CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION IN NAURU

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Nauru is a small, isolated, raised coral atoll. The physical environment is one of relatively poor soil, no surface water, constant heat and humidity and unreliable rainfall — a precarious environment indeed for a human society. It is likely that the first settlement of Nauru was accidental, rather than a progressive movement from Island to Island, as appears to have been the case, southwards, through Kiribati and Tuvalu. It could therefore be expected that until quite recently, the people of Nauru did not necessarily perceive themselves as part of the global society. There was no significant interdependence necessary for daily survival, and contact with other nations was extremely limited. In fact, cultural exchange is a very recent feature of Nauruan life.

Pre-contact Nauruan culture was rich and there was a high degree of social organization which enabled the people of the small island to survive, to exist in harmony with their environment and to lead fulfilling lives. However, with the arrival of the white man, the discovery of phosphate on the Island, the subsequent establishment of the industry and then later, the physical and emotional repercussions of direct involvement in World War II, radical changes began to occur.

Chinese were recruited to work the phosphate fields and these people were later joined by i-Kiribati and Tuvaluan workers. A significant number of Europeans, who could provide technical assistance for the industry, also came to the island and a multi-cultural society became clearly established. There was by necessity, daily cultural exchange. An apparent mutual understanding, acceptance and respect for the cultural differences seemed to exist and the multi-cultural society developed along relatively harmonious lines. During the last five to ten years, people of other races — Filipino, Indian, Taiwanese, Fijian and Solomon Islanders — have been recruited to work in either the Phosphate Corporation or Government Departments. This has introduced further cultures, with different work ethics, languages, food, dress and other customs and has added to the complexity of the existing society.

Cultural exchange, with the resultant societal changes, is not a planned process and occurs as a result of other influences including travel, trade, communication and education. As in most instances where change occurs, the change in Nauru had probably taken place and the new pattern
of co-existence had become well established, before it was generally recognised or even realised.

It would appear that the cultural exposure, arising from the island's industry and trade, various forms of communication, overseas study and travel, has brought a realization to Nauru, as it has to many previously isolated countries, that the preservation of culture is important in order to retain a special identity in this shrinking world. Nauruan culture appears to have suffered at the expense of introduced customs and attitudes, particularly those of the “western world.” Consequently, people who have accepted responsibility for the revision of school courses or the compilation of curricula in Nauru, have been confronted with a serious dilemma. On the one hand, there appears to have been a desire on the part of the community to follow a conventional academic curriculum yet there has always been a suspicion that elements of the Nauruan culture, particularly spoken and written language, music and handicrafts, should be included.

Attempts have been made to obtain a balance between the two but the increasing exposure of students to other cultures, attitudes and values through home videos, cinema and, to a lesser extent, overseas newspapers has made this difficult to achieve. To add to this dilemma, the task of preparing Nauruan children to take their place in the Nauru of the future in the context of rapid change and economic uncertainty is a complex task. The answer seems to lie in placing appropriate emphases within the curriculum and not in creating a new curriculum. Because it was apparent that little emphasis had been placed on cultural aspects of the Nauruan society, in 1981 a decision was taken to survey a cross-section of the Nauruan community in order to gain information which would indicate where, in the opinion of the Nauruan community, emphasis should lie within the curriculum.

At meetings of local and expatriate teachers, twenty instructional goals considered to be appropriate to education in Nauru were identified. Most of the goals formed part of the existing school curriculum but some additional goals were included and care was taken to express the goals in terms which would be clearly understood by the members of the Nauruan community who were to be surveyed. The purpose of the survey was to establish priorities within the curriculum in the context that while each instructional goal was important, greater emphasis in time, effort and resources should be placed on some and less emphasis on others. The Nauruan people to be surveyed were asked to rate each goal in terms of
how important they felt. It was for the schools in Nauru to help students achieve the particular goal. The goals were to be rated according to the following scale:

1. Not important
2. Of some importance
3. Important
4. Very important
5. Extremely important

People were asked to try to distribute the five values as evenly as possible throughout the goals and it was emphasized that there were no “right” or “wrong” answers. The meeting of teachers then decided on the groups of people who would be requested to take part in the survey. The groups included Public Servants, Ministers, Parliamentarians, Church groups, business people, senior students, young employed and unemployed Nauruans, mothers, fathers, elders, teachers, labourers, tradesmen, secretaries — a complete cross section of the Nauruan community.

The survey forms were distributed to the participants by Nauruan teachers who had previously been well briefed and fully understood the procedure. In some instances the forms were simply explained and the participants were left to complete them at their leisure but in other instances, the distributors went through the survey paper item by item. The twenty “Goals for Education in Nauru”, together with the order of priority as indicated by the survey, are as follows:

1) **English Language** (4.75) — to speak, read, understand, write and spell in the English language.

