals, but also affects how enthusiastically he studies at school. If the student believes that he is being taught well and believes that he is learning well, he will be more likely to hold a more positive attitude toward schooling and will thus be better motivated to learn, compared with the student who feels that he is not being taught well.<sup>2</sup>

## **SUMMARY OF THE COMMUNITY'S EXPECTATIONS OF THE SECONDARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

- (1) All sub-groups in the communities surveyed suggested English as the subject most in need of improved teaching. The implication of this for teachers in secondary schools is that they should use better methods and materials for teaching children the use of English. Furthermore, the place of English in the curriculum and the nature of the English curriculum itself need to be closely examined. It was very clear from the survey that both students and adults considered the school as the main agent for improving pupils' command of the English language.
- (2) Students needed more opportunities to acquire commercial and technical knowledge and skills. This view was strongly expressed by many adults and students alike. Employers, education officials, teachers and students were particularly emphatic about the inclusion of technical education in the secondary school curriculum. The types of courses currently offered in some secondary schools under 'technical subjects' include woodwork, metalwork and technical drawing. Students listed these as well as others like electricity, basic mechanics and navigation. It was clear that many students who wished to pursue a technically biased education at the secondary level were unable to do so partly because of the limited number of schools offering technical courses.

Students are often forced to follow a predominantly 'academic' stream which most find extremely difficult and dull. The need, therefore, appears to be more for adequate counselling of students, perhaps at the end of Form 2, and a more realistic system of course offerings at the post-Form 2 levels.

- (3) The need for business and commercially orientated education was also a major concern, particularly, of students. They felt that they were not given opportunities to study courses related to business studies, and commercial and office practice. Furthermore, students felt that the quality of instruction in these areas needed to improve. The implications of this for secondary education in Tonga are clear: the school is seen as largely responsible for vocational education and training and this responsibility is not being fulfilled adequately.
- (4) Students need to know more about Christian ethics and how to behave in a manner acceptable to society. Adult groups, particularly parents and pastors, wanted schools to put more emphasis on religious and moral education because many saw these as determinants of student behaviour.
- (5) Adults were particularly concerned about how young people 'behave' and were obviously expecting the school to be a significant place for socializing the pupils into the acceptable modes of behaviour in Tongan

society. Perhaps carefully devised courses of study dealing with Christian ethics and values could replace some of the existing descriptive and often denominationally biased 'courses' in the schools.

- (6) Knowledge of and skill in Tongan customs and traditions was another area of concern. This was felt more by the adult groups than by students. Many adults, particularly parents and pastors, were critical of the impact of western values on the pupils and considered the school a proper place for emphasizing Tongan history, customs, arts and language. The present course in Tongan language needs to be evaluated in the light of the negative reactions to it by many of the students in the survey. Furthermore, there may be a need for carefully devised courses which deal with local culture and tradition in a more analytical rather than a descriptive fashion.
- (7) Home economics, mathematics and science were three subjects which were often singled out by respondents as requiring improved teaching. Home economics was one which many adults, particularly parents and pastors, felt should be emphasized more in the schools and provided for those who wish to take it. Such a reaction has significant implications for schools in that more teachers trained in these three fields are needed, as well as the provision of adequate and meaningful curricula for the students to pursue.
- (8) The concern of parents and pastors in particular about the teaching of religion should be of interest to curriculum planners. One would have assumed that secondary schools already provide adequately in this area, since all but three secondary schools in Tonga are controlled by mission authorities of one kind or another. Perhaps there are stronger forces which, to many people in Tonga, appear to undermine the teachings of the churches and the home. Clearly the school was expected to provide religious training as well as preparing students for their future careers and vocations.

If the secondary schools are going to attempt to fulfil these community expectations something must be done now to provide for the needs of so many students. The present secondary school curriculum may only be functional for the lucky few who manage to continue beyond the fourth form. Already there are hundreds of school-leavers with Tongan Higher Leaving Certificates who cannot find 'meaningful' employment or places where they can obtain some professional and/or vocational training. The whole question of secondary schooling — its aims and future directions — must be realistically reassessed in the light of the experiences of other developing countries as well as Tonga's present social and economic conditions.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION AND CURRICULUM**

I would like to conclude this article by stating briefly what I see as the significant implications of the survey results for teacher training and curriculum development in Tonga in particular and perhaps in the South Pacific generally.

- (1) Research and evaluation in the area of English curriculum.
- (2) Improving teachers' skills in English language teaching and learning, both through pre-service and in-service programmes. The development of a strong and effective programme in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language particularly for teacher trainees.
- (3) More emphasis given in teacher preparation programmes to examining the role of religion in shaping students' values and codes of ethics. The survey results showed a growing concern by the community about young people's apparent lack of moral and ethical values. The 'scientific' mode emphasized by the pursuit of academic studies may be helping students (and future teachers) to become more rational but not necessarily more humane and caring. Perhaps courses devoted to 'leadership training' or 'human relations' or 'communications' may help draw attention to this need.
- (4) Research and development in the area of commercial studies.
- (5) A strengthening of the present school programmes in industrial arts and home economics as well as providing help for local persons in the development of more meaningful and effective curricula in these areas.
- (6) Systematic evaluation of science and mathematics curricula currently taught in the secondary schools to find out (1) their relevancy to the future needs of the majority of pupils and (2) their suitability for the students. If a great number of students were critical of the teaching of mathematics and science, either the teaching is 'bad', or the students are 'bad', or the curriculum is not suitable for these children.

## **REFERENCES**

1. P.H. Coombs (1968), **The World Educational Crisis**, New York, Oxford University Press.
2. R. M. Thomas and T.E. Titiali'i (1973), **A Study of Unmet Educational Needs in American Samoa, 1971-73**, Pago Pago, Government of American Samoa Department of Education.