

# What Worth Small Rural Schools?\*

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## **Abstract**

The initial impetus for establishing small rural schools in the countries of the South Pacific region seems to have come from varied sources — churches in the early days, governments and communities more recently. The schools therefore reflect, in varying degrees, the concern for the education of children in rural areas by the educational authorities on the one hand and the aspirations of rural communities on the other. This paper, firstly, attempts an examination of the worth of small rural schools in terms of their potential for meeting national and communal educational goals, and secondly, highlights pedagogical issues and challenges inherent in these schools.

## **Introduction**

A teacher who had been appointed to a place with an unpronounceable name arrived in the Chief Inspector's office:

"Sir, I have to take the train for 300 miles."

"Very well."

"Then Sir, I have to take a coach for 40 miles."

"Very well."

"Then Sir, I have to take a camel."

"Very well."

"But Sir, I'm married!"

"Married, eh! Then take two camels!"

(Percival R Cole, 1937:10)<sup>1</sup>

I find this episode rather instructive. For, while on the face of it, it narrates difficulties faced by teachers due to geographical factors of isolation and distance, I suggest it has a second deeper message. The message is that we ought to provide for the education of children

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irrespective of their parents' or community's location. It is this concern for providing educational opportunities to the children in rural areas that justifies small rural schools. This paper is an attempt at exploring the worth of small<sup>2</sup> rural schools in terms of meeting national and communal aspirations in the first place and then at highlighting pedagogical advantages, challenges and constraints inherent in small rural schools as educational institutions. The question as to whether small rural schools are very costly is posed for discussion at the end.

### **Small rural schools: tangible result of government policies and communal aspirations**

Most of the early schools in the South Pacific region owe their origin to missionary efforts. Colonial governments only sporadically came up with educational plans which resulted in a fairly uneven quantitative expansion in the education systems across the region. Independence naturally brought the whole question of development to the fore and education, among other sectors, received much publicity as an item on the national agenda for development. The heightened significance of educational matters at the national level has had several repercussions.

1. It has increased the awareness and expectations of the people generally of the role of governments in meeting the educational needs of the children in the country.
2. It has reinforced the value attached to the local school by each community which continues to view education as a means for the advancement of its children through achievement and the accepted reward system (of passing examinations and gaining entry into tertiary institutions or gaining employment in the public or private sectors).
3. It has at the same time increased community attachment to the institution which they own and which they perhaps look upon with some confidence as a vehicle for preserving and transmitting their culture, (language and religion in particular), so as to maintain the community's social well-being and identity.
4. It has also allowed those groups which consider themselves either disadvantaged or adversely affected by national education policies to become more vocal in their demands.

I shall attempt to illustrate these points with reference to education in Fiji.

Education in Fiji is a good example of how a system evolves in response to the perceived educational needs of various communities, aided by the government, and by social and religious organisations. It also illustrates how small rural schools have come to occupy a distinct place in the political, social and cultural thinking and aspirations of the communities which have either been introduced to, or have themselves established, schools for their children.

There are 665 primary and 129 secondary schools in Fiji today. Of these the government owns only 25, 14 primary and 11 secondary schools. The rest are owned by social and religious organisations but function under the co-ordination of the Ministry of Education. The government provides a per capita grant of \$12 to primary schools to facilitate fee-free primary education, trains and pays for primary teachers, meets eighty percent of salaries for secondary grant-in-aid teachers, provides building grants and remission of fees for needy secondary students and generally caters for and regulates professional matters such as curriculum and advisory services, examinations, schools broadcasts and library services.

However, the policy of the colonial government, endorsed in the post-independent development plans, has been to accept church and community initiatives in establishing and running schools. A notable change after independence was to promote education in the rural areas at the secondary level by contributing to and encouraging the establishment of Junior Secondary schools. In the main, however, most of Fiji's schools can trace their origin and still owe their existence to such sources as the Christian missions, Indian socio-religious organisations such as the Sanatan Dharm, the Arya Samaj, the Sangam, the Sikh Society, the Gujerat Society and the Fiji Muslim League, and the school 'committees' represent a locality or an interested group of people or association.

In Fiji, the rural sector has come under closer scrutiny since independence in 1970. The government has been concerned with "a more equitable distribution" of the benefits of development and in "improving social conditions, especially in rural areas" (DP9:2.2.1c).<sup>3</sup> Rural schools and rural education also feature fairly prominently in the present Development Plan (Chapter 10:135). The government intention is expressed as, "increasing access to education especially for the rural and urban poor", and "giving particular emphasis to Fijian education and to students in rural areas" (p.138).

