
Education in a Pacific Context: Enhancing Ownership of the Processes of Education

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Abstract

The history of the Pacific is one of colonisation. As small Pacific nations have gained independence and political strength, they have also sought to reclaim their unique cultures, languages and knowledge systems. Education is seen as a key vehicle for cultural survival and sustainability. This paper articulates the vision that Pacific peoples collectively have for their future in an increasingly globalised world.

Introduction

In 2001, a group of Pacific educators met at the University of the South Pacific to participate in a *Colloquium on Re-Thinking Pacific Education*. The purpose of the Colloquium was to share common experiences of what these educators termed ‘disillusionment’ with what education had achieved in the Pacific since the small Pacific Island Countries (PICs) started acquiring the status of sovereign states in the early 1960s. Specifically, the descriptor ‘Pacific’ indicated citizenship of, and ethnic origin in, the PICs. The term ‘educator’ essentially meant that the Colloquium participants had taught or were still teaching in schools and institutions of higher learning in the Pacific and were in the business of teaching and learning. While they may have started schooling at primary and secondary level in their home states, they had all spent considerable time and acquired qualifications in western institutions of higher learning outside of their home states. Some had acquired status and significant professional reputations in other overseas universities while others had become well known in their own home states in the field of education. In other words, they were all success stories of western education. However, disillusionment with the outcomes of their education systems was rife and the common verdict was that schooling and education were not achieving the desired goals. The majority of the Pacific children were being failed by the education systems that were in place. In their words, “extensive reforms in Pacific education and significant investments by national governments and donor agencies had largely failed to provide for the quality human resources needed to achieve developmental goals” (Benson, 2002, p.1).

It was at this meeting that the “Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative” was born. Strategies for rethinking and interventions were discussed and designed and a commitment was made to push this initiative forward in order to improve the educational achievements of Pacific children. It was at this meeting that the idea of rethinking philosophies, structures and processes of schooling was first mooted by quite a significant number of Pacific educators. Two key issues identified were; a) the lack of ownership by Pacific people of the formal education process and; b) the lack of a clearly articulated vision for Pacific people which could inform both development and education (Gideon, 2004).

The group agreed on the metaphor of the ‘Tree of Opportunity’ upon which to base a philosophy for the reform of education in the small countries of the Pacific. Based on the assumption that “the main purpose of education in the Pacific is the survival, transformation and sustainability of Pacific peoples and societies, the outcomes of education should be measured in terms of performance and appropriate behavior in the multiple contexts in which [Pacific people] live” (Benson, 2002, p.3). Education in the Pacific therefore, is the ‘Tree of

Opportunity' that is firmly rooted in the cultures of the Pacific societies, with its processes and skills, knowledge, worldviews, histories, languages, values, institutions, rituals and beliefs. The strengths and advantages gained from its root sources allow the tree to grow healthy and strong and further permit the incorporation of foreign or external elements through grafting without changing its fundamental root sources or the identity of each tree. It can accommodate the best of both old and new and can bear different fruits and be useful for a variety of purposes without destroying its roots or the new grafted elements (Gideon, 2004). This article utilizes this vision for Pacific education and essentially argues that the way forward for education in the Pacific and the reorganization of schools to meet local/national and global goals, is through the enhancement of the ownership of the educational process by Pacific people. This will mean a re-conceptualization of schools and schooling in the Pacific.

Schools and schooling in the Pacific

The concept of a school as a place where students would congregate at a regular time to be with a teacher from whom they learn was introduced by the European missionaries into the small islands of the Pacific in the 1840s. In the early days in the Pacific the practical implementation of this concept varied from place to place and from time to time.

During colonial times, the logistics of where the teacher and students met and where the teaching and learning transactions took place, varied quite widely. Early on, students would travel from their villages, stay some weeks at the mission house and go home again while the missionary attended to other duties. In those early days, the schools were 'single sex' and mostly for boys or young men. When the schools were set up by the colonial government administrators, they were often accommodated in the typical indigenous houses of the various cultural entities. For Samoa, the *fale* were thatched with coconut blinds that were put up during sunny weather and put down when it rained. There were no walls and the only equipment would be a blackboard that was propped up against a post or hung from a rafter. From time to time, the teacher would write on the board, but the common method of interaction was teacher talk - very much in the way of the missionary sermon - with reference to an open book.

