

**Knowledge, Schooling and Post-school Opportunities: an exploration of I-Kiribati parents' perceptions of secondary education**

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**Introduction**

As is the case in most other Pacific Islands, formal education in Kiribati is based on an imported, predominantly western model. This form of education was instigated initially by Christian missionaries and then, in the early 1900s, by the British colonial administrators in order to prepare an elite few for administrative jobs in the colony. On the eve of the new millenium, this form of education is still the norm but has been made available to more students, despite very little growth in the economy, in order to provide employment for students when they leave school. The parents, above all others, desire this form of secondary education for their children, often at the expense of other forms of knowledge, such as vocational and cultural knowledge.

This article reports on a study of the range of aspirations for knowledge, schooling and post-school opportunities held by I-Kiribati parents for their secondary school aged children. In particular, the study explores which aspects of knowledge, both I-Kiribati and western, parents perceive as most important for their children to possess. It also examines the role of the secondary school and the body of knowledge that parents perceive the school should be responsible for transmitting to their children. Furthermore, the study seeks to establish parents' post-school aspirations and expectations as far as employment and life chances for their children are concerned.

The study takes as its main premise the desire by I-Kiribati parents for their children to possess a largely western body of knowledge through formal schooling for the purposes of gaining cash employment on completion of secondary schooling. This premise

is based on relatively dated material: a 1975 rural and socio-economic survey (Geddes et al. 1979) and an analysis of the Community High School experiment in Kiribati in 1980 (Hindson 1982, 1985). Also drawn upon is material published by a number of commentators (Baba 1991; Teasdale 1985; Kaye 1986) who state that similar aspirations are found among parents across the Pacific region.

Accompanying the premise that a western body of knowledge has achieved dominance is the concept of subjugated knowledges (Foucault 1977, cited in McHoul and Grace 1997:59), that is, in the Kiribati context, knowledge of a cultural and vocational nature which has been undervalued by I-Kiribati parents. The desire for the dominant knowledges by I-Kiribati parents for their children is quite possibly a result of the perception of the status and comforts that cash employment can bring compared to the alternative of subsistence village life (Talu and Tekonnang 1979: 109). Possession of the dominant knowledges is perceived to greatly increase employment chances and hence power to a certain degree (Foucault 1980). A related concept which also sheds some light on the Kiribati situation is hegemony. Hegemony is the "ideological/cultural domination of one class by another, achieved by engineering consensus through controlling the content of cultural forms and major institutions" (Jary and Jary 1991: 271). In Kiribati, there seems to be a consensus among education clients for an academic western education, yet clearly not all benefit from it in terms of cash employment. In 1997 only 45% of primary school leavers were given a place in secondary school (Tekawa 1998)<sup>1</sup> The *Report on the 1995 Census of Population* (Tiroa 1997) indicates that only 17% of the population over the age of 15 years were working in the cash sector in that year.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1998 a plan was implemented to give all primary school leavers access to secondary school up to Form 3 level by 2002 (Ministry of Education, Training and Technology 1998).

## **Methodology**

The research was conducted in July 1998. Data was collected chiefly by structured interview (see Appendix 1 for Interview Guide), with minor roles assigned to informal interviews and document collection. Thirty interviews with parents were conducted with the help of an I-Kiribati research assistant. These parents had children who were about to commence secondary school or were currently in secondary school, or who had recently completed secondary school. Purposive sampling was done to ensure a broad range of backgrounds among participants (see Appendix 2) and in order to establish the range of aspirations existing among I-Kiribati parents. An overall balance was struck according to the employment status, education background, rurality, ethnicity, age and gender of participants. Interviews were recorded in either English or I-Kiribati, transcribed and, where necessary, translated into English. Transcripts were then coded according to units of meaning, and analysed.

## **Results**

Participants' responses reveal a strong desire by parents for their children to possess an I-Kiribati body of knowledge (see Table 1). This desire exists in parents from all backgrounds in the sample. Rurality, education attainment, gender, age or ethnicity do not appear to play a part in the desire. The body of knowledge consists of a range of practical skills, the type of which varies from participant to participant. There exists a common desire for such skills as toddy cutting, fishing and weaving. This desire exists even where participants do not possess the skills themselves. When it comes to identifying desired I-Kiribati values, participants express a much smaller range of responses (see Table 2). Respect for others was the

most frequent, with the *mwaneaba* system<sup>2</sup>, family obligations, the role of girls and the values of the church stated as important by some.

