

## **Teachers as agents of schooling and development in the South Pacific**

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### **Introduction**

Teachers, as members of a noble profession, have a twofold obligation: to contribute to the learning of the children under their care and to serve the community in its efforts to achieve its development objectives. This paper is based on the premise that these two roles are complementary rather than conflicting. This is because the ultimate purpose of education is to develop the *whole* community or society through the education of its members.

Schooling and development are very much intertwined concepts. Schooling is a major social institution, part of whose purpose is to develop people's knowledge, skills and attitudes. Furthermore, the quality of such personal and social development sets the foundation for the nature and quality of community and national development that citizens and their leaders pursue at the societal level.

The quality of schooling is also dependent on the quality of the human and material resources in the community. As teachers are concerned with the ultimate educational purpose of developing the whole community or society and maintaining the quality of schooling, they must take an active leadership role in both schooling and development.

Specifically, this paper will advocate the necessity for greater participation by local communities in the decision making process as to where and how international funding for development projects is to be spent. Effective

devolution of decision making requires leadership at the local level. Teachers, as an educated professional group in society, are strategically positioned to take up this leadership role in their local communities. Teachers can utilise foreign aid for education, ensuring that areas such as community education benefit, as well as formal schooling.

Through education and community outreach, teachers can help their local communities develop local cultural identity as a foundation for raising the critical awareness of local needs. Teachers can teach the political skills necessary for local communities to participate more fully in their own social and economic development. The teaching profession could play a pivotal role in the development of a nation. In this sense, education becomes an intervening variable and plays a mediating role in the complex nexus between education and development.

All teachers have a professional obligation to contribute to the reformation and development of society by means of a just and equitable education. This worthwhile act of service to the community at large is central to the teaching fraternity's general ethos. Unfortunately, society tends to value teaching as only a semi-professional rather than a fully-fledged profession. Nevertheless, as community leaders, teachers can do much to enhance their professional and social status as recognised contributors to the well-being of their local communities. They have a shared responsibility to enrich the quality of life in the small states of the South Pacific.

### **The South Pacific context**

It is a mistake to think in terms of sameness throughout a so-called unified global society. The societies of the world are multicultural and diverse in their means and aspirations. They are all at different stages of development. Rather than pressing for a unified global development plan, Baba (1992: 230–33) sees the need for recognising the differences between people, cultures and countries. The way forward is to agree on comparable outcomes, while understanding and accepting that different people, cultures and countries exist in different sociopolitical contexts. In other words, different cultures need different curriculum content and teaching strategies to achieve the similar ends of making people more culturally secure, critically aware and politically active.

Aid policies must also aim at equity of outcome rather than equal support strategies. The individual differences between various world communities are factors that further increase the existing inequalities when donor countries implement similar reform and development policies throughout our global community. Different countries are at different stages of development (or perhaps this is better phrased as have followed different trajectories of development) and have different needs. Therefore countries will vary in the support strategies they require in order to achieve a similar standard of development.

When much of the negotiation of aid projects and their subsequent funding arrangements are conducted at international government levels, the recipient country's needs may be misinterpreted and the country may well receive only short-term benefits. As part of the aid negotiations, the donor country also receives social, economic and political trade-offs that may further drain the recipient country's resources.

To counteract this, international governments must devolve their aid administration to the grass-roots level and the sole purpose of aid must be a donation to provide service at the level of the local community. Simultaneously, teachers must provide the appropriate education to raise the consciousness of local communities and develop the necessary leadership skills so that local communities can plan, negotiate and manage the development of their own societies.

### **Previous modernisation strategies**

It may be helpful here to consider some of the main historical influences on education in the South Pacific. The starting point for this discussion is a paper devoted to Melanesia, but because of the relevance to situations over a much wider area, the discussion assumes many parallels for the rest of the Pacific region and even for the entire third world. Francis (1978) describes how Western education in Melanesia failed to raise the consciousness of local communities. It also failed to develop the necessary leadership skills so that local communities could plan, negotiate and manage the development of their own societies. The Western education was a *colonising* education whose overriding purpose was to maintain colonial rule.

First, Francis demonstrates that the nineteenth century mission schools destroyed traditional society in Melanesia by enforcing an ethnocentric and authoritarian form of education. This education was a flagrant attack on the indigenous cultures in order to impart a foreign Christian evangelisation process. Although the missionary schools were a modernising influence, their educational philosophies misguided and culturally damaged the people.