At the beginning, students would come in very early, have one or two lessons then go off again to their homes to attend to the necessities of life such as preparing food for their elders and children. They might make their way again to school after the chores were done for the day and another few lessons would take place. The lessons ('curriculum') included reading and writing based on the Bible with simple primers developed by the missionaries, substantiated by behaviour lessons that included morality and a sense of 'rightness' or 'wrongness', taught, one would imagine, from the perspectives or the morality of the Bible and of missionary culture. Most of these missionaries were from Victorian England. Thus the missionaries exerted an early influence on the culture of the Pacific people and they did so in a 'curriculum' that was holistic in its approach and addressed the total person. That suited the Samoan mentality (and that of most other Pacific islanders) and Christianity was accepted quickly and relatively peacefully in Samoa. The purposes and goals of education as civilizing (turning them from their pagan ways) and Christianizing the people were achieved quite fast. Religion became integrated into the lives of the Pacific people. Religion became indigenized and localized. Not so, schooling and the processes of schooling.

A story

My father, who started teaching in the 1930s, told me of the time he was sent by the authorities to the big island of Savaii to take over a school for boys because the previous teacher had become ill. The year was 1940. When he got to the school, there were no

students; they had left with the teacher to carry his luggage. The school, which consisted of two *fale*, had grass that was as tall as he was. One *fale* had a blackboard propped up against a post with a few mats which covered gravel (stone) floors. My father knew that his first task was to recruit new students. So he traveled around the island by foot going from village to village, approaching the head *matai* from each village and asking for any young man who might want to go to school. In this way, he recruited about twenty young men in their late teens and early twenties whom he took with him to the school. Each one of them had to bring a machete in addition to the few clothes that they had. At the school, the first task was to cut the grass and try to create an environment in which the students (young men) would want to stay. The programme became cutting the grass then a break for a lesson which was conducted under a tree, then back to cutting the grass, then another lesson, then back to cutting the grass again. In the meantime, two boys would be scraping taro or peeling bananas and cooking their meal, which was often eaten in-between the sessions of grass cutting. The 'curriculum' was reading, spelling, simple arithmetic, living in a family and good behaviour. The lessons included admonitions and encouragements to set goals to become good leaders in order to help their *matua* (parents) *nuu* (village) and their *atunuu* (country). I suspect that this curriculum mixture was probably a balance of new *palagi* (white man) knowledge and old Samoan knowledge of appropriate (*lelei*) behaviour according to Samoan cultural norms or maybe mixed with some generally accepted Biblical morality.

By the 1960s when I was attending secondary school, my father had great pride in pointing out to me his former students in that first class of 1940 who had become prominent leaders in the community, including government and in commerce. In fact, apart from those who had passed on, they were all achievers. They were all success stories. I thought that 'schooling' in my father's time worked very well. Schooling was 'effective' in those days.

But what was schooling then? Indeed, what was the curriculum? What were the assessment practices? What were the local or national goals in Samoa at the time? What were the global goals?

The League of Nations had failed miserably and Europe was about to be embroiled once again in another major war. For the Pacific islands, that war was a world away, but as the war progressed, it came closer and closer to the South Pacific, particularly the Solomon Islands and Papua. In Samoa, there had already been a revolt against the colonial administrators as a result of resentment when the islands were carved up by the colonial powers in the 1900s.¹ The nationalist movement of the 1920s was consolidating into a resolve to become independent of the colonial administration as soon as possible. A general local purpose of education in the 1940s would have been to educate people who would eventually take over the leadership as well as the rank and file of administration of the country after independence.

The school curriculum in Samoa had been determined in the colonial administration's home country, with the goal of education remaining that of 'civilising' the Samoan people. Cultural and local values and beliefs were positioned outside the school. The curriculum was totally foreign and the Samoan language became second-class. This situation was to continue both covertly and overtly towards the middle of the 20th century.

In 1961, Western Samoa was the first Pacific Island country to become politically independent from New Zealand by whom it had been administered for the Trusteeship Council of the United Nations. The curriculum, however, still continued to be based on that of New Zealand.

