

THE UNDERPRIVILEGED: SOME STRATEGIES FOR THEIR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Premadasa Udagama

Two well established ideas on modern education need to be reiterated at the beginning of this paper. These ideas apply with greater force in the developing countries than in developed societies.

In every type of society in the developing countries education is sought because it is synonymous with power. It is a status-conferring symbol. It is the power that gives an individual or his family upward social mobility. If the individual is fortunate (specially after about ten years of a nation's independence) he or she can secure a well-paid job in the modern sector. This results in a socially acceptable style of life that gives prestige, gratification and status in society. This demand for education has been called not incorrectly a "hunger" or "thirst" that is afflicting developing societies.

The second idea, which is again not new, is that education systems support political, economic and social systems of the societies in which they have developed. In fact the criticism goes further — "the education system has served to legitimize the prevailing inequalities and perpetuate the very institutions which generate inequality"¹ This may be interpreted in several ways. My interpretation (made elsewhere) is that elites control education to their advantage as was done in an earlier era by the landed aristocracies in many societies.² It is with reluctance that I include the intelligentsia of developing societies as belonging to the elite groups that control education.

Before venturing further into the subject it should be noted that the South Pacific island nations have made remarkable achievements in the education of their societies. Some features are perhaps unique in third world countries. Fiji has attained near universal primary education without even a compulsory education law. Many South Pacific countries spend a high percentage of their annual budgets on education. The progressive policies of countries like Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomons to develop education to reach the masses are remarkable by any developing country's standards. Fiji in its fifth development plan made many innovations to distribute education privileges to the underprivileged regions and groups.³ When references are made in this paper to various forms of organising education it does not necessarily mean that Fiji or some of the South Pacific countries have not adopted them in the last decade or two.

In progressive education literature, the underprivileged (a euphemism for the poor by whatever name you call it — “deprived”, “disadvantaged”, “less privileged”) are assumed to be excluded from education: excluded not by design but by the practice of education in the organised hierarchies that are education systems, be they of government, church or charitable organisations. All colonial powers developed elite education systems. Even after political independence, our countries continue to follow the same policies, and ‘underprivileged groups’ are therefore inherent in the systems. Admittedly, some reforms in education have taken place, but by far and large these are token returns as has been clearly shown by Charles Elliot in his outstanding work **The Patterns of Poverty in the Third World: A Study of Social and Economic Stratification (1975)**.

Whatever the cause for deprivation may be, we know from studies undertaken in developed and developing societies that children of the underprivileged:

- (a) leave school early
- (b) are low achievers
- (c) are frustrated in schools
- (d) have behaviour problems
- (e) find the school not relevant to their life-styles
- (f) see schools as a real bore.

These problems have been studied in nations like U.S.A., U.K., Sweden and Australia. Their per capita income is a dream to us in the developing countries. By this criterion alone the situation of the underprivileged countries is desperate. It is further complicated by the fact that our countries are spending the maximum possible of the national budgets on public education. Compensatory education programmes of the type in some developed countries may never be accepted as appropriate mainly on the grounds of cost.

In education we tend to use research and studies done elsewhere for eradicating our educational ills. I may therefore be forgiven if I use such recommendations in the education of the underprivileged in our societies as well. For the sake of convenience and clarity, remedial approaches in this area are classified under four headings. They are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary their interaction is very much to be desired. The four categories are:

- (1) Political
- (2) Educational
- (3) Instructional
- (4) Professional

Political

Social and educational inequalities tend to go together. In fact "education systems tend to perpetuate existing economic inequalities".⁴ Though education was organised to overcome social and economic problems, it is becoming increasingly clear that education alone is no panacea for our problems.

Educational experts, academics and practitioners bemoan the fact that everywhere politics seem to be creeping into their preserve. But, unfortunately, education is politics and more so in developing countries.

A number of countries have taken political action to redress the education imbalance in regional, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups in their countries. Rural/urban differences in educational achievements and in opportunities seem to be endemic to most countries. (Japan is probably the only exception.) Rural people generally are a disadvantaged group in education. To correct this imbalance, at least in financing education, needs assessment formulae have been followed in some countries rather than per capita or per student government grants to school. Fiji's action in and after 1965 seem to be in this direction to reduce cost of education to parents and agencies.⁵ Laudable as these gestures are, rural education is the Cinderella in all third world countries.