The small rural schools catering for the children of communities far away from the administrative centres which control developments were naturally the last ones to receive much attention from the authorities. Their establishment and welfare were closely tied to the local people's fluctuating fortunes. This has fostered a certain affinity and identification between the people of an area and the institution they have seen suffer and progress with changing communal circumstances. Acknowledging the continuing vigilant and active response of the communities, religious bodies and school committees of one type or another, and alert to the educational aspirations of the people of Fiji, the 1969 Educational Commission<sup>4</sup> stated,

The history of education in Fiji is largely one of private initiative and effort. . . . It appears that the main reason for this unusual state of affairs is that the thirst for education among the communities has consistently outstripped the Government's ability to satisfy it. Consequently, the various Christian missions, and more recently various other religious and secular organisations have stepped into the breach (1969:2.13, p.6).

It is also true that around many small rural schools in Fiji revolve a set of beliefs, expectations and values promulgated and shared by the community or the organisation promoting the school. This makes the school a worthwhile and valued institution as it is seen to fit into the general 'scheme of things', in the overall cultural context of the community or the organisation concerned. While all schools follow a fairly uniform curriculum in the region their 'hidden curriculum' could differ markedly. Add to this the expected benefits from education in terms of career prospects and mobility of rural children and it is not difficult to realize why parents often sacrifice their limited resources on building and maintaining schools. It is suggested here that rural communities view schools as satisfying their social, cultural and psychological needs as much as catering for the educational needs of their children. Here are sketches of four rural primary schools which give some idea of the school-community relationships:

1. A Fijian primary school<sup>5</sup> with three teachers and 47 children who are taught in three groups as follows: classes 1-2; classes 3-4; and classes 5, 6, 7. The school building, a tin and timber structure was put up by the village community. Two teachers' quarters are also provided. The villagers use the school as a cultural centre, use the playground regularly after school for sports, maintain the school compound and relate to the teachers according to their cultural values (ie according to their due status in social and cultural ceremonies, looking upon them

- as important 'cultural' leaders for their children, etc.).
2. Two Indian primary schools<sup>6</sup> on either side of a road, each with a roll of about 200, owned by two separate organisations tracing their cultural heritage to the northern and southern states of India. While one school teaches Hindi, the other caters for the South Indian languages (Tamil, Telugu) and the South Indian culture. This school has a temple on the school compound, and annual religious and cultural programmes are organised by the school committee.
  3. A new primary school<sup>7</sup> recently built entirely by the efforts of the Fijian and Indian parents. The school has a four-classroom tin and timber building, piped water supply from a local source and a playing field. The school, run by the local committee, received the following assistance from the public:
    - (a) a \$200 and a \$100 cash donation each from a farmer and a labourer respectively;
    - (b) the donation of the land for the school from the local Fijian landowners;
    - (c) donations of items such as office equipment, sports gear, a transistor radio, a wall clock and mats.
  4. A secondary school<sup>8</sup> on an island serving 5-6 feeder schools, with boarding facilities. The students from the island no longer move to urban centres, away from their families and community to board with their relatives. The school has been built jointly by the community and the government and offers the normal secondary school curriculum and prepares students for all external examinations.

These four schools give us some indication of each community's expectations and commitment to education. These schools, like many others in the rural areas, carry the hopes and aspirations of the rural people. Their hopes include the development of their children, continuity and stability of their communities, preservation and transmission of their culture, language and values, and above all benefits from the government's efforts to develop the rural sector, including improvement of its social and economic conditions. The rural school therefore means much more to a rural community than merely a place for teaching the three Rs.

### **Small schools and pedagogical issues: 'Small is Beautiful'**

Pedagogical advantages inherent in small schools have been noted and extolled by those who, like Schumacher (1974)<sup>9</sup> argue that "small is

beautiful”, for it allows one to look at an activity “as if people mattered”. The stories of pioneering one-teacher country schools, though often nostalgic, do highlight some very sound pedagogical principles. Titles like, *The Schools Everyone Loves*<sup>10</sup>, *Nostalgic in the Bicentennial Year*<sup>11</sup>, and *Reincarnation of the One Room School-house*<sup>12</sup> are all suggestive of good things in small schools. The ‘virtues’ of small schools are discussed in terms of their potential for meeting the individual child’s needs and fostering worthwhile educational objectives especially in the area of personal relationships. For example, Low (1980)<sup>13</sup> writes, “Most Americans can’t help but keep a tender spot in their hearts for the ‘little red school-house’. It reminds us of simpler days — before education was big business, before it became a massive political and social issue.” She quotes a retired head teacher as saying, “The one-room school situation is very worthwhile — not just scholastically, but socially as well. It’s like a big family with everyone genuinely caring about everyone else.” and concludes, “The one-room school is not likely to come back, but perhaps its philosophy will. Learning, living, personal responsibility — that was the essence of the little red school-house.” Similar views are expressed by Huber (1975)<sup>14</sup> who argues that, “Most of the innovative concepts and philosophies found in the contemporary middle-schools existed by necessity in the traditional one-room school houses.”

