

The Reform of Education in the Pacific Region: Implications for Fiji

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This paper reviews the reform of education from a regional perspective, taking particular note of the Forum Basic Education Action Plan (FBEAP) and the work of the Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of basic Education (the PRIDE Project). It suggests new approaches to education based on the values and ways of thinking of Pacific cultures. It does not reject the reform processes of the global world. Rather, it seeks to identify the best that the global world has to offer, and to blend it with the local in order to create a new and more culturally appropriate vision of education for Pacific societies, and especially for Fiji.

The development of a new vision for education that draws on the ways of thinking and knowing of Pacific cultures is a big challenge. The old colonial ways of developing and managing school systems and their curricula have had a pervasive impact in the Pacific, and are deeply resistant to change. Colonial assumptions about the nature of the Pacific and the education of its people continue to need careful, critical and constructive questioning.

For example, those who occupy continents on the rim usually view the Pacific Ocean as a vast expanse of water dotted with tiny, isolated islands, their inhabitants disadvantaged by smallness and remoteness. Pacific Islanders are now rejecting this colonial assumption, arguing that they do not occupy “islands in a far sea”, but “a sea of islands” (Hau’ofa, 1993:7). Their ancestors clearly did not view the sea as a barrier, but as their livelihood. They were seafarers who were equally at home on sea as on land. They lived and played and worked upon it. They developed great skills for navigating its waters, traversing it in their sailing canoes, and forming a “large exchange community in which wealth and people with their skills and arts circulated endlessly” (Hau’ofa, 1993:9). In this way the sea bound them together rather than separating them.

This idea of “a sea of islands” captures a holistic sense of people sharing a common environment and living together for their mutual benefit. Many people in the Pacific are attempting to reactivate this ethos, seeking ways to help and support each other, rather than constantly turning to the nations on their rim for aid and advice. It is a slow and uneven process, however, much hindered by regional politics, by the insistent pressures of globalisation, and by the continuing impact of colonialism. The latter has divided the Pacific linguistically, creating a gulf between groups of English-speaking and French-speaking islands. It also has divided the Pacific politically, with France and the USA still ruling their colonial empires in the Pacific in ways that isolate their people from many regional forums and networks.

As a consequence of the above divisions this paper focuses only on those countries in the region that are politically independent and therefore able to participate in the dominant political and economic policy grouping in the Pacific, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS): Cook Islands; Federated States of Micronesia; Fiji; Kiribati; Nauru; Niue; Palau; Papua New Guinea; Republic of the Marshall Islands; Samoa; Solomon Islands; Tonga; Tuvalu and Vanuatu. To this list should be added Tokelau, which is in the process of achieving self-government in free association with New Zealand, a similar status to that enjoyed by Cook Islands and Niue.

The Forum Basic Education Action Plan

Founded in 1971, PIFS brings together heads of governments annually for dialogue and decision-making on regional policy issues. At its meeting in Palau in November 1999 there was considerable debate about human resource needs in the Pacific, and the failure of most education systems to satisfy them, thereby perpetuating the region's dependence on external consultants. Schools and their curricula were criticised for not providing relevant life and work skills, for being too focused on academic success in external examinations, and for not graduating young people who could become productive members of their own villages or urban communities. Accordingly the Forum directed its secretariat to bring together the Ministers for Education of the region, asking them to deal with its concerns.

The Ministers met eighteen months later in Auckland, deliberating on what they referred to as 'basic education', which they defined as all educational provisions for children and youth, both formal and non-formal, except for higher education. The major outcome of the meeting was the development of the *Forum Basic Education Action Plan (FBEAP)* (PIFS, 2001), a short but very important document setting out visions, goals and strategies for the future of basic education in the Pacific. Its vision is clear:

Basic education as the fundamental building block for society should engender the broader life skills that lead to social cohesion and provide the foundations for vocational callings, higher education and lifelong learning. These when combined with enhanced employment opportunities create a higher level of personal and societal security and development.