Because of the power structure urban areas are favoured for educational financing. Only political determination and commitment to equity and justice in education can resolve this imbalance in the education of the rural dwellers in any society.

Many developing countries have adopted 'positive discrimination' policies to help disadvantaged groups — disadvantaged through geographical isolation or social and cultural discrimination. Such practices are even found in some developed countries. India, Pakistan, Malaysia and Sri Lanka follow such policies. A World Bank Survey on education supported policies of this nature in the developing countries.

In an earlier era (and even at present) boarding schools were set up to educate promising boys and girls from disadvantaged communities to solve this problem. Such schools are expensive and beyond the reach of many parents. They do not uplift whole communities but only the able children who rarely, not ever, return to their communities. The boarding schools, though solving a problem temporarily, are cut off from the mainstreams of community life. These are some of the disadvantages. However, in areas of scattered population and where secondary schooling is not developed boarding schools are perhaps a necessary evil. In science education, for example, rural areas are usually disadvantaged. It is not likely that future scientists, engineers, doctors will come from the urban areas thus developing a political imbalance in professional groups. To prevent such an imbalance, science schools with boarding facilities for the rural children may be a solution.

Perhaps a far-fetched political solution to educationally disadvantaged groups is the acceptance and promotion of a variety of educational experiences as relevant for a variety of jobs in the 'modern' sector in our societies. The formal education system is a monolithic one. Evaluation through public examinations is supposed to guarantee the quality and similarity of the education products. Those who are unable to come through this process find no place in the race for jobs. If the political powers are able to develop policies that apprenticeship training, distance teaching, sandwich training are equal to qualifications from the formal sector, some disadvantaged groups may benefit in this 'rat-race' of our societies. But the elite groups usually oppose such moves using catch words like "quality" and "standard" in education.

All such policies which have to emanate from the political power group in any country are opposed on several grounds by many. This opposition comes from educational myths we hold onto so dearly with a senseless vigour and tenacity. For one to be educated, there should be so many years of formal schooling is one such myth. Similarly the 'quality' of education, which usually refers to the ability of students to follow courses in metropolitan educational institutions is bandied around by elitist and academic groups. We believe in quality in education, but "quality for what?" should be a question that should be relentlessly asked.

Many colonial countries, including Fiji and other South Pacific nations, have a number of agencies — church, private, industrial — controlling and maintaining schools. At the initial stages in the life of the colony this pattern of management was inevitable as finances were scarce and resources were not available. Though this pattern of management can be supported on democratic grounds, it tends to neglect the underprivileged, not by design but by force of circumstances. Private organisations do not have the finances to support educational activities for the underprivileged. It has been suggested by Gunnar Myrdal in his monumental work, *Asian Drama*, that the state should manage all schools. It has been proposed many times for Fiji by the Stephens Report, or Clive Whitehead and others. In a number of Asian countries the state has taken full responsibility for education. Sri Lanka in 1960 was the first to implement such a policy and later was followed by Pakistan, Malaysia, Iran and a number of other countries by applying a variety of formulae for the purpose. This policy in Sri Lanka has paid off well in the last twenty years, especially for the under-privileged.

Educational

The borrowed educational systems in ex-colonial countries tend to perpetuate social and economic inequalities in the social order. The argument is: let

“them”, the disadvantaged groups, come to “our” standard. This is the normal feeling expressed in, for example, U.S. about the Afro-Americans. But we do not create conditions for “them” to come up. We merely ask for quality from an environment of despair, poverty and degradation.

