

Education and Privilege in the South Pacific¹

Tom Kaye

For the purposes of this article, 'South Pacific' means the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Western Samoa.² These island states, which vary in size and population from Tokelau, three tiny atolls with about 1600 people, to Fiji, a group of 300 islands inhabited by more than 600,000 people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, emerged from colonial dependence during the last two decades. Despite an enormous diversity of cultural traditions, the countries have in common a formal education system inherited from colonial days, and based on the model deemed by the British or New Zealand administrators³ to be appropriate to the needs of the local inhabitants and the purposes of colonial policy — not, of course, necessarily in that order of priority.⁴

Colonial background

Given the complacency of the colonial administrators, it is not surprising that that model was similar to the education found in the colonising power at the time. Boarding schools providing for the sons (and subsequently, the daughters) of the local elites were similar to the British public schools; for example, Queen Victoria School in Fiji, founded in 1906 for the sons of the Fijian chiefs. Schools for the rest of the population were left, for the most part, to the initiative of the Church missions or, in the case of the indentured Indian labourers and their descendants in Fiji, to local committees. This reflected the general attitude of *laissez faire* and the policy of indirect rule deriving originally from the 1925 memorandum, *Education Policy in British Tropical Africa*, which served as a general policy document for all British colonial educational development.⁵

In a very general way this two-tier model reflects the nineteenth and early twentieth century education system in Britain, where the public and independent schools and certain selected grammar schools were seen as providing the academic-type education needed for the civil service and the professions, and the elementary schools gave the children of the working and lower middle classes the skills needed for manual and

clerical work, with scholarships providing for a few bright children from a lower class background to obtain 'white-collar' employment. At the end of the Second World War an attempt was made to continue this selective system in the maintained schools in a series of Government reports. However, many working class parents were no longer willing to accept a subservient role for their children and, perhaps more importantly, the reduced financial circumstances of many middle class parents led them to send their own children to state schools — something more or less unheard of in pre-war days. Hence, the lowest tier of the now three-tier system, the secondary modern schools, designed to provide a practical education suitable for manual or clerical occupations, came under increasing parental pressure to offer an academic curriculum and to prepare their more able pupils for examinations. Ultimately, under a Labour Government, it became government policy to replace the selective school system with comprehensive schools, which were intended to cater for all children and to offer a full range of subjects: academic, technical and vocational. Of course, the public and independent schools of Britain still make it possible for wealthy parents to buy their children the kind of education that will lead to white-collar employment, but increasing numbers of school-leavers enter the civil service, the professions of managerial posts through the state school system.

Education since independence

It is possible to see an analogy between the post-war educational scene in Britain and the post-independence educational scene in the South Pacific. In the last decade of colonial rule, efforts were made to overcome the traditional inertia of educational policy. Moreover, the post-war dogma that formal education was the best form of economic investment, together with the funds arising from a general period of economic expansion, led to a rapid increase in the number of schools and pupils throughout the region. While the provision of schooling had been enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations as a basic human right, it was seen by both parents and older pupils of the South Pacific simply as a means of securing a good job. It is perhaps worth emphasising this point. Except perhaps among a tiny minority, the attitude towards schooling on the part of the people of the South Pacific has always been largely pragmatic. Children are sent to school in order to get the good job that the possession of the necessary certificates, diplomas and degrees promises. Any suggestion that the purpose of schooling is otherwise

immediately arouses suspicion and opposition.

During the years of economic expansion, and while there were still large numbers of expatriates in government, professional and managerial positions throughout the countries of the South Pacific, the fact that the curricula of the secondary schools were predominantly academic seemed not unreasonable. School-leavers with certificates were certain of employment, and a university degree was the key to a highly paid, secure and pensionable job in the civil service. Of course, large numbers of secondary pupils were unsuccessful at some stage or other in the series of selective examinations found in most countries, and were obliged to leave school, but it was accepted that these 'drop-outs', as they were called, were a necessary condition of ensuring a supply of well-qualified local candidates to take over from the expatriates, and to fill the seemingly endless vacancies in white-collar employment.⁶

The failures of the formal education systems

Nevertheless, during the 1970s, most governments of the region tried to implement educational policies based on a recognition of the fact that this situation would not continue. In some urban areas, particularly Suva, the 'drop-outs' — or 'push-outs', as I prefer to call them — began to constitute a social threat, as they joined the ranks of unemployed youths. Petty crime, vandalism, prostitution and vagrancy increased. Education officials began to realise that the academic curriculum which was traditionally supposed to be appropriate preparation for the civil service, was largely irrelevant to the needs of young men and women who had no hope of white-collar employment. Schools were started with practical curricula, intended to prepare pupils for work in the rural sector, in which the vast majority lived.

These schools, variously called junior secondary schools (in Fiji), or community high schools (in Kiribati), have been almost without exception unsuccessful in their aims. In exactly the same way that the parents of children in the secondary modern schools of Britain in the 1950s complained that their children were not being prepared to take the examinations needed for good jobs, so the parents of children in the junior secondary schools of Fiji and the community high schools of Kiribati complained that they did not send their children to school to learn how to farm or to fish. And just as the British secondary modern

schools increasingly modelled themselves on their prestigious secondary grammar counterparts, so the new schools of the South Pacific began to emphasise in their curricula the academic subjects to be found in the government secondary schools and to play down and neglect the vocational and practical subjects which had been their rationale.

