

BOOK REVIEW

Are Small Schools the Answer? Cost Effective Strategies for Rural Provision. Mark Bray, Commonwealth, 1987.

"Are Small Schools the Answer?" is a useful book which provides a succinct analysis of the current debate on school-size and highlights educational, social and economic considerations pertinent to decisions on educational provision in rural areas. It also offers a number of practical suggestions on how to organise rural schools effectively. The book is organised in four sections:

- The Debate on School Size
- Operating Small Schools Effectively
- Making Schools Larger, and
- Conclusions

It was initially introduced in its draft form at a workshop organised by the Commonwealth Secretariat in New Zealand in November 1986. This workshop was attended by delegates from Commonwealth countries of the Pacific region - New Zealand, Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Western Samoa and Vanuatu. Dr Mark Bray, the author of the book, was one of the resource persons.

"Are Small Schools the Answer?" will undoubtedly capture the attention of educational administrators and teachers in the South Pacific region. Small schools are a distinct part of education systems in virtually all small island nations. In their efforts to cater for the needs of rural children, governments in the region, in collaboration with the churches and various socio-religious agencies in the community, have promoted as many schools as resources would permit. Making schools accessible to increasing numbers of school-age children has been and continues to be a matter of high priority around the region. Hence, the debate on school size, highly topical in developed countries which have accomplished universal education, is not all that applicable to the

small island nations of the region. For, in the region, the question is not of closing small schools, for whatever reasons, but of opening more schools in order to enhance accessibility in rural and remote areas. Section 1 of the book, therefore, needs to be read with this regional perspective in mind.

Teachers handling multi-grade teaching will benefit a great deal by a closer study of Section 2 which deals with creating effective teaching groups, staffing and resources. The suggestions on group teaching and drafting time-tables for multi-grade classes are particularly helpful and can be easily adapted to suit specific contexts. Concerns, perhaps, specific to the region which are related to the quality of education provided in schools, be they small or large, need linking to issues raised in this section of the book. Centralized curriculum development, constraints and challenges inherent in teaching English as a second language and using it generally as a medium of instruction in TESL situations and those presented by external examinations, are a few examples of concerns which preoccupy teachers in many countries of the region.

At a more general level, however, the book seems to be based upon the assumption that 'many features of small schools are truly international' (page 8) and that an analysis of such features should prove useful to educational administrators and teachers across countries despite differences in their overall development. Based on this assumption, the book can be seen as a valuable source of ideas and suggestions on organising small schools anywhere. However, in practical terms, it appears that such an assumption has deterred the author from giving the small schools from the island states of the South Pacific region fair treatment. The omission is obvious and rather puzzling as the book is said to be a product of a workshop attended by delegates from the South Pacific region. One naturally wonders whether the workshop generated any ideas/illustrative materials based on the experience of organising small schools in the South Pacific region which were worthy of inclusion in this book. Furthermore, the claim that 'this book is one of the workshop's products' (page 7) can not, in the absence of material from the South Pacific region, be taken too seriously. It is a pity that a real opportunity for 'balancing' the book was not really used by the author, with the net result being that the preponderance of illustrations from Canada, USA and Australia alienates teachers and administrators in the South Pacific. The impression, therefore, that what is being said or discussed is only remotely relevant to the South Pacific region minimises the impact of the book on anyone reading it here.

However, despite the above comments, I am confident that *Are Small Schools the Answer?* will prove useful as a quick reference work for busy administrators and teachers alike. The material should further stimulate thinking on issues pertaining to the organisation of small schools. Moreover, teachers from the Pacific who are currently engaged in the Unesco sponsored Multi-Grade Teaching Project will find this book of particular interest.

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