Primary schools are generally the poor man’s school. If we were to look at educational financing in any developing country we will observe that there is an under-investment in primary education at the same time we over-invest in secondary and tertiary education. One needs no statistics to prove it. One has only to look at school buildings. The university buildings in any third world country are like modern Taj Mahals. They have become a nation’s showpieces of modernisation and development. Examples, nearer home are the Technical Lycee in Vila and any rural school in Vanuatu. But this spending is contrary to the educational theory that intelligence grows up to nearly 90% of a child’s capacity, by age eight or nine, that is, during his primary schooling. Despite this, we spend the least in primary education but the most in secondary and tertiary education. If this policy were reversed, it would undoubtedly benefit all types of underprivileged groups.

There are other aspects of rural schools that need further examination. Most schools in our societies are rural and most rural schools are small ones — one or two-teacher schools. It is true of Fiji as well as of India or Nepal or Afghanistan or Sri Lanka. Fortunately Fiji has been alert to the problems of small schools and the Ministry of Education has been concerned with their improvement. But that is not the case in most developing countries.

Staffing of small rural schools is a problem for any education ministry. Even when teachers are provided they are not the best qualified or trained. Their interests are not in the school or the community. The impoverished culture discourages the teachers. The vicious circle continues. The schools do not produce qualified persons and few outsiders can be induced to stay on. The bright and the adventurous migrate to urban areas. The quality of its teachers affects the quality of instruction. The deprived school serves the underprivileged. The underprivileged continue to grow in numbers and in disillusionment of the school that is only a symbol and no more. Are educationists willing to help to break this vicious circle?

Will decentralisation of educational management help solve this problem? Our ministries are monolithic structures deriving their policies from the privileged in society. Politically and socially powerful forces share in the spoils of this great edifice. Can we devise an administrative structure where the language of silence of the masses could be monitored to formulate educational policies and strategies to help the underprivileged?

The formal school which is rigid, formalized, age-specific, content-specific is, as the de-schoolers, maintain, an instrument of selection and labelling people. Because of age specifications, the over-age and the push-outs are kept outside its gates. Is it possible to devise educational schemes and methods to bring them back to school so that their experience becomes relevant in their own education?

Many third world nations have sought other solutions to the education of the underprivileged, especially in rural and remote areas. The usual policies may be one of the following:

- (a) ruralize the school curriculum
- (b) develop special types of rural schools: community school, barrio school (as in Philippines), agricultural school etc.
- (c) introduce agriculture as a subject in the school curriculum
- (d) preach the dignity of labour to youth
- (e) blame rural youth for unrealistic aspirations.

These policies and actions have been rejected by all rural people in the third world. Examples of these policies are well known in the South Pacific. The whole policy of rural and agricultural education has been described by an eminent scholar in the field as an instrument of social segregation. He suggests that rural education systems, must be "integrated, functional, coordinated, global and continual."⁶ In other words it should not be an education for the underprivileged, while the urban school remains unchanged. In most third world countries the landed aristocracy is replaced by the educated (mostly foreign-educated) aristocracy. Both groups maintain their privileges for their progeny. In this context the promotion of education of the underprivileged is as unrealistic as asking the rich to share their wealth. (Perhaps my diagnosis does not apply to the South Pacific. They seem to be a more fortunate people.)

In education as in politics some are more equal than others. The professed ideology of equal educational opportunity does not seem to work in favour of the underprivileged. It is now known that providing schools or fee-free education does not ensure equality of educational opportunity. Moreover, our educational plans, (there must be thousands of them gathering dust in the ministries of education of third world countries) or on relevance have consistently ignored equity and justice in the provision of education for the underprivileged. We should strive more for equality of *outcome* than for equality of *access*.

Teacher training is another area where innovations by ministries and other institutions may be launched in order to help disadvantaged groups in education. Experiments in teacher education have been undertaken by many

Asian countries such as Thailand, Nepal and others.⁷ Such training models may be adapted and experimented upon when we are able to identify underprivileged groups in Fiji and other South Pacific countries.

There are other areas in educational policy-making that may help disadvantaged groups. School building design, school holidays, age of admission, school working hours, extra-curricular activities and educational evaluation are some of the many areas where policies based on research and study may help the disadvantaged groups. In this regard it is relevant to quote an evaluation of a rural school programme in Sweden described by Thorsten Husen. In rural areas children attending school every other day performed as well as those attending school every day. This is an example of the kind of innovative thinking in education that may help us.