Education in the Pacific today

What is the general purpose of education in the Pacific now? Specifically, what is the general purpose of education in Samoa today? A quick glance at the Strategies for Development or equivalent documentation in other PICs would show that there is a heavy emphasis on education for economic development rather than on social and cultural development. This pathway was determined long before when education increasingly became the main function of the state and thus became more secular in nature. This secularization of Government schools undermined holism in education. Students were not exposed to values or the fundamentals of mores in their cultures. Increasing secularism had also meant the total alienation of schooling for most Pacific people as the curriculum became more and more utilitarian, the processes more scientific and objective and cognition was emphasized over affective learning and emotional enlightenment.

In the 21st century, schools in Samoa are a far cry from the Dame Schools² of the 1940s and the prep schools of the 1980s. Nevertheless, the schools that we have today have become alienating institutions for most children in the Pacific schools.

The schools are *palagi* buildings with typically four-walled classrooms in which students arrive early, sit for six hours in orderly rows at desks (or on the floor on mats) listening to teachers espousing knowledge, then leave again to the freedom of their villages, to run, jump, swim and generally learn to do what they should be doing as citizens of their villages. The doing and the learning in the village plays no part in school at all. It is neither in the curriculum nor in the activities of the school, except for special culture days, where children dress up in their culture dress and eat traditional food. Thus the school remains an alien institution which is often associated with *palagi* knowledge. Even in Samoa, considered to be a society that has remained traditional in the 21st century, such alienating practices of education continue to be encouraged.

This is exacerbated by the location of schools which are often relegated to a less important space in the totality of village life. For example, schools in Samoa are often located at the back of villages, away from the centre of life of the people so that they remain isolated within the communities that they purport to serve. Not so the churches and the houses of worship. In Samoan villages today, churches and pastors' houses remain the biggest and are prominently located. Nothing is more important to a Samoan than the state of his soul. The schools, however, should be a close priority behind the churches.

The education system in Samoa now extends from pre-school level right up to university level. There is universal primary school education with secondary education available and accessible in all parts of Samoa. While "participation rates in primary education have been steady at around 96 per cent in the last ten years" (Afamasaga, 2006, p. 84), this figure includes overage children. The net enrolment rate, that includes children of the appropriate age group, is quite low at around 69 % in 2004. At secondary level, school participation and enrolment is around 45% (Samoa, Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 2004). So are the schools effective in Samoa? Are the schools effective in other PICs?

School effectiveness. Whose criteria?

Thaman (1987) pointed out that notions of school effectiveness are context specific and dependent on people's expectations of what schools are supposed to do. In the Pacific however, there is an amazing similarity in what people expect schools to be able to do in the PICs. I suspect that this is to do with their common colonial experiences of schooling as introduced and established firstly by missionaries and then by the colonial administrators.

According to Thaman, in Tonga for example, an effective school (*api ako lelei*) is one which has a good academic record (that is, it has a high rate of student success in external examinations) and which maintains high moral standards among its students and staff. Similarly in Samoa, an effective school (*aoga lelei*) is one that has a good academic record, maintains high moral standards of behaviour and demonstrates high standards in sports achievement (Afamasaga, 2006). Similar expectations are noted for Cook Islands, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands (Gideon, 2004) with the added expectation of preparing children for employment. The expectations now held by Pacific people have nothing to do with the maintenance of societies or cultures, or indeed, for development and sustainability of their societies. The main expectation is more to do with getting a good job and being able to earn a good living in societies that are becoming more and more Europeanized and more and more westernized. This has given rise to Papadopoulos' (1998) twin politicization of education.

This was quite true of Samoa, where a new breed of education politician emerged in the late 1980s determined to institutionalize their views. As a result, educationists who had devoted their lives to the service of education for the sustainability of Samoan society in a changing world were sidelined. This was also the beginning of the process in which any gains made to Samoanise and localize curriculum after the attainment of political independence came to an abrupt end. Instead, overseas experts, frequently from the Pacific metropolitan countries, were invited to come into the country to determine the goals of education and set the curriculum standards for the schools and indeed take the processes further and further away from the Samoans themselves. Thus, in the first decade of the 21st century there is an overwhelming sense of despair as more and more donor dollars are poured into educational development which has not resulted in expected and desirable learning achievements for students in schools. In fact, the common public opinion is that schooling seems to have regressed in the past thirty years. But how does one turn this trend around? How do we improve learning achievement by Pacific children so that local and national goals are met? This is the most critical issue for education in the Pacific at the beginning of this century.

The Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative suggests how. Reclaiming ownership and enhancing the ownership of the processes of education by Pacific people involves several initiatives.

Rethinking values in education

It has been argued by Taufe'ulungaki (2002) and others that:

The western-derived developmental and educational paradigms which have been adopted by most Pacific countries have failed to achieve their expected outcomes. There is an urgent need, therefore, to explore other value systems [particularly the value systems of the Pacific societies themselves]. For it is from values and belief systems that social and cultural groups construct their world, create meaning, develop rules that govern behaviour, and erect the institutions that formalize and transform those abstract worlds into concrete realities. (pp.19-20)

Hughes (1998), in writing about the goals, expectations and realities for young people in the 21st century, attests to a crisis among youth in the developed countries where there is tension and uncertainty in a world of increasing self doubt. He comments that his own research mirrors Eckersley's analysis of Western society where he speaks of a breakdown in values. The failure of the western-derived educational paradigms to value the values and cultures of PICs is further reflected in Sanga's (2000) writing of the situation in the Solomon Islands.

Getting back to values within the contexts of specific education systems, whether in developed or developing countries, is suggested as a common remedy for improving educational outcomes.

Reclaiming cultural survival and continuity as a purpose of education

Thaman (2002) argues that there ought to be a shift of focus in the Pacific schools away from academic subjects and towards one based on appropriate student behavior and performance. This means that Pacific Islanders (not overseas experts) would need to identify for themselves the types of student behavior and performance that we would like the school leavers to display as a result of their schooling. These would then form the goals of what might be termed 'basic education' which focus on student outcomes rather than on subject objectives.

Thaman (2002) further extrapolates on what outcomes mean, based on Enger's (1994) work that stated an outcome:

- Provides a picture of student behavior that will result from learning;
- Describes long term learning;
- Reflects discipline standards beyond the school setting;
- Acknowledges differing learning styles and styles of intelligence;
- Is understandable to students, parents and communities;
- Is appropriate developmentally;
- Is culturally appropriate;
- Is gender sensitive;
- Addresses higher order thinking skills; and
- Is assessable directly or indirectly.

Such a process is currently taking place in some Pacific Islands but needs to be encouraged and supported in others. For example in Samoa and Tonga, lists of desired student outcomes are quite similar and include the following:

- Must have the ability to communicate in at least two languages [Samoan and English];
- Understand and show facility in proper Tongan [Samoan] behavior and etiquette;
- Be able to work cooperatively with others for the purpose of achieving collective goals;
- Demonstrate analytical abilities;
- Have problem solving skills; or
- Have skills in developing and maintaining good health.

The process of interrogating values in education is now on-going in the Pacific. Cook Islands and Tonga have completed their research on values in the curriculum and in the ministries of education and Samoa and Tokelau are in the process of interrogating values in their education systems.

Thaman (2002) is emphatic that:

Agreed on behaviour and performance as described in terms of learning outcomes in the context of life in a particular Pacific country should form the foundation upon which to base decisions about schools curricula, teaching, assessment and professional development, not a collection of policies and regulations about how curriculum should be organized or function or a collection of academic subjects that are taught at university. (p.30)

Technology to work for the purposes of education that is determined by the Pacific people themselves

Nabobo (2002, p.36) quotes Robert Redfield: “The classroom is important only as it is understood in its relation to the society and culture of the children who occupy it, and teaching will be effective, only as it is related to society and culture.” Nabobo then further makes the assertion that:

Unless the relationship between education and the human community is systematically examined, a lot that we as educators do today will be dissipated in the uncertainties regarding exactly what kind of society we are educating the young in the Pacific for. (Nabobo, 2002, p.36)

Nabobo is aware of the fervent opposition in the Pacific to globalization but, in making the plea that globalization is a force in the world that the Pacific cannot ignore, cites Siwatibau (2001) who says that what the Pacific must recognise is that ‘technology drives globalization’. Technology can be made to work for the Pacific as long as the Pacific knows what it wants and as long as each PIC knows how technology can work for them.

