

Barefoot to school

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand**

Band (Jahr): **37 (1973)**

Heft [11]

PDF erstellt am: **12.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-942176>

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★ HEDY'S CORNER

Mrs Heidi Munam, née Oettli, is on holiday staying with her parents in Hamilton and has kindly consented to write an article about schooling in Sarawak, Borneo and it is with great pleasure that I am able to print her article in this issue. No doubt it will give many of us food for thought. Mrs Munam is well qualified to give her opinion on schooling as she is teacher of English in the senior high school classes. She is Swiss-born, New Zealand-trained post-primary teacher who has taught for eight years in Sarawak.

Barefoot to School

Those among the senior readers of this paper who went to school barefoot had better watch out — in some parts of the world that's still the accepted way of getting there. In the rural areas of Sarawak (a state of Malaysia in Borneo), for instance, the few boys who own shoes would think twice before wearing them to school. In fact, the physical effort of getting there is never considered (ever heard of a prospective sharemilker who wouldn't take on a new farm because "the kids would have to walk half a mile to catch the school bus"?) If it involves half an hour's paddling morning and night that's just too bad. A lunch of half an enamel bucket of cold rice is carried along over jungle paths and through the steep mountains. Primary school children may have to live many days' walk away from their own homes in the school boarding house, if they are lucky to get a place.

They are the lucky ones who can go to school. Theoretically, of course, everybody should go. Primary education is free or at any rate there are no direct school fees. But many paddi farmers simply cannot afford the cost of equipping all of their children with decent clothes (uniforms exist but aren't insisted on in rural schools), buying their textbooks and writing materials. If a parent can manage he will usually send his eldest son to school, though as often as not the elder brothers contribute towards sending the youngest. This makes sense in a large family — if the youngest is educated to get a job, he will not need an overly large share of the family land when it comes to dividing it up.

At the end of primary six, there is an examination. Those who pass it get to secondary school, the great majority of the rest finish their formal education at this point. After form three another half gets sieved out in the Sarawak Junior Examination, and those who manage to hang on till form five sit for the Senior Cambridge Certificate. That is as far as most schoolboys and girls get, and very happy they are to obtain a pass in the SCC, as it means a good chance of getting the most coveted prize — a Government job.

Form six places are as rare as fine jade. There are not many schools in Sarawak offering the Higher School Certificate course, most of them only in a restricted range of subjects. Even at a Government school a form six course is expensive, school fees, books and incidental expenses. Then there are the problems of board and lodging. If a boy is selected for a senior school place, he will need a place to stay. The few schools catering for form six are all in the main towns of Sarawak, and the rural boys are often hard put to find their bed and board. Staying with relatives is one solution, not always very satisfactory if there is a large noisy family around. Some get into school boarding houses, some rent and share rooms. They have been known to live in timber stores, unused classrooms and farm huts, they would probably put up in a henhouse rather than give up a form six place.

Of 1,000 school starters, how many reach the exalted height of the Senior Cambridge Certificate, which is an almost sure passport to a University scholarship? I should say about one, if that. The odds against completing even primary school are fairly heavy, even if a child's family can afford it. Some children live too far away from school, a curfew may keep the way closed for lengthy periods each term. The children may be needed at home for seasonal work too often, and be unable to keep up with the school programme. They may also dislike school, in which case the parents (especially if they are native or Malay), will shrug their shoulders and accept the fact.

Those who fail the examinations in form III or form V have a second chance if their family can afford it: private schools. These are on the whole inferior to the Government ones. They have no financial support other than the fees they can levy, they cannot offer wages to compete with the Government, and as a result they do not always get the most qualified staff. But they are necessary until the State can provide free education for all, plus a few useful extras such as school buses (or launches where there are no roads), free textbooks, one desk for each student even in rural schools.

Once this ideal has been achieved, will the student's attitude change? Looking around New Zealand schools, and talking to teachers here, one wonders. The discipline problems, the perennial absentees, and then — not believed until actually seen — groups of schoolage lads who spend a Saturday afternoon riding motorbikes in circles around a hilly paddock. Just that. They were not even racing each other, they just went round and round and round, presumably until they ran out of petrol. Certainly they all have safe, secure futures before them, but have they got bored with that prospect? New Zealand takes the stand that the State owes its young an education, and that's fair enough. Do they owe anything in return?

A visitor from a developing nation will shake his greying head at the sight of New Zealand's pampered youth, a New Zealander in Sarawak would wring his hands in pity for the ill-treated youngsters in that country. The golden mean lies somewhere in between, but even an impartial observer may wonder if the Kiwis aren't already inclining to the gilt side.

Laugh a little . . .

In Austria "Count Bobby" is a much beloved, fictitious character. He is the vehicle for simple-minded jokes full of Austrian charm.

Bobby is in Paris. The head waiter informs him: "First breakfast from 8-11am, second breakfast from 11am-1 pm. Lunch from 1-5pm and dinner from 5-8pm.

Bobby: "Too bad, I had planned to do some sightseeing".

Also in Paris Bobby was introduced to the Prince of Orleans. Bobby asked the Prince very politely: "Do I have the honour of speaking with the son of the 'Maid of Orleans'?"

Bobby sits in the train headed for Italy. After Innsbruck a second locomotive is added to the train. Bobby enquires why this was done and it was explained to him that the altitude difference between Innsbruck and the top of the Brenner Pass made the second locomotive necessary. Bobby: "Goodness me, by now there must be a huge collection of locomotives on top of the pass".

Bobby is in the art gallery featuring cubism in painting. A cubistic landscape fascinates him and his opinion is: "This Cuba must be a terrible country".

A tourist asks Bobby if this was the street where a famous man was born.

"No," answers Bobby. "As far as I know only babies are born here".

Bobby is in a huge supermarket and asks at the information desk: "Can I buy tickets here?"

The information desk girl says: "Yes, on the third floor is the travel bureau. Do you want to go with the lift"?

"Oh no", says Bobby. "I want to go by train".

Bobby invites a friend to come and see him the following evening. The friend says: "Sorry I am already engaged, I go to see 'Lucia de Lammermoor'" (an opera).

Says Bobby: "For goodness sake, don't be a prude, bring her with you.

Collection from Nebelspalter.