Location of schools may be based more on school mapping. This may perhaps help in the rational location of schools which will be both economical and advantageous to the underprivileged. I have in no way exhausted the possibilities in innovative educational practices that can help the disadvantaged. I have purposely kept away from solutions tried elsewhere which cost a lot more, such as the compensatory education programmes in U.S.A., U.K. and Australia.

Instructional

Our school curricula normally devalue the experiences of children from the disadvantaged families. Our curricula overvalue imported knowledge in comparison to local knowledge. We teachers are purveyors of exalted and exotic knowledge and simply overburden the underprivileged child, who finds no relevance of this knowledge to his life circumstances. We make the school a bore. By this process "low income children are literally taught to 'fail'", as was found by an anthropologist working in an African country.⁸ Common examples of irrelevant material found in textbooks have become the folklore of modern education literature. South Pacific French school textbooks, for instance still refer to "Our Gallic ancestors." But there are many subtle ways in our teaching and in our texts that we adopt to discourage the underprivileged child in our schools.

Such children naturally become behaviour problems in schools. It is not necessary nor pertinent to enumerate the solutions we adopt to solve these behaviour problems. There is talk here of reintroducing corporal punishment in the schools of Fiji!

Elite education systems under political and parental pressure are virtually forced to become institutions of mass education. We are virtually taken unawares in this transformation. We are not capable by our training or vision

to design instructional materials to suit the new system. Common words like "quality", "standard", "evaluation" are thrown around for effect rather than for clarification of issues. So are other practices of sophisticated testing, streaming, monitorial systems and the like, the usual weapons we use against the underprivileged child.

Some countries (not Fiji) have adopted the teaching of basic skills to the truant and the early school-leaver. A comment in the Australian Schools Commission is worthy of quotation in extensio on this policy.

So our local research agrees with overseas studies. From around the world comes evidence that the children of the poor do poorly at school. Their attainment levels as a group are very low compared with the rest of the population.

Perhaps we could say that the children are defective. For example they score somewhere lower in IQ tests, they use restricted code language or they have poor self-concepts. The race was fair but the kids were not just good enough.

Such arguments however are collapsing. We now hear that environmental effects can push up tested IQ by twenty points, that socio-linguistics have virtually demolished the restricted code theory, and that the purported relationship between social status and self-concepts doesn't exist.⁹

Can we as educators develop instructional methods and materials to face up to the challenge of educating *all* the children of *all* the parents in our societies?

In our classroom instruction the bright, docile, conforming, well-groomed child is rewarded. I know from my own experience in the schools of Sri Lanka, over a long period of teaching observation, how the ill-clad, unclean, not-so-bright child is rejected by the teacher and his or her peers. Is it possible by simple instructional methods (as was shown in the Republic of Korea with the Mastery Learning method) to teach to an average attainment, so that every child, privileged or underprivileged, may benefit even from formal schooling. Can the teacher training institutions do something for the underprivileged children in schools? We use material from schools for our theses and publications. Can we as teacher educators adopt one or two schools of the underprivileged and make at least some instructional improvements to benefit disadvantaged children?

The medium of instruction is another barrier for the underprivileged child. When it is a foreign one and the mother tongue is not taught at all it is doubly discriminating against the underprivileged child. Of course, in the South Pacific this is a difficult problem. An effort at teaching the mother tongue even with

English as a medium of instruction may help the underprivileged child. He/she will then have an area of some competence in the school curriculum. Even in this area however, the dice is loaded against the underprivileged.

Every era develops its own code words for educational progress. Now the current fashion is "non-formal" as was the "teaching machine" a decade ago. Non-formal education has been conceived by some as compensatory education for the poor. This concept should be opposed at every step. It does not bring equity or social justice; it creates further discrimination. This idea suggests that the formal system is perfect or near-perfect that if the poor cannot benefit from it then it is their misfortune. Hence, a new education — the "non-formal" — is thrown in as a crumb for the underprivileged. There are similar code words like "life skills programmes," or "basic learning skills". These phrases are used to salve the conscience of elitist education academics.