Meanwhile, white-collar employment opportunities are decreasing. Vacancies in the civil service and many lower managerial positions arising from the replacement of large numbers of expatriates by locals become much fewer once the locals have taken over. Moreover, there is a general contraction of job opportunities from worldwide economic stagnation. These facts can of course be seen as justifying ministry policies for vocational schools, but, in the end, parental preferences determine the kind of curriculum that will prevail in democracies. While the avenue to white-collar employment remains attendance at a school with a predominantly academic curriculum, that is the kind of school that will be preferred, even if the chances of a given pupil's final achievement of white-collar success are less than 10%. Indeed, even if they were less than one in a hundred, many parents would insist on sending their children to such schools, in the hope that their child would be that one hundredth child.

This would be bad enough if the outcome were only that the vast majority of school pupils failed to get the kind of employment which was seen by both their parents and themselves as the prime reason for going to school. But in addition, attendance at secondary school in the South Pacific effectively disables many young people from returning to their villages and participating in the kind of subsistence and local employment that is the alternative. It is not simply that the academic curriculum is largely irrelevant to rural life, though that is, of course, true. Because of the relative scarcity of secondary schools, many pupils cannot attend while living at home, and they are obliged either to live in hostels, or — more commonly — to board with relatives living near the schools. In such cases, their foster parents often have very little interest in their studies, and are unlikely to encourage them or provide opportunities for homework. Indeed, they may well regard the student as an extra domestic servant, and they are not uncommonly given a heavy load of household chores to help pay for their board. Such students are thereby deprived, not only of the care and support they might otherwise have received from their parents and the other members of their own households, but also of the normal socialisation into the customs and traditions of their societies.

Their moral unbringing may be casual and intermittent. In any case, poor parents — especially if they are illiterate — may well feel that once their children have begun to attend school, the responsibility for their good behaviour rests with the teacher, while the teachers in turn may feel that moral education is not part of their remit. Of course, if the school is a mission school, attention will be given to inculcating the doctrines and precepts of the church concerned, but while that may be consonant with the ruling morality of the student's own cultural background, it may still result in a sense of alienation from his or her own society. This sense of alienation is exacerbated by the material attractions of city life if the secondary school is located in an urban area. It was, of course, to avoid this danger that many of the older boarding schools established by colonial administrations were set in rural areas. But however rural the setting, the fact remains that the main purpose of an academic secondary school is to prepare its students for urban employment. Most white-collar workers are to be found living and working in cities and, indeed, the attractions of city life are among the incentives which motivate secondary school students.

Moreover, with a few notable exceptions, the schools which they attend are not integrated into their local communities. There is little if any provision in their curricula for the teaching of cultural traditions. Despite the richness of Pacific societies' artistic inheritance, the place of the expressive arts in their timetables is usually marginal. The curricula of most secondary schools are geared towards the kind of academic education that is felt to be appropriate for white-collar employment.⁷

The vast majority of secondary school children at some stage or other are pushed out of the system. Their experience of schooling is one of a sense of failure, of being rejected by their society, and of having failed to justify the ambitions and hopes of their parents. Because in many cases they left their traditional communities in order to attend school, they have become alienated from their social roots. Frustrated, rejected, alienated, tempted on all sides by films, magazines and pictures based on the kind of Western materialistic permissive life they can no longer hope to attain, is it any wonder that so many young people resort to vandalism, petty crime and prostitution?

These hapless young people have in fact been sacrificed for the tiny minority who are successful.

A three-fold solution

In the last section of this paper I want to suggest how this problem might be dealt with.⁸ The first point is that it should not be regarded as a problem of youth. What we are talking about is not a problem of youth, it is a problem of society. Young people certainly face problems, of the kind I have outlined, but the cause of those problems is not in the youth — it is in their societies. And the solution to that problem is not primarily an educational solution. It is a sad fact that in all the countries of the world in which there is a so-called problem of youth, the public looks to the schools for a solution. The schools by themselves can do little or nothing. The whole society is responsible for the problem and the whole of society must co-operate in solving it. I propose three steps, any one of which would not in itself deal with the situation but which, taken together, would begin to overcome some of the difficulties I have outlined.

The first step is, in theory, the easiest. I suggest that entry to the civil service be made conditional upon passing an examination of which practical and cultural subjects are a required part. This would be a three-part examination, with specified passes in academic subjects, in practical subjects and in cultural-expressive subjects. To make that requirement would be the easiest step to take. It could be done tomorrow! And think what an impact on the curricula of secondary schools such a requirement would make! Overnight, practical and cultural subjects would cease to be marginal entries on the timetable, but central elements in the curriculum. Moreover, there would be no objection from parents to their children taking these subjects once it was seen that they led to the goal of a white-collar job just as surely as the academic subjects. And the outcome of this vital change would be that on the one hand, civil servants would have some knowledge of practical matters and their own cultural backgrounds — in itself surely no bad thing — while on the other hand, the majority of school children who were unsuccessful in obtaining a white-collar job, would at least have learned something at school of relevance to their own lives.