Some of the stated advantages of the small schools include the following:

1. Smallness provides a sense of belonging where each individual is valued for his/her unique qualities. The personal nature of small schools is often contrasted with the large bureaucratized school where the individual is ‘lost’ in the crowd.
2. Small schools enable children in rural areas to remain and enjoy normal family life without being subjected to the undue pressures of adjusting to a new environment if they were to board away from home. (One of the areas of concern in Fijian education is the adverse psychological effects on the students who move away from home to stay with relatives or friends in the urban areas in order to attend secondary schools. Lack of guidance and care, disruption in life-style and a new environment have ruined the future of many youngsters. See Halliday and O’Brien (1986)<sup>15</sup> for the effects of transferring children to a new school and environment.)
3. Small schools perforce have to resort to teaching-learning strategies seen as pedagogically sound practices. These include cross-age peer group help, and flexible approaches to instruction such as individual-

ised instruction, independent study, team-teaching and group projects.

4. The flexible teaching approaches encourage resourcefulness, initiative and independence in students and generally provide more opportunities to promote the skills and attitude of 'learning to learn'.
5. Small schools have to lay emphasis on the basics to give children an adequate basis for independent study and cross-age tutoring.
6. The smallness facilitates teacher-student interaction and helps develop positive personal relationships which in turn raise student morale, self-esteem, etc.
7. Small schools are closer to the communities they serve and possess greater potential for utilising the community as a resource.
8. Small schools find it easier to integrate mildly handicapped pupils into the ordinary classroom.

One finds amusing parallels between the small rural schools of the South Pacific region and the 'innovative schools' of developed countries in the process of rediscovering such principles as individualised learning and cross-age grouping, and the humanisation goal of education. Amusing because while the teachers in our region, for example, have to teach cross-age groups (in composite — or multi-class situations) by necessity, their counterparts in the more advanced systems are resorting to it on pedagogical grounds. Similarly, while teachers in the region bemoaned teaching in 'see through' classrooms or in large halls, 'open-plan' advocates in the United Kingdom were breaking down walls to open up the 'box-like' classrooms in order to implement new ideas on teaching.

However, a realistic look at the issue of pedagogical advantages in the region demands a closer examination of the constraints and challenges in teaching in small schools.

### **Constraints and challenges**

The potential worth of small rural schools in the region in serving the aspirations of the community and the development goals of respective governments depends heavily on the perceptions of the teachers and education administrators. It is argued here that some of the issues perceived by the teachers as constraints are perhaps due to the limitations imposed by the systems and conventional teaching practices in the region. A re-interpretation of these issues may help us to see them not as

constraints but as reasonable professional challenges to be faced by teachers and administrators alike. The re-orientation is necessary not only so that some of the perceived constraints may be accepted as normal professional matters but also in order to explode the myth fairly widely spread in the region that neither rural children nor their teachers can achieve 'good' results in education.

Let me once again use a case study from Fiji. In a pilot study<sup>16</sup> aimed primarily at recording and analysing teachers' perceptions in curriculum implementation in two rural primary schools, it was noted that the constraints perceived by teachers were pedagogical, situational and system-specific. In brief they were as follows:

	Based on Teacher- Interview	Based on Observation
<i>Pedagogical</i>		
1. Limited repertoire of teaching behaviours on the part of teachers resulting in a greater emphasis on teacher-centred training.		x
2. Difficulties in achieving the objectives set for each lesson due to reduced instruction time.	x	x
3. Lack of suitable teaching-learning resources.	x	x
4. Ineffective 'occupation' activities for one class while the teacher is busy with the other.		x
<i>Situational</i>		
1. Disturbance to the class working on its own from teaching activities in the other class. (The classes with assigned occupational activities found to be consistently paying attention to such attractions as teacher-talk, humorous incidents and new subject matter from the other class.)	x	x
2. Distractions from the neighbours, due to choral work, loud reading, music lessons etc. as the school buildings are not designed to contain such noise.	x	x
3. Rural environment of pupils (physical and social) does not provide adequate support to classroom learning.	x	

*System-Specific*

1. Recommended curriculum materials, teaching

strategies and timetables are generally meant for straight-class teaching thus reducing the available instruction time for each class in a composite set-up to almost half.	x	x
2. Unsuitability of pupil textbooks for independent study by children.		x
3. Examination pressures force teachers to concentrate on the examination classes, eg. classes six and eight receive greater attention in the five and six, and seven and eight composite combinations.	x	x

It appears reasonable to assume that the features of the education system and the cultural and historical background of schools will influence greatly, if not actually determine, the teachers' perceptions of constraints and challenges in a given situation.

