



Research Paper:

Avonbrook's Educational Criteria

by Peter Diamond, Trustee, 19.06.09

Research Paper

Preamble

Avonbrook, quite properly, has adopted a very precise series of aspirations. As published on our website ...

We fund the recruitment, training and retention of professional teachers to provide a higher quality of education in developing countries and aim to improve vocational and post-school education and training to increase opportunities for children in the real economy and world of work.

It must be self-evident that the world is full of good causes and that there are far too many for any single organisation, whatever its resources, to help. With our explicit commitment to **Education**, bald, even harsh as it may be, to say so explicitly, such an undertaking precludes aims which are directed merely towards saving lives blighted by famine, disease or political disturbance. That is the mission of other charitable organisations, many with much greater resources than our own and themselves desperately over-burdened. It is, therefore, incumbent on us to define as accurately as we may, what we understand to be our mission in educational terms.

Other Criteria

Obviously, any project which we undertake to help must come with a sound business plan, appropriately costed expenditure, and convincing arguments in support of its being effectively managed. Equally, during construction, in the case of building programmes, or of development where the benefits are longer-term and more abstract, we would expect regular progress reports and statements of successful completion. In the case of the latter, where on occasion these outcomes may be ongoing or difficult to assess, even, in some cases, impossible to articulate in any but the most tenuous of senses, a precise set of criteria are essential as the means whereby we can measure both our effectiveness and our responsible husbandry.

Education

In its most obvious of senses, education is about the curriculum; what is learnt and taught formally in school. This will vary enormously from school to school, village to village and country to country. Education at a voluntary institution, in Pemba, Mocambique, was, in our experience, vague in its aims and sketchy in its application. Its teachers were largely untrained and its primary focus was to maintain a quality of life for its children which at least assured they were healthy and secure. Its most basic of expectations, if they were expressed at all, would be to provide an essential literacy and numeracy with a hope, satisfied occasionally, to do something for the pupils' creative and imaginative lives. In circumstances where food and water were often scarce, survival had to be a priority; when the only teaching available was provided by young people who had achieved some sort of proficiency at secondary level, any experience of or feeling for teaching and learning theory and practice was hardly perceived. This is not, of course, the truth of all education in that country, but typical of those disadvantaged strata of the population which would be most aptly described under our label of a 'developing' world. On the other hand, Akany Avoko, the school, rather the 'home', in Madagascar which Avonbrook was able to help last year, employs 25 trained members of staff, many of them with English as a second language. Their expectations of the curriculum are much more sophisticated with an articulated vision for providing preparation for life after school, including some few pupils going on to higher education in Antananrivo. It's easier to identify their need and to help provide for it with confidence. Their educational model is clear, not unlike our own and we have guarantees of their delivering it in accordance with their objectives. And, of course, there are all sorts of areas between these extremes.

Much more difficult to quantify, beyond the obvious and necessary benefits of basic literacy, taught not only in schools but elsewhere in communities among, say, adult or women's groups, or in isolated villages where

formal schooling is not yet available, is what used to be called the 'hidden curriculum'. This might include all sorts of 'life skills' such as communication, self-confidence, co-operation, awareness of others and patterns of social behaviour appropriate to the successful management of living communities. They might be classified as personal capacities and the wider obligations which affect our behaviour towards others.

Post-School education and training

Ultimately, the aspiration of an education programme must be towards helping individuals to discover and then realise their potential to the point where they become happy and successful members of their local communities. This is why we Avonbrook carefully considers, not merely segments of a student's progress (I use this term to refer to anybody, child, young person, adult), but their whole development. Of course, learning does not stop with basic literacy or when a child reaches 11 or when an adult finds their first paid employment. Educational need, in our sense, must be assessed in the context of the whole i.e. a proposal now against expressed educational objectives. (Many of these will be very limited, far more so than this discussion implies, but insofar as they can be articulated, so they must.) This is especially pertinent in the case of what we refer to as 'post-school education' or vocational training. In the Pemba case I mention above, there is only a restricted consciousness of the future of children who leave the school at 11 and, as a result, sadly many of them will return to the sorts of deprived lives which the school had originally and ironically saved them from. Akany Avoko fares better in trying to devise experiences of the world of work before the girls leave the home's umbrella. Some become integrated and well-adjusted adult members of the wider society. But this is rarely seen as the responsibility of formal institutions and, even here, the school is unable to provide a successful experience of this sort for all its students; anyway, it is available only to the girls who stay on there while the boys must leave when they reach the age of puberty.