The second essential step is to change the examination system, which should be localised and made more relevant to the needs of the countries of the South Pacific. The school-leaving examinations should not only provide for the practical and cultural subjects I have already mentioned — they should also be designed to test flexibility of thinking, imagination

and the capacity to solve problems. It should not be possible to pass school examinations largely through rote learning, and it should therefore not be possible to prepare students for such examinations by stuffing them full of facts, many of which they do not understand, to be regurgitated in the examination room. What the countries of the South Pacific need of their culture citizens is not a head full of undigested and often irrelevant facts, but the capacity to think for themselves, to solve problems, to apply their imagination to new circumstances. And examinations should foster these qualities. This is not an easy task and it is one which will require a great deal of effort and application.

Once these two essential steps have been taken, then and only then would it be possible for the schools to develop the kind of curriculum that is needed, with a three-fold emphasis on academic subjects, practical subjects and cultural-expressive subjects. As part of this development, schools should form closer relationships with their communities than many have at present. Again I realise that there are some very notable exceptions. But I would like to see schools and communities jointly involved in the educational enterprise in which young people are prepared not only for entry to the civil service, professions and managerial positions, but also to take an active and needed part in the work of their own communities. Schools should reinforce, not undermine cultural traditions. And society's moral values should be taught in both home and school. Teachers should be able to take part in non-formal educational activities leading to community development, while members of the community should participate in their school's cultural programmes. This argues in turn for a large-scale in-service training programme for teachers. The Department of Education at the University of the South Pacific, has embarked on such a programme which allows qualified teachers to study for a B.Ed degree through extension and summer school courses, with education specialisms in the fields of the expressive arts or non-formal education among others.

I would like to conclude with a vision of the future. This vision is of a teaching profession throughout the South Pacific whose members are all graduates, both secondary and primary. In their classroom teaching, and in their activities in their communities, these graduates encourage an understanding of and respect for the traditions and arts of all the cultures and subcultures of their societies, while also fostering the capacity of flexible thinking, imagination and problem-solving upon which the futures of these societies must depend. This vision is not an idle dream; it

could become a reality. Imagine the effect on the morale and well-being of the youth of the South Pacific if that vision were to come to pass. Instead of being pushed out of an irrelevant school system and being regarded (and worse still, regarding themselves) as failures, they would have the opportunity to participate fully in the social and economic rejuvenation of their countries. And instead of rejecting the values and traditions of their parents and elders, they would share them. Participation in the activities of their communities would foster a sense of purpose and responsibility. Instead of being, as at present, human sacrifices in an elitist selective system, they would become in time responsible leaders in their societies. How bright their futures would look. We might then be able to say, after Wordsworth:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!

Notes

1. Based on a paper presented at a conference on 'Education and Privilege', organised by the New Zealand Association for Research in Education at the Secondary Teachers' College, Auckland, 5-8 December, 1985.
2. These countries constitute the region served by the University of the South Pacific, which has a campus in two of them (Fiji and Western Samoa) and a university centre in all but one of the remainder (Tokelau).
3. Vanuatu is unique in having inherited not one but two colonial education systems, British and French. This has vastly complicated its educational problems, but the general observations of this paper still apply.
4. The extent to which these education systems continue to reflect colonial policy 10 years or more after independence is well brought out in Thomas, R.M. and Postlethwaite, T.N. (1984) *Schooling in the Pacific Islands*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
5. See Whitehead (1981) *Education in Fiji: Policy, Problems and Progress in Primary and Secondary Education, 1938-1973*. Canberra: Australian National University, Pacific Research Monograph No. 6. Chapter 12 provides a good summary of the various forces at work.
6. Rates of 'drop-out' vary, and it is difficult to find precise figures. In Kiribati, for example, there were 260 pupils altogether in Form 1 of all secondary schools in 1981. By 1982, this had become 256 in Form 2. In 1983, there were 238 in Form 3. There was then over 100% drop-out to 115 in Form 4 in 1984, which had dropped to 89 in Form 5 in 1985. (Figures taken from Table 3.04 in *Digest of Education Statistics*, Tarawa, Ministry of Education, 1985.) At a very rough estimate, less than 10% of pupils entering the primary schools of

the South Pacific end up with a school leaving certificate. The remaining 90+% constitute the 'drop-outs' or 'push-outs'.

7. See Kaye, Tom (1985a) 'The Place of the Expressive Arts in the Schools of the South Pacific,' in Kanbur, M.G. and Hau'ofa, E. (eds) *Ray Parkinson Memorial Lectures 1984*. Suva, USP.
8. The following paragraphs are based on proposals I have made elsewhere; See Kaye (1985b) 'Education for What in the South Pacific?' *ibid*. See also Kaye (1985c) 'The Role of the Schools in Tackling the Problems of Youth Today. Address given to Fiji Principals' Association 56th Annual Convention, Suva, 18 April 1985.