

NEW POLICIES FOR CLASSES 7, 8 AND 9 IN KIRIBATI PRIMARY SCHOOLS*

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INTRODUCTION

A lot of thought has been given to Classes 7, 8 and 9 in Kiribati primary schools, which are the three years covered by the four pilot Community High Schools. The new policies which are explained below are the result of a very long and extensive process of consultations. Most of the new ideas which are to be introduced are drawn from the Report of a 14 strong Commission which was appointed to evaluate community high schools. The members of this Commission travelled widely and visited eight islands outside of Tarawa. It is hoped that the changes which are being introduced will have a most beneficial effect on these three years of schooling. The purpose of this statement is to give details of the changes and the reasons for introducing them.

PRESENT STRUCTURE OF KIRIBATI PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Kiribati primary schools offer a basic six year course leading up to the Secondary School Entrance Examination, which is normally taken in Class 6. After this examination those pupils who do not gain places at one of the government or church secondary schools continue at primary schools for three more years — in Classes 7, 8 and 9.

Most people are in agreement on what subjects should be taught to children in the first six years at primary school. The children are taught to read, to write, some arithmetic, some English, some useful general knowledge about their environment and the world and some non-denominational religious knowledge. Few people would question the usefulness of this period of education. Most parents hope that their children will do well, pass the Secondary School Entrance Examination and continue their education at one of the secondary schools.

* This article has been adapted from a statement made by the Minister of Education, Training and Culture to the Kiribati House of Assembly on 26th August, 1980.

The problem arises with the final three years of primary schooling for those pupils who do not pass the Secondary School Entrance Examination. At present these pupils have no further opportunity to enter a secondary school and few opportunities to gain a wage-earning job. The schools in these years continue to teach the same sort of mainly academic subjects which were taught in the first six years. The pupils have nothing to work towards; they have no goals and morale is generally low among both teachers and pupils.

THE COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL PROJECT

It was for this reason that the Community High School Project was started. The idea of the community high schools was to replace Classes 7, 8 and 9 with a new type of school which would provide an education suitable for pupils who would, after school, be employed in the rural or subsistence sector of the economy. In the words of the 1975 Review of Educational Development: "In this way it is hoped that the pupils would be more fitted for life in their own communities."

Thus at community high schools the academic content of the curriculum was reduced and more emphasis was placed on practical subjects. New subjects were introduced such as community skills, cultural arts, commerce and agriculture. Four community high schools were opened in 1977 as a pilot project. They were especially designed and built to accommodate these practical subjects with specialist rooms and equipment for woodwork and home economics. Each school cost about \$100,000 to build and equip.

AN EVALUATION REPORT

The pupils who entered these four schools in 1977 finished their three year course at the end of 1979. So early this year seemed a good time to appoint a committee to evaluate this pilot project thoroughly. The commission was asked to look into the whole question of what type of education should be provided after primary Class 6 for those children who were not selected for secondary schools.

NATIONAL ECONOMICS AND PARENTAL WISHES: THE DILEMMA

The Evaluation Report produced by the commission told us quite clearly what sort of education the people of this country want for their children. They want an academic type of education; the type of education which will pave the way to securing paid employment.

So it would appear that government has been trying to develop a type of schooling which concentrates on the practical skills considered to be relevant for pupils who will live in the rural areas and not obtain cash employment, while all the time, 'the people' desire an education with an academic bias designed to prepare children for employment in the urban areas.

Those islands with community high schools have already rejected the role of these schools as 'preparer-for-village-life' on the grounds that the family can do this. They see the function of schools to be to qualify pupils for employment on Tarawa. To do this they want the schools transformed into secondary schools. The universal community cry, as revealed in the Evaluation Report is for more English and more maths.

Now, the community high schools are especially designed to give emphasis to the practical subjects. If our aim was to provide an academic education in English and maths up to Junior School Certificate level, we would be establishing junior secondary schools not community high schools. And the real difficulty in trying to upgrade the upper forms of our primary schools into junior secondary schools is in the insufficient availability of suitably qualified teachers. To teach English and maths to Form 3 requires good secondary school teachers with good text books. And the training of secondary school teachers is a very long term process. Even our one government secondary school is still, today, mostly staffed with expatriates.

So there are two rather different views on the sort of education to be offered in these three years which somehow have to be reconciled into one coherent policy. First, the government view which places emphasis on what is practical, what we can afford and what is necessary. The underlying assumption of this view is that the present reliance on the subsistence economy will continue into the foreseeable future with this sector absorbing 80-85% of our primary school leavers. If five out of six primary school leavers are going to be employed in subsistence pursuits, it seems sensible to provide an education relevant to this mode of living. The foundation of this view seems sound. Even if all our development plans are successful, it does not seem probable that many more people can be employed in the cash sector than are at present. Government only manages to employ so many people at present by a heavy reliance on aid and the Reserve Fund. There is no reason to believe that in the future we could produce enough secondary school teachers to staff more secondary schools, or have enough finance to build more secondary schools or create enough jobs to employ many more secondary school leavers.