Forum members recognised that development of basic education takes place in the context of commitments to the world community and meeting the new demands of the global economy, which should be balanced with the enhancement of their own distinctive Pacific values, morals, social, political, economic and cultural heritages, and reflect the Pacific's unique geographical context (PIFS, 2001:1-2).

The Ministers asked the PIFS secretariat to implement FBEAP, and recommended that they themselves continue meeting on a regular basis to monitor this process. Following the meeting, discussions took place with the European Union (EU). It was agreed that funding be provided to implement FBEAP under the 9th EDF Pacific Regional Indicative Programme. By the time the Ministers came together for their second meeting in December 2002 plans were well developed, and a sub-committee of Ministers was formed to finalise a submission.

This sub-committee, under the leadership of the Samoan Minister of Education, the Honourable Afioga Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, developed a proposal that was accepted by the EU for funding of €8 million over a five year period for a new project to be called 'Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of basic Education', abbreviated to 'The PRIDE Project'. The University of the South Pacific (USP) agreed to manage the Project. NZAID also joined as a funding partner with an initial grant of NZ\$5 million over three years. The Project was officially launched by the Samoan Minister of Education in May 2004.

The PRIDE Project

Essentially the PRIDE Project is designed to implement the Pacific vision for education encapsulated in *FBEAP* in the fourteen Pacific member states of PIFS, together with Tokelau. Its overall objective is:

To expand opportunities for children and youth to acquire the values, knowledge and skills that will enable them to actively participate in the social, spiritual, economic and cultural development of their communities and to contribute positively to creating sustainable futures (www.usp.ac.fj/pride).

To achieve this objective, the Project is seeking to strengthen the capacity of each of the fifteen countries to deliver quality education to children and youth across all sectors except higher education [i.e., pre-school, primary, secondary and Technical & Vocational Education & Training (TVET)], and through formal and non-formal means. The key outcome will be the development of strategic plans for education in each country, plans that blend the best global approaches with local values and ways of thinking. Ideally these plans will be developed following wide consultation with all stakeholders and beneficiaries, including parents, teachers, students, NGOs, private providers, employers and other civil society groups.

A set of ten benchmarks was developed by the PRIDE team as a tool to guide the strategic planning of education. Derived from FBEAP, the benchmarks were rigorously discussed and prioritised at the first PRIDE regional workshop, and a set of associated principles and indicators developed. The benchmarks document was formally ratified at the second meeting of the Project Steering Committee in October 2004, and now has become a key regional resource for the review and development of education plans.

The Project also is assisting countries to implement their strategic plans and to monitor and evaluate the outcomes. Capacity building activities are being provided for educators at national, sub-regional and regional levels. To further support these activities the Project is developing an on-line resource centre to encourage the sharing of best practice and experience amongst countries.

In discussing the PRIDE Project with educators throughout the Pacific and beyond, a frequently asked question is: “How is it different? We have seen many donor-driven education projects and initiatives come and go: why is this one unique?” Their cynicism is justified. The history of educational aid in the Pacific, as elsewhere, is an ambiguous one, with at least as many negatives as positives. The present Project, however, does have a number of unique features, and there is considerable optimism that it can achieve its goals in ways that others have not. These features include:

(i) The fact that the Project was designed and approved by the Ministers of Education: the process started with them, not with the donors. It was very clear at their third PIFS-sponsored meeting in January 2004, and at their fourth in May 2005, both held in Apia, that Ministers saw this as their Project, and were determined to guide and direct it according to their countries’ needs and priorities. Discussions with individual Ministers have reinforced this view. The donors, in turn, have shown quite remarkable preparedness to allow this to happen.

(ii) The significance of the acronym: its choice clearly was deliberate, and reflects the wishes of the Ministers. Each country is being encouraged to build its education plans and curricula on a stronger foundation of local cultures, languages and epistemologies, thus enabling students to develop deep pride in their own values, traditions and wisdoms, and a clear sense of their own local cultural identity.