It cannot be denied that all around the world, the technological revolution in communication and information has brought about unprecedented changes. In the Pacific Islands, the cell phone, the ipod and the internet have created a knowledge community among youth that their elders find quite perplexing. It is amazing just how fast young people take on ownership of the knowledge of this technology. This is a fact that schools and schooling in the Pacific must grapple with.

Determining agreed behaviour and performance learning outcomes that take into account the uses of this information technology is difficult but very critical, especially as potentially, the cost of infrastructures for ICT can be quite inhibitive for the small states of the Pacific. The PICs have all made the choice to join the digital age and the societies are being changed as a result, particularly in the way communication is achieved and information is disseminated. Changing the curriculum to accommodate this knowledge, mediated by the Pacific people’s own determination of uses and purposes, based on the identified cultural and social values, can be achieved.

Educational leadership for sustainability

Fullan (2001) wrote extensively about the management of change in the early 1990s but in the first decade of the 21st century he now talks about the importance of leading in a culture of change. Furthermore, he has stated that after decades of research he now concludes that change cannot be managed but it can be led.

Emphasizing that leadership is key to large-scale improvement, Fullan (2001) has developed five core components of successful leadership in a culture of change. These components include:

- attending to a broader moral purpose;
- keeping on top of the change process;
- cultivating relationships; and
- sharing knowledge and setting vision and context for creating coherence in organizations.

First and foremost, Fullan argues that in leadership, as in education, there must be moral purpose which is made up of; a) having an explicit 'making a difference' sense of purpose; b) using strategies that utilize many people to tackle tough problems, and which can; c) be held accountable by measured and debatable indicators of success and; d) be ultimately assessed by the extent to which it awakens people's intrinsic commitment.

The notion of leadership as having a moral purpose is an important consideration, particularly the last feature which talks about leadership ultimately being assessed by the extent to which it awakens people's intrinsic commitment. According to Fullan, this is none other than the mobilizing of everyone's sense of moral purpose. This is an important feature indeed for Pacific schools where lack of effectiveness may result from a lack of commitment to teaching and learning on the part, especially, of teachers. It is quite clear that leadership quality can awaken people's commitment. However, moral purpose alone, according to Fullan, does not make an effective leader, the other four core components must also exist, collectively enabling a leader to deal with change, however complex.

Of equal significance is the development of a set of elements that Fullan (2005) has designated as the eight elements for educational leadership for sustainability. These are:

- Public service with a moral purpose;
- Commitment to changing the context;
- Lateral capacity building;
- Intelligent accountability and vertical relationships;
- Deep learning;
- Dual commitment to short and long term results;
- Cyclical energising; and the
- Long lever of leadership.

Fullan states further that sustainability is considered at different levels; the level of the system, the school, the institution or the society or culture. In my opinion, this is a model that can work well, not only for developed countries but also for developing countries of the world. Leadership in education traditionally has been considered as a possession of one person - either of the school inspector or the principal in a school. Fullan is suggesting that leadership should be developed for all, including teachers.

Educational leadership, particularly at the school level, must be provided with the knowledge and skills to bring about sustainability in the school. It must understand the purposes of schooling which have been redefined according to the values of the society, the general purposes of education which include the survival and sustainability of Pacific people. Finally, the purposes and uses of technology must be defined if the purposes noted above are to be achieved.

Forging relationships

I wish to focus on the concept of forging relationships as an element of educational leadership and as an imperative in the processes of education in small Pacific societies. Forging relationships is a key element of Pacific Island cultural processes. Human interaction in Pacific societies is hugely governed by relationships. In Samoan culture this is known as *va* (code of behaviour between people who are related, are strangers, or are visitors to a community), *va tapuia* (relationships that are governed by strict [sacred] rules of behaviour because of some kinship affiliation for example, brother and sister, wife and mother in law), or *va fealoaloa'i* (relationships that are governed by respectable codes of behaviour; for example, *matai* and *matai*, husband and wife, villager and pastor, or cabinet minister and

prime minister). Thus, Fullan's (2001) analysis of leadership in a culture of change can be used effectively for educational leaders, especially school leaders such as principals, school review officers, administrators, chief executive officers and others.

