

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-2

Uncle Joe's Guest House
P.O. Box 319
Banjul, The Gambia
February 12, 1980

The New Curriculum

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Wheelock House
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Dear Peter,

Patriotism and self-interest seem to be antithetical forces in The Gambia, at least for those citizens who have the knowledge and skills to improve markedly the conditions of the country. The more good a person can do for the nation, the greater also is his ability to improve the quality of his life, but here these two worthwhile goals are not considered to be compatible. The well qualified individual who wants to get ahead in his career and make a lot of money must abandon feelings of commitment to his job. This results in a structural instability in the progressive component of Gambian society. The remedy is to impose sanctions on professional irresponsibility, but this the society has yet to do.

I draw this conclusion from a look at the educational system, but I believe it holds for other areas as well for I see no reason that teaching should be an exception, although here, as in the U.S., no group to my mind is so underpaid in comparison to its value to society as the teachers. The gravity and pervasiveness of this professional irresponsibility in the educational system is revealed by the following remarkable passage from the education department's 1979-80 annual report:

"Unfortunately, the Under-Secretary Mr. A.M. Sallah left the Ministry (of Education) on 1st February. Another administrative officer was posted to this ministry but, like many unqualified teachers, failed to turn up."

The officer in question probably found that it was not in his best interest financially to report to his assignment. Likewise, Mr. Sallah's departure may well have been precipitate, prompted by a sudden opportunity for self-advancement, and resulting in substantial disruption in the ministry's affairs. Job duties here do not stand in the way of a promotion. Teachers leave schools in the middle of the year, abandoning classes which must await the uncertain arrival of a replacement. Any expressed

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concern from the education department about teachers failing to go to their assigned posts rings hollow because the same department freely transfers or promotes teachers out of the classroom. It seems to me the educational system here is a game of musical chairs, the teachers scrambling for a limited number of opportunities to advance. Consequently, any teacher who remains in a school for any length of time is a loser in the competition for promotions, so he is likely to become disillusioned and unenthusiastic about his job. Good teachers, on the other hand, will be constantly moving up the ladder, having little chance to develop new skills and to apply them thoroughly. Either way, the students are the victims of the process.

Only someone with rare dedication, amounting almost to a sense of mission, could overcome this system to work at a job he believes in. Such a person, however, is Mr. M.O. Sonko, the director of the education department's Curriculum Development Center. After his schooling in The Gambia and graduate studies in curriculum development at the University of Maine, Sonko was teaching at Gambia College when, in 1976, the job of science curriculum coordinator was offered by the CDC. At the same time, the government announced that lecturers at the college would be raised to a higher level on the government's pay scale. Sonko's acceptance of the curriculum coordinator's job would mean losing out on a 25 percent pay increase. "All my friends told me I was crazy for taking it," he recalls now with a smile. Fortunately, when it came the government's action was made retroactive for a year, so Sonko received his salary increase even though he had been at his new job for six months.

He still confronts the problem of low pay, however, because now, as director, he has to find qualified applicants who are willing to accept a lower salary than they could earn as teachers. Curriculum coordinators are put at grade 13 on the government's pay scale, which has an initial salary of 6,336, or about \$3,600, a year, with annual raises for the next five years until promotion to the next grade level of D132 or about \$75. Yet a person with the graduate degree and teaching experience required for curriculum development would, at a minimum, be at grade 15 as a high school teacher, receiving D7,956 or about \$4,500 a year with annual increases of \$106. Predictably, Sonko has a chronic staff shortage, and a high turnover rate since many teachers take advantage of the center's UNESCO-funded training programs to further their careers, never doing any work on curriculums.

Sonko says he has tried to convince his superiors that his staff should be paid more than the teachers for whom they are developing a new curriculum, but he encounters two obstacles: a lack of understanding of his objectives, and interference from higher-ups who feel threatened by the center's growth. Although the government initiated the move to a new curriculum, suited to The Gambia's needs, in 1974, some officials educated in the British mode are resistant to change. More importantly, some education department officials don't want the CDC to have a large, well-trained and settled staff because it could lead to the center's establishment as an autonomous body under the Ministry

of Education, which Sonko admits is his goal. The loss of authority over the curriculum would be a substantial diminishment of the department's powers, so it is to the education officers' advantage to keep the center as small and as unstable as possible. To that end, there is no promotion within the center, forcing the staff to transfer back into the mainstream of the department for advancement, another source of frustration for Sonko.