2) **Mathematics** (4.56) — to understand basic mathematical ideas — to use the four operations with whole numbers, decimals, and fractions — to understand ideas of length, weight, time etc.

3) **Vocational Training** (4.13) — to be trained so that students will be able to obtain a job, appropriate to their ability and interests.

4) **Health** (3.85) — to know about and understand health, personal hygiene, physical fitness, mental health and drugs, the structure and functions of the body, diseases, food and nutrition.

5) **Nauruan Language** (3.75) — to speak, read and write the Nauruan language.

6) **Religion** (3.71) — to possess a knowledge of Christianity and practice of Christian beliefs and way of living.
7) **History and Civics (3.48)** — to possess knowledge of the history of Nauru and its people — to understand the rights and responsibilities of today's citizens — to gain knowledge of history of other countries — to understand simple economics.

8) **Home Economics and Manual Arts (3.47)** — to be trained in basic woodwork, automotive and electrical skills — to develop skills in cooking, needlework, and general home economics.

9) **Science (3.45)** — to gain a basic knowledge and understanding of plants, animals, air, water, the earth and space.

10) **The Future (3.44)** — to develop the qualities which will enable students, when they become adults, to take their place in other societies in the future, if necessary, e.g. Australia, New Zealand, Fiji.

11) **Nauruan Culture (3.41)** — to possess a sound understanding of Nauruan culture and ways of preserving it.

12) **Personal Development (3.28)** — to develop pride in oneself, a sense of independence, concern for others, the ability to get along with others and a sense of responsibility towards self and others.

13) **Safety (3.27)** — to understand and obey basic rules of safety related to home, road and sea.

14) **Geography (3.03)** — to develop an understanding of distances, direction and other geographical aspects of our world — to develop a sense of concern and responsibility for our environment.

15) **Family Life – Education (2.90)** — to understand the growth of life, parts and functions of the reproductive system, pre-natal development and birth.

16) **Physical Education (2.82)** — to develop a healthy, well co-ordinated body — to learn the skills necessary to play various sports.

17) **Arts & Crafts (2.58)** — To enjoy making things from different materials.

18) **Other People, their Culture and Religion (2.48)** — to know about and understand the lifestyle, culture, and religion of other people, particularly in the Pacific Region.

19) **Leisure and Recreational Activities (2.32)** — to be trained in the purposeful use of leisure time — to be exposed to a wide range of recreational activities.

20) **Music (2.30)** — to enjoy the beauty and creativity of island music and music from other sources.
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The results of the survey must be interpreted carefully and sensitively with a degree of knowledge and understanding of Nauruan society, the current education system and the expectations of the Nauruan people.

The development of skills in English language and Mathematics is seen as a top priority, and to enable Nauruans to accept positions of responsibility essential to the development of the nation, this is understandable.

Vocational training also has high priority since it is socially and economically desirable for young Nauruans to be employed and to be seen to be assisting the development of their country. Increasing awareness of the incidence of disease, particularly diabetes and hypertension, has prompted people to place a high priority on all aspects of health education. The teaching of the Nauruan language is not currently included in the curriculum but the survey indicates a strong desire to include such teaching, as a means of preserving the written language. (Nauruan is predominantly a spoken language and only a relatively small number of Nauruans are able to write the language). It was anticipated that Religion would rank as a high priority as the Nauruans are essentially a religious people. A group of five goals are closely clustered between 3.48 and 3.44 indicating a high priority, and include Nauruan Culture, and "The Future", while Art, Craft and Music rank low in importance. This should not be taken to mean that parents do not wish Art, Craft and Music to be included in the curriculum, but it does indicate that they consider less school time should be allocated to these areas, possibly because it is thought that they are adequately pursued at home. Music, particularly singing, remains a strong element of the Nauruan tradition and while it would appear that some of the traditional forms of handicrafts are disappearing, some are still quite widely practised.

The quite high priority given to the Nauruan Culture has strong implications for curriculum developers and indicates a desire on the part of the Nauruan people for their children to understand their culture and develop ways of preserving it. Above all, the survey indicated that while the Nauruan people were anxious that they become part of the world community through developing the necessary academic and vocational skills, there is also a desire to retain their special identity with its associated traditions and culture and that they perceive the education system as one means through which this can be achieved.

This paper has attempted to describe something of Nauru's past and its present. Indications are that although there is an understandable degree of
uncertainty of what the post-phosphate period may hold, the future will be exciting — change will continue on and all around Nauru. The desire of many countries to preserve the most worthwhile features of their traditional cultures is being repeated in this small island nation. It is a part of the world community but it is also unique. The people have expressed a strong desire to have the uniqueness of their culture recognized and reinforced and Education has a significant role to play in this process.

REFERENCES