The teachers in these two schools clearly recognised the fact that rural schools were different in many respects from urban and semi-urban schools. The difference, they pointed out, lay in the home backgrounds of the children, the degree and the level of participation of parents in their children's education, limited resources and the constraints of teaching composite classes. The challenge perceived by teachers was achieving better results in examinations — Intermediate Examination in the school with classes 1-7 and the Eighth Year Examination in the school with classes 1-8.

The two head teachers also acknowledged that their students were "well behaved and very respectful" and discipline was not an issue in their schools. The head teachers were grateful to the community and the school management for providing whatever physical facilities they could. They were also fairly certain that the community and the management could not provide much more than they had provided already.

The teachers pointed out the absence of any 'academic tradition' in the locality and took it on themselves to motivate students to succeed in external examinations. (One head teacher commented that 'not a single boy or girl from this locality has yet made it to a tertiary institution'.)

A major concern of these teachers was the effective implementation of the existing curriculum in composite classes. Teachers generally adhere to the suggestions or teaching materials, class organisation and teaching

methods given by the Curriculum Development Unit in Suva.

The suggested approach of alternating teaching with occupation activity in a composite class situation obviously imposes a rigid pattern, and if adhered to strictly, leaves little room for the normal development of a lesson as seen by the teacher. However, even within the suggested approach it is essential that:

- (a) a useful independent activity can be arranged for a class while the teacher is working with the other,
- (b) the children on their own can pursue such an activity independently without much disturbance from the other class,
- (c) there is at least a minimum supply of teaching-learning resources which the teacher can draw upon in developing suitable activities for a class, and
- (d) that the initial preparation of teachers and subsequent inservice programmes have provided the teacher with a repertoire of professional skills to handle composite class teaching effectively.

The teachers pointed out that in following the suggested approach they faced difficulties in achieving the set objectives for each lesson as the teaching time was reduced by half. They perceived the reduced instruction time as contributing to a gradual erosion of standards in their classes making it increasingly difficult to cope with the prescribed curriculum as children move up the class levels.

### Reduced Instruction Time (RIT) as illustrated in eight lessons observed

XXXXXXXXXX = Teacher directly involved in teaching, guiding etc.  
XXXXXXXXXX

////////// = Class occupied on independent activity.  
//////////

CLASS		FIRST 10 mins	SECOND 10 mins	THIRD 10 mins
Lesson 1	Hindi Oral	XXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXX	XXXXXX XXXXXX	
		////////// //////////	////////// //////////	

Lesson 2	English Oral	3	xxx//////// xxx////////	//////// ////////	
		4	xxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxx xxxxxx	
Lesson 3	Mathematics	3	xxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxx	///xxxxxxxx ///xxxxxxxx	xxxxx xxxxx
		4	///////// /////////	xxxx//////// xxxx////////	//////xxxxxx //////xxxxxx
Lesson 4	Social Science	7	xxx//////// xxx////////	///////// /////////	xxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxx
		8	xxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxx	///////// /////////
Lesson 5	Mathematics	1	xxxxxxxxx/ xxxxxxxxx/	///////// /////////	xxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxx
		2	/////////xxx /////////xxx	xxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxx	///////// /////////
Lesson 6	English Oral	1	///////// /////////	//////// ////////	
		2	xxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxx xxxxxxx	
Lesson 7	Social Studies	3	///////// /////////	//////xxxx //////xxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxx
		4	xxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxx/ xxxxxxx/	///////// /////////
Lesson 8	English Activities	5	xxxxxxxxx/ xxxxxxxxx/	///////// /////////	xxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxx
		6	xx//////// xx////////	xxxxxxx/ xxxxxxx/	///////// /////////
		7	xx//////// xx////////	//////xxxx //////xxxx	///////// /////////

It is rather unfortunate that the widespread use of the straight class teaching approach geared towards teaching for examinations has discouraged innovation in matters dealing with teaching in rural schools. In comparison to straight class teaching composite class teaching has gained almost general endorsement as being difficult and inevitably leading to lower standards.