**Table 1:** Range and frequency of desired I-Kiribati skills

Skill	Freq.	Skill	Freq.
toddy cutting	20	healing	2
fishing	15	sailing/navigating	1
cultivation	10	weather forecasting	1
mat weaving	10	home skills	1
house building	7	cooking	1
canoe building	7	genealogy	1
thatch weaving	3	dancing	1
string making	3		

Note: Frequency indicates the number of respondents identifying the skill as desirable

**Table 2:** Range and frequency of desired I-Kiribati values

Values	Frequency
respecting others	17
<i>mwaneaba</i> system	5
family obligations	2
behaviour of girls	2
church	1

Note:(as for Table 1)

<sup>2</sup> The *mwaneaba* system refers to a complex web of political, religious, social and cultural norms, protocol and expectations which govern people's behaviour and responsibilities.

Perceived benefits in possessing such skills and values fall into two broad categories (see Table 3). The first category is utilitarian, in which possession of I-Kiribati knowledge is considered a means of making money or of enhancing survival, better health or self reliance. The second category is for a more collective purpose where possession of I-Kiribati knowledge is for a greater cultural identity, maintenance of culture or the establishment of good relationships with others.

**Table 3:** Range and frequency of purposes for possession of I-Kiribati knowledge

Utilitarian	Freq.	Collective	Freq.
survival	9	maintain culture	9
make money	5	identity	3
self-reliance	3	establishment of good	
future benefits		relationships	1
health benefits			

Participant response also reveals a strong desire for a western body of knowledge (see Table 4). Most participants list school subjects, indicating a belief that the gaining of western knowledge and the institution of the school are closely related. The most common responses are the subjects English and Mathematics. Participants found great difficulty in identifying desired values (see Table 5) but a small number of participants reveal a desire for more democratic parent/child relationships, for critical yet constructive thinking toward decisions made by authorities, for independence from family, for modes of behaviour linked to Christianity and for the ability to reason.

**Table 4:** Range and frequency of desired western skills

Skill	Freq.	Skill	Freq.
English	15	Accounting	1
Mathematics	12	I-Kiribati literacy	1
Art	1	Religious Instruction	1
Science	6	Industrial Arts	1
Music	1	Political Science	1
Geography	2	Computing	1
History	1	Mechanics	1
		No preference	1

**Table 5:** Range and frequency of desired western values

Value	Freq.
democratic parent/child relationships	3
critical thinking	3
independence from family	2
appropriate behaviour	1
reasoning	1

Reasons given for the possession of such a body of knowledge (see Table 6) are not solely for purposes of gaining cash employment, which perhaps contrasts with desires of parents in earlier studies (Geddes et al. 1979, Hindson 1982, 1985). Other responses closely related to careers and jobs include reasons of status, qualifications, access to goods, but also stated were reasons such as enhanced relationships with others, communication with and understanding of other cultures, and self growth. It is possible that some changes in attitude have occurred in the almost twenty years since the demise of the Community High School scheme in which parents' desires for cash employment were most clearly articulated (Hindson

1982, 1985 and Tata 1980). The harsh realities of finding cash employment may have forced parents into seeing other benefits of western knowledge in this time.

**Table 6:** Range and frequency of perceived benefits in possessing western knowledge

Utilitarian	Freq.	Collective	Freq.
career	12	communication	5
financial gain		5 coping with change	3
qualifications		3 self-growth	2
status	1	better relationships	2
goods acquisition	1		

Participants perceive a range of changes in I-Kiribati culture over their own lifetimes (see Table 7). These changes reflect a general westernisation of I-Kiribati society. Almost all changes are in the area of relationships and include gender roles and marriage, the role of children and the authority of old men. Other aspects include the declining use of ill-intended magico-religious practices and the increasing importance of money.

**Table 7:** Perceived areas of change in I-Kiribati culture and frequency of response

Perceived area of change	Freq.
magico-religious practices	4
gender roles	3
children's roles	2
money	2
relationships	2
<i>mwaneaba</i>	1
diet	1

Most participants desire the main role of the school to be transmission of a western body of knowledge but they are willing to include knowledge of an I-Kiribati nature as long as the transmission of the former is seen to have priority. Only one participant disagrees with the inclusion of any I-Kiribati content at all. In some cases, participants see the family as the chief means by which I-Kiribati knowledge is to be transmitted and are only willing to give such knowledge a place in formal schooling where parents are not able to teach children themselves.

