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

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Introduction

In April 25-27, 2001, a group of 'Pacific educators' met at the University of the South Pacific in a *Colloquium on Re-Thinking Pacific Education* to share their common experiences of what they 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 60s. Specifically, The descriptor 'Pacific' meant that each of these people were citizens and of ethnic origin of the PICs. The term 'educator' essentially meant that they 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. Their common experience was that 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 of them 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 was rife and the common verdict was that schooling and education was not achieving the desired goals and 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."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 educational achievements by the children of the Pacific. It was at this meeting that the ideas of rethinking philosophies, structures and processes of schooling were first mooted by quite a significant number of Pacific educators and the group agreed upon the metaphor of the 'Tree of Opportunity' upon which to base a philosophy for the reform of education in the PICs.

There are many issues in Pacific education but two key issues identified by the 2001 Colloquium were a) the lack of ownership by Pacific people of the formal

¹ USP/IOE Tree of Opportunity: Rethinking Pacific education (2002), p1



education process and b) the lack of a clearly articulated vision for Pacific people which could inform both development and education.²

The Colloquium was significant in many ways. One important way was that, the group rose to the challenge of creating a new vision of Pacific education which was conceptualized as the metaphor of the 'Tree of Opportunity'. 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." 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 allows 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 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.³ This paper 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

A bit of history

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 starting with the mission house to which 'students' would travel from their villages and stayed for the duration of a few weeks and go home again while the missionary attended to other duties. When the schools were set up by the colonial government administrators, these were often housed in the typical indigenous houses of the various countries. For Samoa, these fale were thatched

² ibid p2

³ ibid p3



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 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 may make their way again to school after the chores are done for the day and another few lessons would take place again.

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' one would imagine from the perspectives or the morality of the Bible and of the missionaries own cultures. The point that I wish to make here is that the missionaries introduced early influences on changing the culture of the Pacific people and they did that in a 'curriculum' that was holistic in its approach and addressed the total person. That suited the Samoan mentality (and most other Pacific islanders) and Christianity was accepted quickly and relatively peacefully in Samoa. Purposes and goals of education as civilizing (turning them from their pagan ways) and christianising the people were achieved quite fast.

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 were as tall as he was. One fale had a blackboard propped up against a post with few mats which covered stone floors. He 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 which he took with him to the school. Each one of them had to bring a machete with him. 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 good old Samoan knowledge of appropriate (lelei) behavior according to Samoan cultural norms of maybe mixed with some generally accepted Biblical morality.

By the 60s 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 fathers 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. For the Pacific islands, that war was a world away. For Samoa, there had already been a revolt against their colonial administrators as a result of resentment when the islands were carved up by the colonial powers in the 1900s.⁴ The nationalist movement of the 1920s was consolidating into a resolve to become independent of the colonial administration as soon as possible. A general purpose of education then in the 1940s would have been to educate people who would eventually take over the leadership of the country after independence.

The tools of education at the time as illustrated by the stories above were quite rudimentary and unsophisticated but they worked. In 1961, Western Samoa was the first Pacific island country to become politically independent from New Zealand who had administered it for the Trusteeship Council of the United Nations.

What is the general purpose of education in the Pacific now? In fact 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 development⁵ rather than

⁴ In 1989 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.

⁵ Thaman, K 1987 "Good schools and Bad-some issues in assessing school effectiveness in Pacific Island Societies" in **Studies in Educational Administration**, CCEA



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. Government schools had become increasingly more secular to the detriment of holism in education where students were not exposed to values or the fundamentals of mores in their cultures. Increasing secularism has also meant the total alienation of schooling for most Pacific people as the curriculum become more and more utilitarian, processes more scientific and objective cognition emphasized over affective learning and emotional enlightenment.

In the 21st century, schools in Samoa are a far cry from the Dame Schools⁶ of the 1940s. The education system in Samoa now begins from pre-school level right up to university level education. There is universal primary school education with secondary education available and accessible in all parts of Samoa. But 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 is context specific and is dependent on peoples 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 by the colonial powers.

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 maintain high moral standards among its students and staff. In Samoa, it is very similar; an effective school (aoga lelei) is one that has a good academic record, that is, it has high rate of student passes in external examinations, maintain high moral standards of behaviour among its students and staff and demonstrates high standards in sports achievement.⁷ Similar expectations are noted for Cook Islands, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands⁸ with the added expectation of preparing children for employment. The expectations now held by Pacific people have nothing to do 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. This has given rise to what Papadopoulos calls the twin politicization of education where

⁶ 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.

⁷ Afamasaga 2006 'The Challenge of Education' in Soo et al (Eds) *The Samoa National Human Development Report 2006*

⁸ Gideon, Jacques 2004 "Teacher education in Vanuatu" Paper presented at PATE conference 2004



*"on the one hand economic stringency has led to the sharpening of the conflict about priorities in educational objectives in contrast to earlier more affluent times when all the objectives of education could all be pursued more or less simultaneously. On the other hand, politics has penetrated to the very core of the educational process, giving rise to a different kind of conflict between educationists, particularly teachers who regard themselves as the guardians of the professional standards of education and a new breed of education politicians eager to impose their views and values in terms of what education is about"*⁹

This was quite true of Samoa where a new breed of education politician emerged in the late 80s determined to institutionalize their views which resulted in sidelining the educationists who had devoted their lives to the service of education for the sustainability of Samoan society in a changing world. This was also the beginning of the process in education for Samoa when 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 achievement for students in schools. In fact the common public opinion is that schooling seemed to have regressed in the past thirty years. But how to turn this trend around? 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 this ownership the process of education by Pacific people involves several initiatives.

