

2. The Aims of Practical Curricula

This chapter has three sections. It discusses (a) the justification for teaching practical subjects, (b) the most appropriate stage for them in the education system, and (c) some common but unrealistic expectations.

(a) Why Teach Practical Subjects?

Most governments consider practical subjects a way to develop appropriate skills and attitudes. The Minister of Education in Belize, for example, has declared:

Our education system must integrate the world of study with the world of work. A school cannot be divorced from its social and economic environment. The value and dignity of work starts in the home, but must be pursued in the schools. Our young people should come out of school with some measure of marketable skills, and should be well disposed to work with hands and minds in every sector of the country's economy.

Similar views are held by many other government and community leaders.

Although practical subjects have long been taught in schools all over the world, recent years have seen an upsurge of interest in them. Rising school-leaver unemployment has been the main cause of this. Governments are anxious to avoid the social problems that arise from unemployment. They also recognise that people without work are a wasted resource, and it is important for all manpower to be put to productive use. Governments commonly assert that a practical school curriculum can reduce unemployment and thus help both individuals and the nation as a whole.

Practical subjects aim to reduce unemployment in two ways:

- * they try to give young people skills which employers are likely

(b) Practical Education at what Level?

Because primary school children are too small for heavy manual labour, effective teaching of practical subjects is hard to introduce at that level. By the time children enter secondary school they are older, they have begun to show what sorts of things they are good at, and they have better ideas of the work that they are likely to do as adults.

Because choice of subject options has such a strong implication for final careers, however, many governments try to retain flexibility as long as possible. They commonly have a broad junior secondary curriculum which can be followed by all students, and only require specialisation either at the senior secondary level or in separate technical/vocational colleges.

The pattern in St Lucia is fairly typical of the Commonwealth Caribbean. Students are obliged to take at least one of seven practical subjects at the junior secondary level, and 13 other subjects are offered as options at the senior secondary level:

Subjects offered at the junior secondary level:

- Agricultural Science,
- Art & Craft,
- General Electricity,
- Graphics,
- Home Economics,
- Metalwork,
- Woodwork.

Subjects offered at the senior secondary level:

- Agricultural Science,
- Bookkeeping,
- Clothing & Textiles,
- Food & Nutrition,
- General Electricity,
- Home Management,
- Metals,
- Office Practice,
- Principles of Accounts,
- Principles of Business,
- Technical Drawing,
- Typing,
- Woodwork.

(c) Unrealistic Expectations

As already mentioned, practical secondary education is not a new idea. In most Third World countries, missionaries and government education officers have placed great stress on manual work since the introduction of schooling. Often, for reasons that should be noted, their efforts have borne little fruit.

(i) Practical Education and Jobs

The word 'job' refers to formal, wage-earning employment. Jobs may be contrasted with self-employment, which is discussed in the next section.

In any country, the supply and nature of available jobs is determined by a great many factors, of which very few are under the control of the Ministry of Education. They include:

- the nature of international competition,
- the size of the local market,
- availability of raw materials,
- the types of technology employed,
- prevailing interest rates,
- regulations on employment, minimum wages and trade unionism,
and
- the skills of the labour force.

Introduction of practical subjects in secondary schools can have some effect on the last of these. However, many employers require such specific skills that all real training is either done on the job or is sponsored by employers at the post-secondary stage. By themselves, therefore, practical subjects in the secondary schools can do very little to *create* jobs.

(ii) Practical Education and Self-Employment

It is also hard for practical secondary education to generate effective self-employment. The skills taught in schools are often too shallow, and individuals need many complementary skills to become successful. In particular, they need knowledge of:

- places and ways to obtain raw materials,
- places and ways to sell their services/finished products,

- ways to protect machinery from theft and accidental damage,
- methods of accounting,
- types and benefits of insurance, and
- places and ways to borrow money.

In societies with strong family systems, the successful entrepreneur must also know how to honour social obligations without being exploited by them. For example, many small retail businesses have been made bankrupt by general expectations that the storekeeper will give free or low-priced goods to relatives and friends. But this type of required skill cannot easily be taught in the secondary school.

(iii) Practical Education and Attitudes

The third common hope is that introduction of practical subjects will change pupils' attitudes, and make secondary school graduates more willing to work with their hands. There may be some force in the idea. However, a much stronger determinant of attitudes is the structure of the economy. If pupils see that manual workers receive lower incomes and work much harder than non-manual ones, they are unlikely to change their job preferences.

This fact partly explains the scale of youth unemployment in less developed countries. Although individuals know that they could make some money by becoming self-employed entrepreneurs, they also know that they could make much more money (and have better working conditions and security) in wage-earning jobs. It often makes sense for these individuals to refuse to become self-employed and instead to devote their time to job-hunting. Although very few people succeed, the rewards may be sufficiently high to make the gamble worth trying.