(iii) The strong emphasis on mutual collaboration and support: the aim of the Project is to help countries to help each other. Earlier projects brought consultants from outside the region, and therefore became donor-driven as they responded to donors' priorities and preferences. The PRIDE Project is sourcing most of its consultants from within the region, and already has built up an impressive data-base of qualified people from Pacific nations. It also is funding local educators to go on study and training visits to each other's countries, not to those on the rim and beyond.

(iv) The encouragement of consultative and participatory approaches to educational planning, policy-making and curriculum development within each country: there is a clear wish to avoid top-down models, and a strong commitment to bottom-up processes.

(v) The fact that Ministers want the Project to promote a more holistic and lifelong approach to education, with effective articulation between sectors, and between school, TVET and the world of work.

(vi) The commitment of the PRIDE team to building strong conceptual foundations for the Project. Earlier projects brought outsiders to the Pacific with western 'recipes' for the reform of curricula. The PRIDE team is committed to helping countries develop their own theoretical foundations, doing so via the creative fusion of their own epistemologies, values and wisdoms with the most useful ideas and approaches of the global world beyond their shores.

Conceptualising education reform in the Pacific

In seeking to develop a conceptual foundation for the PRIDE Project, the PRIDE team turned to the Report to UNESCO of its International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (Delors, 1996). From our experiences in countries as diverse as Thailand, Japan and Indonesia, as well as the fifteen Pacific countries with which the PRIDE Project is working, it remains the most useful blueprint for reform, regardless of the economic, demographic and social indicators of each nation. In the 8½ years since it was published, the Delors Report has stood the tests of time, critical analysis and practical application. It has been widely debated in educational and political circles, and its ideas used as a springboard for education reform in a wide variety of settings. It continues to offer the most coherent, inspiring and relevant conceptual foundation for education of any international document published in recent years. It is important that we reflect on the Report, and to question its implications for the Pacific, and for Fiji. What are the main trends?

From teaching to learning

Ever since the invention of mass schooling in the early years of the industrial revolution in Europe, the focus has been on the delivery of knowledge to children and youth by adults with the necessary training and/or community recognition. The architecture and routines of the school, and the content and processes of the curriculum, were primarily aimed at preparing the young to be compliant and productive workers in the burgeoning factories of Europe.

This new form of mass schooling was almost entirely teacher-centred, the podium and black-board at the front of each classroom helping teachers to control their students and deliver their knowledge. A system of examinations and reporting regulated progression through the school, and provided incentives for students to acquire knowledge and the formal credentials

for having done so. These credentials in turn were linked to subsequent employment. The higher the credentials the more prestigious and well paid the job at the end. It was this system of education that was exported to the Pacific during the colonial era, largely by well-intentioned Christian missionaries, and has proven so resistant to change in many countries.

While the above is a very oversimplified account of a much more complex reality, it does highlight the view that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, educationally speaking, can be characterised as those of the teacher. The role of the teacher was central. This has been especially the case in the Pacific, and still is in many if not most settings.

The current change in focus to that of the learner, as reflected in the Delors Report, is highly significant. Even though many might argue that teaching and learning are simply opposite sides of the same coin, and essentially one and the same, the reality is that education is undergoing a profound transformation. The shift in power from teacher to learner is just one element of this. Another significant shift is from education as the acquisition of knowledge, to education as learning how to learn. And a third is from a view of education as preparation for the world of work to education as a holistic process of lifelong learning. From these perspectives the twenty-first century might well be described as the ‘century of the learner’.

The fact that the Pacific Ministers of Education have requested the PRIDE Project to encourage a more holistic approach to education, with an emphasis on lifelong learning, is fully in tune with global developments, and has substantial implications:

(i) The ICT revolution has ensured that teachers and lecturers are no longer dispensers of knowledge. Their students now have access to an exponentially expanding array of information that they can access quite independently. Teachers have responsibility to help students make effective and appropriate use of this knowledge, which requires a capacity to critically appraise all of the material available to them, and to make value judgments of it, often from moral and ethical perspectives. School curricula therefore need to focus on developing the critical capacities of students, enabling them to know themselves, to think for themselves, and thus become active and confident learners.