I1. Rethinking values in education:

Firstly it has been argued by Taufe'ulungaki and others that

"the western developmental and educational paradigms which have been adopted by most Pacific countries have failed to achieve their expected outcomes. There is therefore an urgent need to explore other value systems (particularly the value systems of the Pacific societies themselves) for it is the value systems and beliefs that social and cultural groups construct their world,

⁹ Papadopoulos G.S. 'learning for the 21st century-issues' in UNESCO *Education for the 21st century-issues and prospects* p, 25



create meaning, develop rules that govern behavior and erect the institutions that formalize and transform abstract words to concrete realities."¹⁰

Hughes 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 where there is increasing self doubt. He cites Eckersley's analysis of Western society where he speaks of a breakdown in values and indeed speaks of his own research where he has found that 'there is a profound and growing failure of western culture , a failure to provide a sense of meaning, belonging and purpose in our lives as well as a framework of values. People need to have something to believe in and live for, to feel they are a part of a community and a valued member of society and to have a sense of spiritual fulfillment."¹¹

Sanga writing about the Solomon Islands states that the "extent to which the school represents the multiple cultures of the nation is minimal...and the officially sanctioned values are those that are represented by the school culture , the approved curriculum, the policies, the regulations and the teaching profession' and not those of the cultures from which the teachers and students come."¹²

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

2. Reclaiming cultural survival and continuity as a purpose of education

Thaman 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 would need to identify for themselves (not overseas experts) 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 on subject objectives. Thaman further extrapolates on what outcomes mean, based on the work of Enger 1994 who stated that an outcome¹³

- Provides a picture of student behavior that will result from learning

¹⁰ Taufe'ulungaki,A.M. 2002 'Pacific educatin at the crossroads : are there alternatives?' In *Tree of Opportunity*

¹¹ Hughes,P. 1998 'Goals Expectations and realities for young people' in UNESCO Education for the 21st Century pp 47-60

¹² Sanga.K 2000 *Learning from indigenous leadership: Module 6 Pacific Cultures in the Teacher Education Curriculum*, IOE/USP in association with The UNESCO Chair on Teacher Education

¹³ Thaman, K 2002 'Towards cultural democracy in Pacific education: an imperative' in *Tree of Opportunity*



- 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
- 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 student outcomes 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
- Have skills in developing and maintaining good health etc

The process of interrogating values in education is now on going in the Pacific. Cook Islands and Tonga have completed their researches 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.

Finally, Thaman sums up 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 should be organized or function or a collection of academic subjects that are taught at university.”¹⁴

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

Nabobo quotes Robert Redfield who wrote “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”

¹⁴ Ibid p30



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”¹⁵ Nabobo is aware of the fervent opposition in the Pacific to globalization but she makes the plea that globalization is a force in the world that the Pacific cannot ignore and what the Pacific must recognise is that ‘technology drives globalisation’ (citing Siwatibau 2001) and 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 changes which have been unprecedented. In the Pacific islands, the cell phone, the ipod and the internet has 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 upon 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 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.

4. Educational Leadership for sustainability:

Fullan wrote extensively about the management of change in the early 90s 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.

Fullan has developed five core components that leaders must have in order to lead successfully in a culture of change emphasizing that leadership is key to large scale improvement. These include attending to a broader moral purpose, keeping on top of the change process, cultivating relationships, sharing knowledge and setting vision and context for creating coherence in organizations.¹⁶

¹⁵ Nabobo U 2002 ‘Computer Tigers and Coconut Trees’ in *Tree of Opportunity*

¹⁶ Fullan 2001 *Leading in a Culture of Change*



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 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 moral purpose is an important consideration of educational leadership particularly the last feature which talks about 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 the Pacific schools as quite often, this is the gap that is diagnosed where there is an ineffective school, that is the lack of commitment on the part especially of teachers. However, moral purpose alone does not make an effective leader, the other four core components must also exist and together and collectively they will be able to deal with change however complex..

5. Forging relationships

I wish to focus on the aspect of forging relationship as an element of leadership that is also very critical in the management of schools in the Pacific. Forging relationship is a key element of Pacific island cultures. Human interaction in Pacific societies are 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 eg brother and sister, wife and mother in law,) etc or va fealoaloa (relationships that are governed by respectable codes of behaviour eg matai and matai, man and wife, villager and pastor, or cabinet minister and prime minsiter). Thus Fullan's 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 officer and others.

6. Elements of leadership for sustainability

Of equal significance is the development of a set of elements which Fullan has designated as the 8 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
- Long lever of leadership

Fullan further states 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.

Educational leadership particularly at the school level must be provided with the knowledge and skills to bring about sustainability in the school and of 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 and defining the purposes and uses of technology in order to achieve the purposes noted above.

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

Ideas on how these can be done are extrapolated by Puamau¹⁷ 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 PICs experience of colonial times is 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 where 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 so 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, 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.

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

¹⁷ Puamau P.2002 'rethinking education in Fiji: issues and solutions in the 21st century' in *Tree of Opportunity* pp61-69



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. Pens and papers 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, must be fully utilized.

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

It is generally recognized that language mediates meaning, create knowledge and communicates thinking. The fact that today there are still PICs who do not teach their vernaculars/languages in the schools curricula reflect the long history of education where Pacific languages were made to be inferior while the colonial language became the medium for communication and thinking .

Conclusion

This paper 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 and ways of learning. 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 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.



