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## The big picture: International perspectives on the reform of education

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This paper provides a brief review of the changing ways that people are thinking about education globally. What are the new ideas, the new trends, and how are they influencing the ways that schooling is taking place in our global world? And what are the implications of these different ways of thinking for the reform of education in the Pacific? And in Vanuatu?

In seeking to understand the changes that are taking place in the way people think about education, the PRIDE team has 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 that are the focus of the PRIDE Project, the Delors Report remains a particularly useful blueprint for reform, regardless of the economic, demographic and social indicators of each nation. In the eight years since it was published the Report has stood the tests of time, critical analysis and practical application. It has been widely debated in both 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.

The PRIDE team also has moved beyond the Delors Report, beginning to explore wider philosophical perspectives, including post-modernism. These 'big picture' changes in thinking and knowledge are beginning to impact on education globally, and it is important that we try to understand them, and to question their implications for the reform of education. What are the main trends?

### **From teaching to learning**

Ever since the invention of mass compulsory 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 new and expanding factories of Europe.

This new form of mass schooling was almost entirely teacher-centred, the podium and blackboard 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 teacher was central to educational discourse and process. 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 exemplified 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, as suggested below:

(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 boundaries between the various sectors of education (pre-school, elementary, secondary, technical/ vocational) 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 Technical & Vocational Education & Training (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. In some countries the seventh and eighth years of schooling are 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.

(iv) As we take a more holistic and lifelong approach to learning, with a broader emphasis on preparation for life as well as work, questions need to be raised about the deeply entrenched system of external examinations in the Pacific. This system has maintained the 'pyramid' structure so typical of 'third world' education systems that contributes 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 is working with 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 Vanuatu play the guitar. They will 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 relevant in curriculum development and reform. 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 Oceania Centre for Arts & Culture at USP Laucala Campus 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 the reform of education on a strong foundation of local cultures 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 us suggest a few principles:

- (i) In many settings it may be appropriate to adopt a bilingual approach, with English and the local language(s) 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. 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, 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 and elsewhere provides fascinating examples of a process-based approach that fosters cooperative learning of this kind (see for example, [www.education.qld.gov.au/corporate/newbasics](http://www.education.qld.gov.au/corporate/newbasics) )

### **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. Even though the idea achieved considerable recognition following publication of the 1972 UNESCO report of the same name (*Learning to be*, or the Faure Report), it had not become prominent in education discourse prior to release of the Delors Report. 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 learn about themselves, and to become more fully human.

Likewise the 'learning to live together' pillar challenges those engaged in curriculum reform. The tendency is to relegate it 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 a deeper way these two pillars 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, 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 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. 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 the 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 Oceania 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.

Moving beyond the Delors Report, I now want to conclude this paper with a brief and very preliminary exploration of philosophical perspectives, including post-modernism, and their implications for the reform of education.

### **Postmodernism and education**

Knowledge, like culture, is in a constant state of flux. It is never static. And in the global world at the moment we are going through a particularly significant period in the transformation of knowledge. Because it is happening all around us, it is difficult to understand and describe. There are several things we can say about it, however:

(i) It is a shift from a relatively finite system of knowledge, where we have assumed the world to be basically knowable, to the infinite. The sheer magnitude of the expansion of knowledge in recent years, and the capacity for continuing expansion, is beyond our comprehension. The ease with which we can access most of this knowledge through the world of cyberspace is equally mind-boggling.

(ii) It is a shift from the certainty and predictability of the old scientific understandings of the past few centuries, to the uncertainties and unpredictabilities of the new sciences of chaos theory, quantum mechanics, and so forth. In their writings, the 'new' scientists are admitting they do not have answers to our questions about ultimate realities, and they reaffirm the importance of subjective and spiritual explanations of the creation of the world and the meaning of life.

(iii) It is a shift from neatly packaged and defined areas of knowledge - from clearly demarcated areas of intellectual inquiry - to much more holistic and integrated ways of thinking and knowing that transcend the old boundaries and venture into territory that may be quite new and unfamiliar to us.