As far as perception of what schools are actually doing with regard to I-Kiribati knowledge, responses indicate a very superficial treatment of that knowledge in the curriculum. Though communication between school and home is limited due to distance, responses from school officials confirm the superficial treatment. Participants cited Cultural Day, Kiribati Studies and the presence of visiting experts as the means by which schools encourage I-Kiribati knowledge. Possibly, many participant responses concerning the contribution of school to cultural breakdown lack validity. Management of students in boarding schools is blamed for a range of problems such as improper hairstyle, bad manners, inappropriate male-female relationships and lack of punctuality. However, these perceived problems also exist in the general urban community of South Tarawa. Perhaps most valid are the responses from education officials who give several structural aspects of the school system, such as an administration unsympathetic to non-academic knowledge in the curriculum and a teaching force untrained in cultural knowledge and its transmission, as ways in which schools contribute to cultural breakdown.

The study also reveals the problematic nature of including more I-Kiribati knowledge in the curriculum as it conflicts with the concept of secret family knowledge and the "tradition of silence" (Rennie 1981). Furthermore, locating I-Kiribati people skilled and willing to share knowledge with students on a voluntary

basis is difficult, as payment for services places greater strain on an already stretched education budget.

Participant response with regard to post-school life chances reveals an aspiration chiefly for a place in cash employment. Two participants express their aspirations in terms of working for the church or in terms of behaviour. In only some responses is the job type specified, and in these cases they are jobs requiring high levels of training. From these responses it is clear that parents see that the prime role of the schools is to prepare students for employment in the cash sector. The benefits expressed earlier with regard to possessing a western body of knowledge, that is, communication and understanding of other cultures, must be seen as a secondary role of formal schooling.

Participants firmly believe that their aspirations will reach fruition if they, the parents, provide financially for their children's schooling needs. Aspirations will also be fulfilled if the children are obedient and work hard at their studies. Participants do not see the state of the economy or the government as playing any part in their children's post school life chances.

### **Discussion**

This study draws on Foucault's notion of dominant and subjugated knowledges in an attempt to explore parents' perceptions of various knowledges transmitted through formal and informal learning systems in Kiribati. The study reveals parents' perception of the school's main role to be that of transmitting an academic body of knowledge. This finding generally concurs with Geddes et al. (1979) and Hindson (1982, 1985). Both the previous studies reveal a similar desire among parents. Western knowledge, therefore, remains a dominant knowledge as far as parents and the school are concerned. Accompanying a dominant knowledge is a set of knowledges that are perceived as less important, or subjugated. The study reveals that I-Kiribati knowledge is not considered as

important as western knowledge. Parents perceive the school to have a lesser role in transmitting it. However, the study does suggest that the level of subjugation is perhaps not as low as in previous studies. The willingness by most parents in the study to include it in the formal secondary curriculum and the listing of a wide range of benefits in possessing I-Kiribati knowledge tend to support this claim. Furthermore, the listing of non-job benefits in the possessing of western knowledge suggests a softening of desire for that body of knowledge.

The study confirms the connection between dominant knowledges and power. Responses indicate parents perceive a strong link between the possession of western knowledge and cash employment. Cash employment leads to a more comfortable lifestyle and therefore power in those terms.

The study reveals, to some extent, elements of hegemonic relationships in the present educational structure and parents' desires for schooling. Responses reveal a widespread desire for a type of education that, due to economic limitations, will not achieve for all parents and their children their aspirations for employment. Parents do not modify aspirations to match the reality of few employment opportunities. Neither are aspirations modified by the fact that many students are forced out of secondary school at various stages because the system is not equipped to enroll all students to the end of secondary schooling. In general, consent is given to a system by many families that, in the end, disadvantages them and their children. However, those who gain the most in the hegemonic relations are not clearly identified by the study. There are certainly successful products of the western system of education who have gained positions where important decisions regarding educational policy and practice are made. However, in Kiribati it is somewhat simplistic to suggest that these decision-makers carry out their role to maintain their own positions. In a small Pacific state such as Kiribati, the local decision-makers are to a large extent at the mercy of those in positions of power outside of Kiribati. It is felt

that those individuals and groups who dictate the nature of the global market economy and also those involved in overseas aid are possibly the 'rulers' in a wider set of hegemonic relations.

### **Implications for policy and practice**

The study reveals a willingness by parents to talk about their children's education. Where secondary schools are separated from South Tarawa or from a student's island of origin there are few means by which home and school communication is possible. This study recommends that ways be investigated by which parents can have a greater voice in the curriculum implementation process of their children's school. Although parents may have little opportunity to play a part in the implementation of core curriculum areas, there are many other areas where parental influence could be beneficial. For example, student management in non-classroom hours and extra-curricular activities similar to but more extensive than the already existing Cultural Day.

At an administrative level there also needs to be a means by which parents can provide input into curriculum decision making. This study reveals a desire by parents for a greater amount of I-Kiribati knowledge to be transmitted through formal schooling. Perhaps a forum needs to be organised, whereby parents and other education sector interest groups such as employers, the churches and aid donors can provide input for curriculum decision-making.