Professional

We are now aware of the term "self-fulfilling prophecy". What the teacher thinks of the pupil determines to a great extent his or her achievement in school. If the underprivileged children are thought to be of low ability by their teacher, the pupils oblige him with low achievement. Teachers, like the affluent in any society, are unaware what it means to be poor or underprivileged. Children with experiences different to theirs are not understood by teachers. They are generally vexed by the underprivileged children in their classrooms. But the role of the teacher is a critical one to the underprivileged children as can be seen by this explanation in a publication in the disadvantaged Schools Programme in Australia.

Poor families must rely on teachers for information about all aspects of schooling.

Teachers are often the alternative significant adult in the lives of these children.

Low expectations by teachers are absorbed by children.¹⁰

As a professional group, teachers must cultivate warm and humane qualities of love and respect for *every* child, irrespective of his home background and academic ability. Research on teacher behaviour in classrooms confirms many teachers have negative attitudes to children from underprivileged backgrounds. A recent study in U.S.A. showed that it takes more time (in seconds) to draw the attention of the teacher by a child from an underprivileged background compared to children from affluent homes. By their training, orientation to examinations, and their own value system, teachers tend to ignore or reject the underprivileged child. Attitudes are difficult to change. But a teacher with appropriate professional behaviour can do much for the underprivileged child in the classroom.

There are many positive actions teachers as individuals and as a group can take to help the underprivileged children. They can accept such children in play and group work, and reward their work in the classroom, take an interest in them and their families, provide extra instruction through able children, and develop many more activities. I am personally aware of a programme in a Colombo school where breakfast was supplied to children who did not have a meal in the morning. It was organised in such a way as to maintain the dignity of the recipient children and consequently most of the teachers in the school were not aware of it.

It is generally complained that teachers take the path of least resistance. Some do their school work well and their professional life ends with that. But a useful professional teacher needs to be involved in community work, in the world of work in general, and should be interested in the affairs of his society. Many do no wrong but they do no good either. It is professionally better for a teacher with social contacts in every sector of the society. It is necessary to illumine one's book knowledge by social learning. While poverty or deprivation cannot be eradicated through education, some teachers can give just that required encouragement to children to improve their lot.

Teachers' professional associations too, can take positive action to improve the education of the underprivileged. As one Fiji Teachers Association has already done, the other too, can sponsor research in the area of the education of the underprivileged. By a simple gesture of concern for disadvantaged schools some of the best teachers may be sent from time to time to teach in disadvantaged schools. By constant propaganda in-service courses, seminars and discussion groups, teaching groups can expose their members to this sensitive and humane area of education. They may make annual awards to those teachers who have made substantial contributions to the development of the schools, and to the children of disadvantaged areas. Teachers unions have collective power, professional prestige and mass media support to pressurise governments to develop policies that favour the underprivileged groups. Children themselves may be encouraged by scholarships, bursaries, cash prizes and other awards by rewarding their progress in schools. Teachers associations can attach one or two poor rural schools to a rich urban school so that ideas, men and materials may flow from one to the other.¹¹ The rich schools may enrich themselves by this experience, so novel to their children.

Public awareness is also essential in a democratic society for genuine educational reforms and innovations. Concern for equity and justice in education must guide the activities of teacher unions in democratic societies. That is also the concern of U.N. organisations in this decade. Let us not be found wanting in promoting sane and just policies for the youth of our countries.

CONCLUSION

Each society has to define and locate the underprivileged in that society. They may not necessarily be poor. The developed countries like U.S.A. and Australia have already organised special programmes in education for the underprivileged of their societies. Ours, which are poorer by their standards, perhaps need more research to locate these groups and help them in their search for a life of dignity.

Our political, educational, institutional and professional areas have been explored superficially in this paper. We tend to believe the underprivileged are static groups, needing and asking for help. They themselves, through their own efforts may take relevant action. But they are rarely reached by papers such as these. Their voices, aspirations and needs have to be articulated by themselves in order to understand them. There is hope. Educational programmes, however, may produce a political awakening of disadvantaged groups — a process that has developed with compensatory education programmes in U.S.A.¹²

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