This then is the basis for the original concept behind community high schools and it remains equally valid today. But, of course, individual parents when considering the education of their own children do not think in terms

of the overall economic condition of the nation. They think only in terms of obtaining what is thought to be the best opportunity for their own children. They are convinced that the best chance for a child is to get a place in secondary school, because this will lead to paid employment; so most parents want their children to go to secondary school. And even if their child does not get a place at secondary school, they know that many students with only primary school education do get paid employment. So they still want primary education to carry an academic bias with a view to preparing their children for paid employment.

And, to a large extent, they are right. Virtually all children who obtain places at secondary schools do obtain jobs and many children with only primary school education do obtain jobs — even if the latter group only represents about one out of six of the total. And if parents see the main purpose of education as being a preparation for their children to obtain paid employment, it is perfectly sensible of them — in terms of their own children — to insist that the education offered should be geared to this purpose.

The difference then between the government view and the parents' view is that government looks at the overall picture while the parents look at the opportunities open to the individual child. Both are right in their own way. The new policies being introduced try to recognise this fact.

THE EVALUATION REPORT: LESSONS LEARNED

A lesson learnt from the Evaluation Report is that the Kiribati government has probably gone too far in interpreting relevant education to mean practical subjects and irrelevant to mean academic subjects. This is contrary to public opinion which still considers the academic subjects to be the truly relevant part of the school curriculum. And there is no doubt that literacy and numeracy are every bit as useful to a child as any practical subjects, whatever employment he will take up. For example, literacy has been proved in many countries to be a more important factor in improving agricultural standards than teaching agriculture. The literacy factor is tremendously important.

So academic subjects should remain the core of the curriculum because of their own intrinsic value, both to those who will obtain paid employment and those who will not, and because this is what the parents want. At the same time, we will try and develop the practical subjects, which have been pioneered in the community high schools, in such a way that they become really practical and useful. Thus, parents may in time become more convinced that they are proper subjects to be taught in schools; not because educationalists say so, but because they can see by results that their child is learning many useful skills. Skills which are *not* readily available at home.

Below are details of the new policies to be introduced with a view to improving Classes 7, 8 and 9 in our primary schools.

THE NEW POLICIES

From next year, 1981, the Secondary School Entrance Examination will be taken in Class 7, when pupils should be aged 13 years. At the moment pupils take this examination at 11 or 12 years of age. So pupils taking this examination in future will be one or two years older than at present. To be eligible to sit this examination pupils must be under 14 years of age on the 1st January of the following year. For example, pupils who take the examination in 1981 must be under 14 years of age on 1st January, 1982. Thus every child will have at least one extra year of schooling before taking this important examination. It should transform the present rather demoralised Class 7 from an aimless year into a highly motivated year. An extra year of motivated schooling is a good thing for every pupil and it is likely to improve the standard of entry into the secondary schools. (See Appendix A on page 35.)

2. There will be only one attempt allowed at the Secondary School Entrance Examination in Class 7. At present pupils may sit at ages 11 and 12 years. In future they will sit once at age 13 years. To sit the examination twice gives a clear advantage to second-time-sitters. And pupils who succeed at their second attempt seldom do as well as first-time-sitters in their later education. It does *not*, of course, reduce any pupil's chance of passing the examination. Although each pupils has only one attempt, he has twice as good a chance of succeeding at this attempt, since he is not having to compete with pupils a year older who have already sat the examination once. In 1981 (and perhaps 1982), the years of transition, there will be pupils in Class 7 who will already have attempted the examination in a lower class. The rule about no second attempts will not apply to them. All pupils in Class 7, who qualify by age, will be allowed to take the examination.

3. The practice of pupils repeating classes will be eliminated as far as possible. In future the approval of the Ministry of Education will be required before a headmaster may permit a pupil to repeat a class. The introduction of the policy of taking the Secondary School Entrance Examination in Class 7, and allowing only one attempt, makes this rule necessary. Pupils should enter Class 1 at age six years and advance by one class each year.

4. After the Secondary School Entrance Examination in Class 7 there will be two years of schooling, Classes 8 and 9. In other words, the length of schooling is retained at nine years for those who do not enter secondary schools. Any lengthening of the years of schooling offered will not be

contemplated until the government has at least brought the supply of qualified teachers up to a strength which can adequately staff our present school system.

5. From 1982 there will be a second chance of entry into secondary schools by an examination to be held in Class 9 of primary schools. The examination will be in two parts. The first part will take the form of continuous assessment of the pupil's attainment in *each* subject over the whole period of Classes 8 and 9, provided by the headmaster. A good grade in the continuous assessment part of the examination will be a necessary qualification for entry into the second part of the examination. The second part of the examination will consist of written papers on the same lines as the Class 7 examination, but of a higher academic standard.

It is anticipated that about 400 pupils will pass the continuous assessment part of the examination and thus qualify for the written examination. This number is approximately one-third of all students in Class 9.

Eligibility to sit the written examination in Class 9 will be restricted to those pupils who are under 16 years of age on 1st January of the following year. Thus pupils who take the written part of the examination when it is first set in 1982, must be under the age of 16 years on 1st January, 1983. Only one attempt will be allowed at the Class 9 examination.