School curriculum and assessment to incorporate Pacific ways of doing things, ways of knowing and ways of assessing and evaluation

Ideas on how the above can be achieved are extrapolated by Puamau (2002) who gives a succinct summary of the effect of colonial power and control on knowledge, history, language and education in Fiji. The similarities to other PIC's experience of colonial times are not surprising. Puamau suggests that through the English language the colonial powers sought to dominate and control knowledge and learning in Fiji. Later, using the grants in aid, the colonial government was able to control the curriculum and the language in which it should be taught. The vernacular languages were relegated to an inferior position. As a result it was often believed by the Pacific people themselves that their languages did not have the capacity for intellectual discussion and for high level thinking. Indigenous systems of knowledge and wisdom were undervalued and were not considered as worthwhile learning. For many decades, students in the Pacific learned more about the societies and cultures in other parts of the world, particularly in the western Pacific rim countries, and knew very little about their own histories, social organizations, languages and governance because these were not part of the school curriculum. Many Pacific students, when attending universities overseas, were often put in the embarrassing position of not being able to answer questions about their own countries. The knowledge that put them in the overseas universities in the first place was not their knowledge.

Evaluation tools, testing and measurement have been adopted and used in the Pacific schools for the past one hundred years even though some of these instruments were quite faulty and invalid. This has continued in spite of the fact that many students failed these systems of assessment where there is a high reliance on pen and paper tests that test writing skills usually in the second language. Pens and paper are western imports and while they have their place are not the only means. Other alternatives to reflect the collaborative and cooperative nature of doing things in Pacific societies must be fully utilized.

Language and Pacific epistemologies to be part of the schools' curriculum

It is generally recognized that language mediates meaning, creates knowledge and communicates thinking. The fact that today there are still PICs who do not teach their vernaculars/languages in the schools' curricula reflects the long history of education where Pacific languages were made to be inferior while the colonial language became the medium for communication and thinking. Languages are pivotal in cultural survival and societal continuity. When the Pacific languages are not taught, cultural understanding remains incomplete, depending on the second language for mediation. This is often inaccurate or at worst creates approximations of truth that do more harm than good in forging relationships.

Conclusion

This article has argued that education in the Pacific has been hampered and disadvantaged by a heavy reliance on western type ideologies and beliefs about the world, ways of doing things and ways of learning. This has been especially true of the processes of schooling where the structures, the face of schooling and the schooling process have been imposed as part of the colonial process. Even after political independence in most PICs, these have been adopted in total, despite disappointing school outcomes. At the beginning of the twenty first century however, Pacific educators are coming to the fore to interrogate the fact that in the schools in

the Pacific, the different education systems are failing the children. This is wasteful and detrimental to the survival and improvement of Pacific societies.

As we look towards moving further into this century, Pacific people must agree to recognize the survival of Pacific societies as a moral purpose for education. By accepting such a moral purpose the tools for progressing schooling in the Pacific then become those of rethinking values in education, especially those cultural values that provide meaningful entities in Pacific societies; reclaiming cultural survival as a purpose for education; making technology work for the purposes of education; forging relationships within the education systems; developing leadership for sustainability; reclaiming the importance of Pacific languages and epistemologies within the curriculum of Pacific schools and inculcating Pacific ways of doing things into the schools' processes. All these tools would work towards the Pacific people claiming ownership of the processes of education in the Pacific and would in turn result in better achievements and more success for children in Pacific schools.

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¹ In 1889 the Berlin Treaty carved up the Samoan islands so that the eastern part became a US territory while the western part became a German colony. In 1914, a New Zealand military contingent took over the western part peacefully sending the Germans home. New Zealand officially became the Administrator after World War 1 when the League of Nations allocated the status of a Mandated Territory to Western Samoa in 1922.

² Term used by Dr Beeby, Director of Education in New Zealand in the 1940s, who popularized this term in his theories of school development in the colonies

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