The staff shortage has forced a halt in the development of a secondary school curriculum, but so far the center has kept to its timetable for the introduction of a primary curriculum. The change was made in the first grade this year and a revised curriculum is being tested in grade 3. Next year the second grade will receive its new curriculum and a trial program will be tested in pilot Primary 4 classes. Full implementation for the six primary grades is due in 1984-85.

To get a glimpse of the new and the old curriculums I visited Albion Primary School in Banjul. Albion is a "local agreement" school which means that although it is a government school, as almost all primary schools in the country now are, it is still largely run by the Methodist Church, which started it. Its present buildings were erected in 1974, making it one of the better facilities for elementary education here, although the classrooms are dimly lit and noise from the traffic on the street and from the students comes through the open windows and doors and resounds against the ~~drab~~ concrete walls.

The first lesson I attended was a Primary 6 math class. The instructor, Mr. Goode, is as fine a teacher as I have seen perform in a classroom. He was educated entirely in The Gambia and evinced some regret at not being able to get more training, but he welcomed the opportunity to help his "brothers and sisters" in the classroom. However, he is also physical education coordinator for the area, which takes him out of the classroom during school hours, especially now, just before the Independence Day celebrations on Feb. 18. Instruction time is also cut in half by the necessity of copying examples off the blackboard into the students' notebooks due to the lack of textbooks. The lesson was on simple interest, and like all lessons at this level it was geared to the Common Entrance Examination given at the end of the year for admission to secondary schools. Of about 6,000 pupils who will take the exam only about 550 will get into high school. Another 1,500 will be admitted to the less prestigious secondary technical schools. The majority will end their formal education at the Primary 6 level.

Goode was critical of the government's education policy. Two years ago, during an election campaign, the government made primary education free, but while relieved of a small school fee parents now have to buy their children's books and school supplies, which has raised the cost of educating a child from about \$2 a year to between \$35 and \$50. The government also has raised the entrance age from 6 to 8, which is a late start for formal education it seems to Goode and to me. Both decisions were made to win votes in the rural areas, Goode thinks.

I visited a Primary 4 English class next. English is the official language in The Gambia and, except in the lowest grades,

the medium of instruction. Yet it is rarely used between Gambians outside the classroom, and although I watched classes function normally in English, my attempts to talk with the pupils between classes met with vacant stares and embarrassed smiles. English is a scholastic language for them, as specialized in function as, formerly, the Latin of Roman Catholic Masses. The new curriculum does little to correct this problem. Language is the last and most redoubtable bulwark of colonial rule. A revolution is needed in the teaching of English in Africa which goes beyond the cosmetic reforms of substituting "hut" for "house" and "mango" for "apple." The introduction to the new curriculum's Primary 1 teacher's handbook for English states that the aim is not to make "native English speakers of our Gambian pupils" but only to give them "sufficient mastery of the language...to be understood by a native or any other speaker of English." This philosophy defeats the purpose of having English as the national language. The primary goal, I believe, should be to have every student able to speak Gambian English, comprehensible to other Gambians first, to other West African English speakers second, and finally to other native English speakers who have accustomed themselves to its inflections and idiosyncracies in the same way one develops an ear for a New Orleans drawl or a Downeast twang.

Another flaw I find with the new curriculum is that the handbooks aren't written for Gambian primary school teachers. I offer this splendid example of educationese from the English handbook: "Test marks and other evaluation results provide direct evidence of the child's progress because the evaluation techniques are concerned with the same learning outcomes as those stated in instructional objectives." I witnessed the result of such faulty attempts at communication in a Primary 3 class using the experimental science curriculum, where the teacher had misunderstood the directions and was teaching the lesson incorrectly.

Despite these failings, I have great respect for the work Sonko and his staff are doing, and unless it is aborted by jealous education officials I expect the new curriculum will have a radical impact on Gambian society. In the words of a Primary 1 teacher who has been in the profession for 23 years, the new curriculum gives teachers and students "something to fall back on." The difference was obvious both in her class schedule for the week, posted at the back of the room, which was filled in line by line whereas the others were a jumble of half-hearted intentions, and in the order of her classroom which struck me with the impression that the lesson was something physical which the teacher needed only to set in motion, not relying on the teacher's competence, energy and good intentions as in the other classes. If their education is allowed to continue in this mold, these Primary 1 children will learn the discipline necessary for a sense of responsibility, and through them society will gain the skeletal strength to overcome the impediment of self-interest to growth.

Best regards,



Bowden Quinn