(ii) Knowledge is power. As teachers lose their authority as holders and dispensers of knowledge, their relationships with students are transformed. They need to become facilitators of learning, providing students with the skills and motivation to become lifelong learners. A much stronger focus on curriculum process therefore is required. *How* to teach becomes equally important as *what* to teach. And for these new relationships to be effective teachers need a new kind of moral and even spiritual authority. They must become respected as exemplars of right living within their schools and communities. This requires a profound shift in the mindset of teachers, and even more importantly of their trainers, as they reconceptualise their roles and functions.

(iii) In adopting a more holistic approach to learning, the old curricular and management boundaries between the various sectors of education (pre-school, primary, secondary, TVET) need to be reviewed, and the question of effective articulation between them addressed. There is a particular need to explore how the secondary school and TVET curricula might be planned together in a more holistic and interconnected way. In the Pacific region, TVET programs need to be brought down into the secondary school, and even to upper primary settings. The seventh and eighth years of schooling are often the last for many students, and it is vital that relevant and meaningful TVET is available to

them, and that such programs articulate with subsequent learning opportunities, especially in the non-formal sector. It is pleasing that Fiji is taking a lead role in the region in the provision of vocational programs in primary and secondary schools through its enterprise education initiatives. These could be further developed and expanded, and woven into the curriculum in a more integrated way.

(iv) As we take a more holistic and lifelong approach to learning, with a broader emphasis on preparation for life as well as livelihoods, questions need to be raised about the deeply entrenched systems of external examinations in the Pacific, including Fiji. These systems have maintained the 'pyramid' structure so typical of 'third world' education systems that contribute to many children being pushed out of an increasingly selective school environment, with implications of failure and rejection. A truly lifelong and learning-based approach will require totally new models of student monitoring and assessment. The PRIDE team applauds the work of the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment as it seeks to introduce the idea of 'assessment for learning', using an outcomes based approach that aims to empower learners.

Tensions and change

Jacques Delors, in his preface to *Learning: the treasure within* (Delors, 1996), identifies and discusses seven tensions that he believes characterise most education policy, planning and learning environments in a rapidly changing world. He revisits these and adds further insights in a later paper (Delors, 2002). Among the tensions he identifies are several that have deep resonance with communities in the Pacific, including the tensions between tradition and modernity, cooperation and competition, the spiritual and the temporal, the universal and the individual, and the local and the global.

In neither of the above documents does Delors elaborate on the idea of tension itself. One assumes he is not using the concept of tension in the sense of conflict between opposing factions or ideologies, the kind of tension that can lead to rivalry and war, but is referring instead to a functional or positive tension. This idea of functional tension is best understood by thinking about the strings of musical instruments. Many people in the Pacific play the guitar. They appreciate that the guitar strings need to be kept in a constant state of tightness if they are to produce pleasing music. One of the tasks of the guitarist is to maintain a functional tension by regularly adjusting and readjusting the strings to ensure harmony. Likewise educators have the constant challenge of achieving a functional or creative balance between the tensions confronting them as they seek to reform their education systems.

The concepts of tension and balance are highly relevant to the reform of education. Almost every educator I speak with in the Pacific believes that the balance is wrong, that the global, the competitive and the temporal have a disproportionate influence in most learning environments. How do we restore the balance? Once again, I find analogy a useful tool. In the realm of visual arts, music, drama and dance in the Pacific there are currently some remarkably creative initiatives. Individuals and groups within local communities are creating new forms of expression from the fusion of the traditional and the modern. The USP Oceania Centre for Arts & Culture is playing a significant leadership role here.

By way of example, much contemporary music in the Pacific represents a dynamic syncretism of the local and the global. It often has equal resonance with those who celebrate and enjoy the traditional as it has for those who prefer modern western music styles. Another

wonderful example of the fusion of the global and the local is a fan given to me in Nauru this year. It is very finely woven, using traditional techniques of fan making, and looks exactly like the fans of yesteryear. Except for one thing. It is not made with the fibres of young coconut leaves, but woven entirely with vividly coloured, fine plastic string, along with plastic decorations around the edge.