Secondly, he explains that this process continued under colonial government through to the mid-twentieth century. Two main cultural foundations were ravaged during this period of history. In tandem with an indigenous spiritual destruction, a complete economic dependency was fostered. The small South Pacific colonies became the underdeveloped assets of various developed countries, who exploited their natural resources and human labour. Colonial so-called education was mainly for 'educating' the indigenous people for work that would maintain the colonial administrative structures and processes (i.e. it was little more than a basic and vocationally oriented training).

Thirdly, Francis describes the neocolonialism of the latter half of the twentieth century. South Pacific countries gained independence only to be subjugated once again in economic competition in the international market. They remained handicapped by their status of relative underdevelopment and their smallness of size. They became known as third world countries or undeveloped nations unable to compete economically with the developed countries of the world. Their economic weakness made them easy targets for labour and primary industrial exploitation by much stronger economies that used their labour and resources to supply the large manufacturing industries of the developed nations (Watson 1994). Again, the local communities were educated and trained to supply inexpensive labour for overseas companies.

Culturally sensitive and critically aware people in the developing countries lamented the damage that had been visited on the whole of their society. This damage was most obvious in the area of traditional cultural disintegration and vocational and spiritual subservience. It was a result of a series of educational programmes heavily laden with the vested interests of the donor country.

Finally, when the newly formed developing nations were attempting to regain their cultural identity and strengthen their independence, these developing countries continued to implement a borrowed and inappropriately

adapted strategy for modernisation and development. This strategy took the form of a rhetoric of traditional value orientation running through the content of Western modernisation and development policies. On its surface, such a contribution from the developed countries appeared to be a beneficial and just compensation for the damage wrought in the past. However, the outcome was paternalistic, damaging and naive. The trend was Western-inspired traditionalist dogma. A regaining of traditional cultural identities was only half the challenge. The indigenous people of these developing countries needed to develop a critical awareness, vision, leadership skills and vocational training to gain a competitive edge in the global market (Francis 1978: 49–51).

### **A post-modernisation strategy**

Social reconstruction comes about when people can discern equity and justice in their daily lives. Education that promotes this must transmit relevant content via appropriate pedagogy. Such an education will transmit the best parts of the local traditional culture and provide the knowledge and skills necessary to develop a competitive edge in the international market place (Francis 1978: 62–64). It must also incorporate the relevant and appropriate pedagogy that will enable a critical examination of the educational content and encourage people to make choices based on relevant and appropriate learning. Thus the people must choose for themselves what is best for them, after being informed by a sound education that is relevant and appropriate to the context. In essence this is the pedagogy of critical thought.

Since the nineteenth century when education was the responsibility of the village, educational policies have slowly excluded the community. In terms of values, goals and content, education was responding to the needs of the developed countries rather than to local needs. Teachers in local schools need to reverse this trend through community outreach and by implementing a pedagogy of local cultural and critical thought. The aim of education would be to reverse the existing local cultural isolation and respond to the needs of the local communities.

Thaman (1993) sees the challenge of present day education in Pacific countries as being to reverse the general global breakdown caused by past inappropriate development strategies in political, social and economic institutions. The present crisis situation of underdevelopment has occurred

because large international corporations with their economic bases spread worldwide siphon off profits from all of their local markets. He believes that this is a form of development that the developing countries cannot sustain. It wreaks cultural, economic and social damage upon the people (Thaman 1993: 5).

With the weakening and eventual dismantling of the communist structures as a global force, the new world economic order is a world economy based on capitalism. National boundaries are of diminished significance in this world capitalistic state, whose economic, political and social impact reaches every region of the planet.

In this integrated world, the developing countries must retain and develop their assets. While remaining independent, they must maintain their cooperative and competitive edge by interdisciplinary and intercultural means.

In the search for new strategies, teachers can play a key role. Teachers, as a professional community service group in society, have the unifying capabilities to negotiate at all levels. They can bring about a more appropriate direction for education and development in the South Pacific (Thaman 1993: 14).

There are more equitable and just alternatives to the past and present international relations strategies. Global economic, political and social networks have become integrated and complex. No longer can any nation risk a potential catastrophic breakdown of the global economic order in the underdeveloped parts of the world. Therefore education now carries an additional moral obligation. It must ensure that all components of the new world order function to bring about social, economic and political harmony with fairness and justice to all, and this is especially true of education in the developing countries.