The study reveals that the present curriculum transmits western knowledge and I-Kiribati knowledge usually as two separate entities, each having their own distinct time in the program of the school. Means need to be explored by which a western body of knowledge and an I-Kiribati body of knowledge can be fused in a way similar to that suggested by Teasdale (1998). For example, the I-Kiribati skill of toddy cutting could be treated from the viewpoint of botanical science, that is, plant structure

and function. Such a curriculum would also possibly further increase the status of I-Kiribati knowledge, from its present subjugated position.

The study confirms the importance placed on examinations in gaining a place in secondary education and maintaining one's position in it. The study also reveals how examinations often dictate the level of importance placed upon certain subjects by teachers and students. Means need to be devised to ensure that all learning areas are given equal treatment in the classroom.

Finally, the study reveals an expectation among parents for their children to gain cash employment. In the light of Kiribati's limited economic growth, such expectations seem unrealistic. It is recommended that national development planning and the role education has in achieving development plans be communicated by appropriate means to the community, so that parents and students can make better-informed choices about schooling and post-school opportunities. It is possible that the Community High School scheme of the late 1970s would have won more support from parents if its goals had been communicated more clearly.

### **Further research**

This study was preliminary in that its main aim was to derive a range of perceptions held by I-Kiribati parents on knowledge, schooling and post-school opportunities. A more comprehensive study is needed to gauge with accuracy the extent to which the perception exists in the general population. In particular, a survey needs to be conducted which incorporates the perception of outer island dwellers. Furthermore, if the present study does contribute in any way to debate on appropriate curriculum for secondary schools in Kiribati, then it would also be useful to examine the perceptions of others with a stake in education such as the students themselves, employers, churches and aid donors.

Data revealed during the course of this study suggest that a follow-up study be done in the areas of 'secret family knowledge' and the perceived barrier that it presents to incorporating a greater level of I-Kiribati knowledge in the curriculum. It would also be useful to examine the relevance of maintaining elements of curriculum and school structure from the colonial period in I-Kiribati history in the present day secondary school system. Relevance of curriculum needs to be assessed in relation to the perceived needs of the various groups in the education sector.

This study focuses mainly on curriculum content and the dominance of western knowledge. Further research is necessary to assess the process by which content is transmitted. It is possible that I-Kiribati knowledge, in particular values and beliefs, may be transmitted to a much greater extent through teachers' classroom practice and the hidden curriculum.

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## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Interview Guide**

#### **Questions**

1. What island are you from?
2. How long have you been on South Tarawa?
3. For what purpose did you come to South Tarawa?
4. Would you consider going back? Why or why not?
5. How many children do you have? What are their age?
6. Could you describe the sort of schooling you have had?

#### **Knowledge and Skills**

1. Could you list some I-Kiribati knowledge and skills that you consider important for young people to have these days?
  - skills such as weaving, fishing, etc.
  - knowledge such as the *mwaneaba* and its *katei* (customs and culture)
2. Why are these things important?
  - why should young people need to know these things?
  - their purpose
  - is there anything that has lost importance?
3. Could you state some *I-Matang* (western) knowledge and skills that you consider important for young people to have these days?
  - things taught in school
  - ideas
4. Why are these things important?

### **Schooling**

1. What sort of things do you think schools should be teaching young people?
  - which of the knowledges?
  - is there anything that the school should not be teaching?
2. How did you learn the I-Kiribati knowledge and skills that you have?
3. In what ways, if any, do schools promote *katei*?
4. In what ways, if any, do schools go against *katei*?

### **Employment/Life Chances**

1. Given that all things are possible, what would you like to see your children doing at the end of their schooling?
2. Do you expect that this will be possible for your children to achieve? Why or why not?
  - what will make it possible/difficult?
3. Ask Questions One and Two for each of the children.

**APPENDIX 2**

**Demographic data pertaining to sample**

Characteristic	Females % n = 11	Males % n = 19	Total n = 30
Age			
25-29	67	33	3
30-34	0	100	0
35-39	33	67	3
40-44	40	60	5
45-49	50	50	2
50-54	30	70	10
55-59	50	50	2
60-64	25	75	4
65-69	0	100	1
Religion			
K.P.C. <sup>1</sup>	44	56	18
Catholic	16	84	6
Other	32	68	6
Rurality			
Rural	39	61	18
Urban	33	67	12
Employment			
White collar	33	67	15
Blue collar	50	50	2
Village or Home Duties	38	62	13
Ethnicity			
I-Kiribati	10	15	25
Tuvaluan	1	4	5

<sup>1</sup>Kiribati Protestant Church