In the realm of education, whether in policy, planning, curriculum or in the classroom itself, we should be striving for the same dynamic syncretism between tradition and modernity, the spiritual and the temporal, and the global and the local. Young people need to grow up with the skills and confidence to live successfully in a globalising world. Yet it is becoming increasingly recognised in the Pacific that they also need to grow up with a clear sense of their own local cultural identity, built on a strong foundation of their own cultures, languages and spiritualities, and with a deep pride in their own values, traditions and wisdoms.

One of the core principles of the PRIDE Project is a commitment to building education reform on a strong foundation of local cultures, languages and epistemologies. Many Pacific educators share this commitment, suggesting that the primary goal of education:

...is to ensure that all Pacific students are successful and that they all become fully participating members of their groups, societies and the global community (Pene, Taufe'ulungaki & Benson, 2002: 3).

School and TVET curricula therefore need to be firmly grounded in the local while at the same time achieving an effective syncretism with the global world beyond. How might this be done? Let me suggest a few principles:

(i) In many settings it may be appropriate to adopt a bilingual approach, with English and the local languages used equally but separately in the learning environment. This implies that English literacy and vernacular literacy are equally promoted. A significant challenge here is the development of vernacular literacy materials of a suitable standard and interest level for children and youth of all ages.

(ii) A culture of literacy has not yet developed in many settings in the Pacific.¹ People tend not to read for pleasure and relaxation. Nor is written material a primary source of information gathering: most local knowledge is not stored and transmitted in writing, but continues to rely on oral traditions, with story telling playing a significant role. School and TVET programs need to recognise, value and build on these oral traditions, yet blend them with modern ways of communicating.

(iii) Networks of human relationships are profoundly significant in the Pacific, including Fiji, especially within the extended family and local language groups. Mutuality, not competition, is all important. This needs to be recognised in all school and TVET learning environments. The challenge here for teachers is to facilitate strong linkages between students, developing learning networks where they can support and learn from each other. Group project activity and group assignments often can replace individual learning programs. Peer tutoring also offers significant shared learning opportunities. The ground-breaking 'New Basics' curriculum currently being trialled in Queensland, Singapore,

¹ An exception here, of course, is Fiji, where the Indian population has a rich tradition of literacy dating back many centuries, and where the written word has long been used to document local knowledge and wisdom.

Nauru and elsewhere provides a fascinating example of a process-based approach that fosters cooperative learning of this kind.²

The four pillars of learning

One of the most widely recognised and discussed features of the Delors Report is its notion of four pillars of learning: to know, to do, to be and to live together. While it has been criticised by some in the Pacific, Thaman (1998), for example, arguing that it leads to the very conceptual fragmentation that the Report itself so strongly criticises, the idea that all learning is built on these four foundations seems readily accepted in most cultures. For example, the design and construction of many traditional homes and meeting places in the Pacific are based on four large timber uprights, usually tree- or palm-trunks, one in each corner, these supporting the remaining structure. The idea that each upright needs to be of similar size or scale in order to ensure structural strength and stability is readily transferred to education, and to the view that all pillars should receive equal emphasis in a child's learning. In reality, however, the representation of each pillar in most Pacific education systems, as elsewhere, is far from balanced, with 'learning to know' and 'learning to do' occupying disproportionately large parts of the curriculum. As Jacques Delors (2002) himself acknowledges, these two pillars have long been self-evident, and are the dominant focus of most education systems.

The 'learning to be' pillar has posed particular challenges for educators. It is the least understood, and the least represented in curricula at all levels. Basically, it has to do with the formation of identity, both individual and collective, with the achievement of self-knowledge, self-understanding and self-fulfilment (Delors, 2002), and ultimately with the development of wisdom. The full recognition and implementation of 'learning to be' will require "... nothing less than a revolution in education that will be expensive in terms of time" (Delors, 2002:151). Nevertheless, Delors makes it clear that we cannot afford to overlook this aspect of learning, for through it people are empowered to become more fully human.