(iv) It is a shift from the security of positivism and structuralism to the insecurities and uncertainties of the post-structural and the post-modern. It is a shift from that which can be known, quantified and explained, to that which is fleeting and often intangible. Instead of searching for the right answers, it encourages us to search for the right questions.

(v) And finally it is a shift from an exclusively western/global discourse to new forms of dialogue between the western and the indigenous. In other words it represents a genuine search for complementarities between the global and the local.

What are the implications of this for the reform of education in the Pacific? First, we here in the Pacific are not alone in our quest for a creative fusion of the local and the global. A recent high level conference on educational planning at Oxford University, for example, had as its theme, 'Knowledge, values and policy', exploring questions such as the role of spiritual and ethical knowledge in educational planning, and alternative ways of planning in traditional religious cultures.

Second, there is an exciting correspondence between post-modernism, the new scientific thinking, and the ways of knowing of many local and indigenous cultures. All three open up different ways of perceiving reality, challenging us to think in terms of:

- interconnectedness rather than fragmentation
- inclusion rather than exclusion
- mutuality rather than hierarchy
- the relativity of knowledge, truth and values rather than certainty and objectivity.

Let me give three examples that are relevant to the reform of education at all levels.

(i) *The reality of the spiritual.* Most local cultures do not differentiate between the spiritual and the physical. For many cultures the spiritual is a reality that is not queried or challenged, even when dissonance exists. The old western preoccupation with finding the ‘right’ answer and thus resolving the dissonance does not occur. Likewise in the new sciences the need for closure is less apparent, and the metaphysical is re-emerging in scientific discourse. This suggests that our curricula may quite legitimately include local values, ethics and wisdoms, and take a more subjective and spiritual approach.

(ii) *The nature of social relationships.* A primary feature of most local cultures is the intricate network of social and family relationships that helps to ensure the survival of the group through interdependence and cooperation. People do not define themselves in terms of their individuality, but in terms of group affiliation. Basic to their thinking and knowing is mutuality, not separateness. This contrasts with the competitive individualism of the global world. As emphasised earlier, we need to rediscover this interconnectedness, and develop curriculum processes that recognise and affirm our interdependence and mutuality, both in a human context, and with the natural world around us.

(iii) *The unity of knowledge.* The modern, global view of the world has encouraged a fragmented view of the universe, where knowledge is analysed by dividing it into ever smaller units. This has led to the compartmentalisation of knowledge into discrete disciplines, and to reductionist approaches to thinking whereby any phenomenon can be broken down, however artificially, into separate components. Our school and TVET curricula have far too often suffered this fate.

By contrast, most local cultural groups traditionally have taken a more organic, holistic view of knowledge that emphasises the essential oneness of humanity and nature. An Indigenous Australian colleague, Dr Doug Morgan, a philosopher, describes his people’s view of reality as a web, with all elements of place, people, species and events interconnected in a single cosmos. He emphasises that this concept of a united cosmos is dynamic, continually defining and redefining peoples’ relationships with each other, with the land, and with the universe (Slade & Morgan, 2000). Similar views of reality are present in most Pacific cultures.

This indigenous perspective is now mirrored to quite a remarkable degree in the recent ‘discovery’ of interconnectedness by subatomic physicists, and opens up exciting possibilities for restructuring our school and TVET curricula in more unified and holistic ways. (For a more detailed exploration of these ideas refer to Beare & Slaughter, 1993).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have tried to reconceptualise the planning and reform of education in Oceania by reflecting on the ways that people are thinking about education globally. The chapter has drawn on the ideas of a visionary UNESCO Report, *Learning: the treasure within* (Delors, 1996), and on broader philosophical ideas that are influencing the way we think about knowledge and learning.

In quite a fascinating way many of these new ideas and directions have deep resonance with the traditional values, beliefs and lifeways of Pacific cultures, thus helping us in our quest to fuse the local and the global in the reform of our school and TVET curricula.

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