Pupils who are successful in the Class 9 examination will enter a special Form 2 at secondary school and will stay together as a group in Form 3. Thereafter, they will be placed in Form 4 on the basis of their Junior School Certificate results and be absorbed into the mainstream, together with all the other pupils who progress successfully from Form 3.

It is anticipated that a total of about 90 places at secondary schools will be available for those passing this examination. These are additional places over and above the number presently available. So the size of the intake into Form 1 will remain the same but about 90 additional places will be created for the new entry at Form 2 level.

This means that pupils will retain a chance of entering a secondary school right up to the time they finally complete their primary schooling. No longer will there be three years of primary schooling which contain no hope of advancement into secondary schools.

6. All pupils who complete Class 9, irrespective of age, will be eligible to receive a leaving certificate. The award of this certificate will be based on the continuous assessment part of the Class 9 examination. Each subject will be graded on a five-point scale and the overall certificate will be graded on a three-point scale. The leaving certificate will show both the results by

subject and the overall grade. In the course of time, the leaving certificate may be made a necessary qualification for obtaining any employment with government. Thus all pupils completing the 9 years of primary school will be eligible to receive some form of recognition, graded in line with their level of attainment. This should add further purpose to Classes 8 and 9.

7. Primary school Classes 8 and 9 and community high schools will be merged from 1981. It is necessary to emphasise that community high schools and Classes 8 and 9 at primary schools are, in fact, one and the same thing. All children who continue schooling after the Class 7 examination, but who do not enter secondary schools, should be offered the same sort of education. They should all be treated alike and the schools they attend should have the same title. We cannot, with any justice, contemplate an education system which does not give equal opportunities to all children who do not pass into secondary schools.

The degree of difference between community high schools and the upper classes of primary schools has been over emphasised, is harmful and will now be ended.

8. The merged Classes 8 and 9 and community high schools will be called Upper Primary Schools; Classes 1—7 at primary schools will be called Lower Primary Schools. In most locations the Classes 1—7 and Classes 8 and 9 will share the same buildings and teachers. So a distinction in name which emphasises their unity rather than their differences makes most sense.

Where possible it is hoped that Classes 8 and 9 can be grouped together at the larger primary schools. To form classes of a reasonable size it will be necessary that isolated Classes 8 and 9 at small schools be brought together to form upper primary schools at suitable locations; it is not expected that every primary school will have Classes 8 and 9.

9. The four existing community high schools will remain as they are. Only their name will change to Upper Primary Schools. We have no intention of taking these schools away or allowing the progress they have made to be undone. What we want to do is to introduce all beneficial ideas throughout every island.

10. From 1981 all primary school fees will be abolished on the Outer Islands and Banaba. This includes fees for the former community high schools. Thus in 1981 primary school fees will only be payable on South Tarawa and the Line Islands for Classes 3-9. And these will continue to be phased out by one class each year with the implementation of the compulsory education provisions.

11. Classes 8 and 9 will be re-opened where required on the four islands

with community high schools and Class 7 will be re-introduced within the existing primary school set up. (Classes 7, 8 and 9 had previously been phased out on the four islands with community high schools.)

12. Places allocated at secondary schools under the quota system will be increased this year from 25% to 33%. The quota system is designed to redress the balance of advantage which favours South Tarawa schools and thus help the children on Outer Islands.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

These, then, are the new policies, the principle objective of which is to put new life into Classes 7, 8 and 9. It is hoped that this will be achieved by:

- having the Secondary School Entrance Examination taken in Class 7;
- giving children a second chance of entry into secondary schools by an examination at the end of Class 9;
- introducing a graded school leaving certificate at the end of Class 9;
- trying to introduce some of the new ideas which have been pioneered at the community high schools into all upper primary schools and at the same time ending the differences between the upper classes of primary schools and the community high schools.

These changes will also benefit the secondary schools by improving the quality of their intake. The Outer Island primary schools will be helped by the increase in the quota of secondary school places allocated to them; the decision to hold the Secondary School Entrance Examination in Class 7, with only one attempt allowed, and the elimination of the practice of repeating years, will combine to help make this examination fairer than at present.

Our constant aim is to produce an education system which meets the needs of our developing country and the aspirations of our people in the fairest way possible, at a cost we can afford. It is obviously unfair that some children should go to secondary school while others do not; but I think parents accept that it is not possible for every child to enter secondary school. Kiribati does not have the resources to provide this level of education for more than a few. Nor has the economy developed to such an extent that more than a few people can gain cash employment, whatever the level of education they reach.

So within these constraints, the Kiribati government has attempted to respect the following principles:

- the methods of selecting the fortunate few to enter secondary schools should be made as fair as possible;
- all those who do not pass that selection examination should be treated as equally as possible;
- the age of selection to secondary schools should be made as late as possible.

It is because we have tried to stick to these principles that we feel parents will find these new policies acceptable. They do not offer everything parents would have wished for; that is not possible. But they are, I think, an improvement. They will, I believe, lead to greater opportunities, more fairly distributed.