This latter, I'd suggest, provides a good model for post-school training. The future of the child, now young person, is seen to proceed seamlessly from the classroom to the work place. The place of work is on the school site where the girls are taught to make paper, jewellery and other artefacts and how to market their crafts in the local village and beyond. They have the dual advantage of learning their skill, under adequate supervision, in an environment which is secure and familiar; the next stage is the world. That's the idea and the ideal. Its success is dependent on funding, buildings, teachers and, of course, appropriate student subjects – not all of them have aspirations far beyond having a child and, of course, that expectation has to be addressed, too. Wider than the terms of this discussion would be the question of the education and aspirations of women in patriarchal societies. In Pemba, the highest aspiration for most post-sixteen females, and, indeed, their sense of status, is to become a mother. In general, though, without clear vision for the future of the student, at every stage, much of what has happened earlier is wasted.

Recruitment, Training and Retention of Professional Teachers

As the previous section, this question and what is proposed as an answer may be pitched as more sophisticated than the facts really warrant. Almost by definition, the genuinely needy of the 'developing world', many in poverty and large numbers with little access to education at all, are unlikely to encounter anything as developed as the teaching, curriculum and school organisation as is implied here. And therein lies a problem which we have already wrestled with under a more general banner. Avonbrook as an organisation has restricted its role to one of distance support, confident that we have identified elsewhere, NGOs and others, who are willing and able to oversee our adopted projects for us. We are, therefore, required to seek out and to examine the credentials of such partners as we can discover by recommendation or guaranteed reputation. Akany Avoko was ideal as Avonbrook's first venture. Our Trustees knew the organisation personally and could vouch for the validity of its organisational structure and the reliability of its teaching force. We were as confident as ever we could be that funds dedicated to the provision of a new building and of the employment of the new teaching staff dependent on that could be assured. So the issue of the qualifications of teachers requires to be considered under two separate headings.

- (i) Teachers already employed by the organisation which has applied to us for help and where we perceive that assistance of this kind would be in order.

(ii) Situations where the project under consideration requires on our behalf management in the form of a clerk of works and continuing practical usage and development in the form of professional pedagogic skills.

In the case of (i) we should accept that the educational attainment of most of the teachers we will encounter in these situations is likely to be limited. By far the best, and no doubt the most difficult, strategy to improve this situation would be to aim to provide further training to those already in post in whatever guise. One of the most appreciated of Rosemary and Peter's contributions to the work in Madagascar was the training in elementary teaching and learning psychology they were able to offer to the teachers there. Volunteers, possibly older and with extensive experience in the UK – any with presentational, organisational, communication and other teaching skills – for whom Avonbrook would not be required to be legally liable - could be vetted, registered and matched with situations of relevant need in other countries. Where the recruitment of new teachers were concerned, I fancy we would have to accept what was available (but see below).

In the case of (ii), in addition to on-site training and supervision by any volunteers, Avonbrook should address the question of how, practically, we can test the validity of any given project against the capacities, as we perceive them, of the work force likely to be carrying them out. Again, an ideal, not always practicable, would require an expert on the ground, one of our trustees, for example, or a trusted nominee, in an informal visit to examine the professional competence of the teachers or administrators before any applications were accepted. Our fund of personal recommendations might soon be running dry; it's important that assurances are given, by whatever means, that our commitment is well placed. A visitor with a sound 'nose' would have little difficulty in making a balanced assessment. Yet there are additional tests or questions which would help in the analysis. These include:

- (i) Is the staff-pupil ratio conducive to good practice?
- (ii) Is funding appropriate to the employment and training of teachers?
- (iii) How far do numbers, or projected numbers, of pupils match the accommodation available in which to house them?
- (iv) Is there already in place a system of monitoring by means of which colleagues are in a position to help each other?
- (v) Is the management competent to and assiduous in promoting the professional well-being of the staff?
- (vi) 'Lesson plans' are probably an inappropriate concept. But merely to draw attention to the teacher's need to be aware of where he/she wishes the lesson to go and what the pupils might be expected to learn in its process is constructive. And, of course, the means of achieving these objectives are crucial.
- (vii) Are suitable policies in place to safeguard the security of the children's physical and emotional well-being?
- (viii) How aware are the teaching staff of their obligation to influence patterns of behaviour, a sense of obligation to others, a responsibility for the welfare of the whole community?
- (ix) Does the establishment have any sense of its role in developing the skills and aptitudes of its work force?

Of course, these are more or less sophisticated goals and may more properly belong to an extended system of educational involvement of the sort I recommend for us earlier. In that context, of course, they also suggest a direction which we might take were we to feel that an organisation, though raw in its perceptions, should be helped for the genuineness of its intuition and promise. Even a short visit, listening and watching, will yield a reservoir of convincing pointers.



But the essential irony remains. It is more likely that an Akany Avoko model will satisfy our criteria than will Pemba; sadly, it is, of course, the Mocambique project which is far more urgently deserving of our help than the Malagasy.