It is suggested that teachers' perceptions of constraints and challenges need to be interpreted within the context of the main features of the present education system. For example, when teachers in rural schools perceive the reduced instruction time in composite classes as a constraint in covering the required curriculum, they are implicitly accepting a number of other things, such as the need to cover a prescribed curriculum in totality step by step, the suggested approach to composite class teaching alternating teacher instruction with independent activity, expository teaching and so on. Similarly, when some teachers in rural schools give almost 'ready-made' explanations of parental apathy and lack of motivation in students towards external examinations one begins to question such explanations and to wonder whether this is not a case of stereotyping.

A fresh look at the common features of the system and primary programmes may prove useful in widening our approach to teaching, curriculum development and assessment procedures.

A 'challenge model' rather than 'deficit model' may help in this re-orientation. Linda Dove<sup>17</sup> (1982) uses the two models effectively in discussing the deployment and training of teachers for remote rural schools and argues that, "the rural deficit model tends to encourage the use of compulsory posting and incentives while the rural challenge model searches for better ways of preparing teachers for service in remote schools." It is suggested here that teachers' perceptions of constraints, as noted in the case of teachers in the two schools looked at in Fiji, tend to highlight deficits in rural situations when compared with schools in and around the urban centres. Unfortunately, too, the deficit model encourages stereotyping and biases in teachers' perceptions of issues concerning rural teaching. The rural challenge model, on the other hand, has the potential for questioning the assumptions underlying the current policies and practice. By adopting a more positive model, it is likely that a number of issues which we presently see as constraints can be viewed as reasonable professional challenges in rural schools.

Pedagogical areas which may require immediate attention include curriculum development, teacher education, advisory and support services, and the assessment and reward procedures. For instance, the possibility of freeing primary schools from external examinations and encouraging varied teaching strategies which capitalize on the smallness and close community relations must be explored. The centralized

curriculum development and advisory services to schools has definite advantages. The curriculum developers, however, need to provide a more integrated curriculum for rural schools better suited to varied teaching methods than curriculum material strictly on 'subject' lines with pre-determined time-allocations and the whole class teaching approach.

Teacher education and teaching-learning resources together could make a lot of difference in the quality of education in rural schools. In small systems of the region, a centralized approach, once again, for developing and distributing essential educational resources would help reduce costs and pool professional talents for the benefit of all schools. Teacher education programmes both pre-service and in-service, equipping teachers for rural schools with essential theoretical and practical skills and a deep appreciation of constraints and challenges of teaching in rural schools would indeed be most helpful.

### **Are small rural schools really costly?**

It is true that small schools cost more to run in comparison with larger schools if one looks at per capita costs. But is the worth of a small school to be measured purely in monetary terms? This paper has taken the position that small schools mean a great deal more to the communities they serve, to governments anxious to provide reasonable equity in education and in the benefits of development to all people, be they urban or rural dwellers. True, the smallness of rural schools does pose special constraints if rigid pedagogical practices are applied. However, these schools can obviously present us with professional challenges that are not unreasonable. And seen in the context of societal aspirations and development policies of the island nations of the South Pacific, the small rural school is indeed an important institution.

### **Notes**

1. Pervical R. Cole (1937) *The Rural School in Australia*. Australia: Melbourne University Press.
2. A small school in Fiji is one with 10-170 children and has up to five teachers.
3. *Development Plan Nine 1986-1990* (1985) Suva: Government Printer.
4. Report of the 1969 Fiji Education Commission, *Education for Modern Fiji*. Suva: Government Printer.

5. Personal study of Nubu District School, Northern Division, Fiji.
6. Personal knowledge of Tagi Tagi Indian and Sangam Schools, Western Division, Fiji.
7. Personal study of Kelikoso Primary School, Northern Division, Fiji.
8. Schools such as Gau Junior Secondary School, Lomaiviti Province, Eastern Division, Fiji.
9. Schumacher, E.F. (1974) *Small is Beautiful*. Gr. Britain: Blond and Briggs Ltd.
10. Low, Janet (1979) 'The Schools Everyone Loves.' *NRTA Journal* XXX, San Diego.
11. Burgess, W.V. (1976) 'Nostalgia in the Bicentennial Year.' *Today's Education* NEA, Washington, D.C.
12. Huber, J.D. (1975) 'Reincarnation of the One Room Schoolhouse.' *The Clearing House* 49 (3), Washington DC.
13. Low, Janet, op cit.
14. Huber, J.D., op cit.
15. Halliday, Ian (1986) *Secondary Education on the Island of Tiree, Scotland*. CPW/CS/3.
16. Personal research on curriculum implementation in two rural schools in Fiji, under USP research grant.
17. Linda Dove (1972) 'The Development and Training of Teachers for Remote Rural Schools in Less-Developed Countries.' *International Review of Education* XXVIII.