Likewise the 'learning to live together' pillar challenges those engaged in curriculum reform. The tendency is to relegate this pillar to the Social Sciences, and to the teaching of international relations. Yet one of our primary goals surely is to learn to live together within a nation state. Again, Jacques Delors (2002, p 151) expresses this aptly:

This newer pillar has a special resonance in the twenty-first century as countries grapple with the difficulties of co-existence among different religious communities, different ethnic groups and others. Education bears a tremendous responsibility to bring to blossom all the seeds within every individual, and to make communication between people easier. Communication does not simply mean repeating what we have learned: it means also articulating what is in us and has been combined into a rounded whole through education, and understanding others.

In seeking a new vision for education in Fiji, and in building a strategic direction for its future, these words of Jacques Delors are particularly apt. Only when the many disparate peoples of Fiji truly learn to co-exist in peaceful and mutually beneficial ways will the nation itself move forward. Education has a key role here.

² See for example: www.education.qld.gov.au/corporate/newbasics

In a deeper way these two pillars of 'learning to be' and 'learning to live together' also have to do with the nurture and development of spirituality, not just in a religious sense, but also through the broader quest for meaning in life and for explanations of reality, both individual and communal. It is interesting that secular education discourse – that of UNESCO and other international agencies, for example – is starting to emphasise the spiritual, and to advocate a role for education in the spiritual development of children and youth (see, for example, Cawagas et al., 2004; Zhou & Teasdale, 2004). But how do we introduce the development of the spiritual into school and TVET curricula? Certainly not by creating an extra 'box' somewhere, and slotting it in alongside other content areas.

In my own view the teaching of spirituality, and more broadly the teaching of 'learning to be' and 'learning to live together', cannot be superimposed on existing curricula and taught purely as content. The following principles therefore are suggested:

- (i) The teaching of these elements is the responsibility of each and every teacher. They should be woven into the very fabric of the curriculum in all subject areas in a fully integrated way.
- (ii) They cannot be taught just from a content perspective. Curriculum process is equally if not more important (see, for example, Teasdale & Teasdale, 2004).
- (iii) Teachers themselves should be exemplars of good living in these areas. Their own behaviour and relationships should inspire and guide students.
- (iv) School and college administrators also have significant responsibilities here, in particular for ensuring that the organisation of the institution, and all relationships within it, are exemplary of 'learning to be' and 'learning to live together'.
- (v) Teacher training institutions need to rethink their curricula, pedagogies, structures and organisational culture to bring about the expected transformation at the learner level. The aim here is to ensure that the pre- and in-service training of teachers effectively incorporate these elements.

From a traditional perspective, these two pillars, until the colonial era, were a fundamental part of a holistic process of lifelong learning throughout the Pacific, and in India. If we could return by time capsule to the villages of our ancestors, say three hundred years ago, most of us would find that 'learning to be' and 'learning to live together' indeed accounted for at least fifty percent of the learning experiences of children and youth as they prepared to take their place in the adult life of the community.

Hopefully global thinking about education may be coming full circle, returning to the subjective and the spiritual, and to a more holistic and lifelong approach, thereby allowing the peoples of the Pacific to reaffirm the legitimacy of their own local ways of thinking, knowing and understanding. It thus reinforces the significance of a key objective of the PRIDE Project, namely to expand opportunities for children and youth to acquire the values, knowledge and skills that will enable them actively to participate in the social, spiritual, economic and cultural development of their communities. Certainly if we are to capture the essence of the Delors Report in the development of curricula, ensuring that 'learning to be' and 'learning to live together' occupy at least half of the energies of teachers and students, then we need to

radically transform the way we conceptualise curriculum content and process, as well as the roles and responsibilities of teachers.

Conclusion

In this paper I have reviewed the reform of education, taking particular note of FBEAP and the work of PRIDE Project. The paper has not rejected the reform processes of the global world. Rather, it has drawn on the ideas of the Delors Report to identify the best that the global world has to offer. It then suggests new approaches to education based on a fusion of the global with the values and ways of thinking of Pacific cultures. I hope this will help us to create a new and more culturally appropriate vision of education for Pacific societies, and especially for Fiji.

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