### **What can be done to bring about a just and equitable education?**

Freire (1992) believed that education must play a vital role in the stages of development that follow the gaining of independence by once-colonised countries. It is as though an educational healing process needs to take place within the culture.

Baba (1992: 232) suggests that the form of educational healing that is to take place is one that continually works toward the abolition of the dependency culture and mentality. The people need to transform their colonised minds. This colonisation of the mind permeates the culture as a subtle psychological ‘afterglow’ of the blatant all-encompassing physical, economic and social colonisation period. He argues for an affirmative action policy in education. This means that teachers must incorporate curriculum content and teaching strategies specifically designed to bring about a more equitable and just society. Educators must also target adults through community education. Community education can develop community leaders with awareness, vision and leadership skills for the present. Educators must develop a similar education of social reconstruction for children in order to develop the leaders of the future.

Affirmative action also means that the Ministries of Education in the South Pacific, through their teachers, must reach out to each individual community in turn in search of where the needs are the greatest. This goal would require varying degrees of decentralisation and school-based management of all aspects of education.

### **Teachers as leaders of reform**

The teachers’ professional and social network should enable them to take on the leadership in the pursuit of such an educational goal. They can give collaborated collegial support and help each other as a professional group to set and maintain their common educative direction. Individual teachers can participate in the development of national educational goals and strategies and carry them through to implementation at the school and community level.

The social and political powers of teachers as a professional group in society enable competition and cooperation with other institutions that may distort educational agendas. Other institutions hope to control society for their own social, political, economic or moral ends, whereas teachers have their own *educational* agenda and central purpose. They need to remain true to their educational rationale and not allow their ideals to be diluted (or polluted) by other competing interests in society.

This positioning and ‘reason for being’ of teachers becomes more relevant at the present time when education is evolving from school-centredness to a community-centredness. Sharma (1992) reports that

parents are increasingly exerting pressure for more local-based changes in school governance as local schools are becoming more accountable. He sees government and local society in equal bargaining positions when they negotiate on how and by whom decisions are being made about the direction of education.

Sharma (1992: 16) argues that community participation in schooling allows for the formulation of policies and practices that are more responsive and sensitive to the needs of the local communities. He suggests that principals should be educating their communities for leadership at all levels in education and social development. His rationale is that communities need wisdom, knowledge and skills in order to implement effectively what these same communities consider to be appropriate social, political and economic development.

As well, teachers' professional and social networks can provide the political link to interpret the will of the people in relating to specific policies of educational reform and social development. In collaboration with other community groups, teachers can promote such policies at the level of the educational system and even at the political level.

People who feel a concern for their country's future have a right to participate in the performance and direction of education and national development. Education benefits not only the individual but also the society and the nation as a whole. Sharma (1992: 22) believes that teachers as individuals have a role to play in helping parents and the community to realise their basic human and civic rights.

Baba (1992: 232–33) considers educated people to be independent and ably skilled, acting as catalysts for the alleviation of the deprivation suffered by inequalities and injustice. Teachers can achieve a just and equitable education in a diverse multicultural society by developing positive and liberated people whose minds are free. Given the history of education, this is particularly relevant to the third world, and not least to people in the South Pacific.

### **Implementing a cultural impetus for the development of society**

In the current global society, the development of an integrated network of diversity is a key issue. Helu-Thaman (1994: 17) believes that sustainable development and environmental conservation must include a consideration of local knowledge, skills and culture. She states that this local cultural foundation also needs to be the foundation of education at local, national and global levels. However, people must examine and understand the concept of culture. A person's culture is an evolving characteristic of that person. It integrates with and continuously transforms that person's community at all levels in society. Its influence is in all directions of contact.

Once a person establishes and understands his or her own local cultural identity, he or she can use it for understanding the world at the national and international levels. Here is an opportunity for Helu-Thaman's (1994) idea of a cultural democracy to flourish because the local cultural identity becomes the foundation of the larger global identity. Once the local culture is firmly established, people can freely make educated choices from those aspects of the larger national and international cultures that best suit their needs. No longer will an external culture force itself upon the local communities.

This basic cultural democracy, or educated choice, provides the foundation on which to build an integrated culture at the international level. Helu-Thaman (1994: 5-6) speaks of the need to include the important aspects of the local Pacific cultures in the formal curriculum as the foundation step toward intercultural education and cultural democracy. Educators need to use the traditional as a valuable tool for the understanding of foreign cultures and social, political and economic institutions in the international marketplace.

Already, present culture, with all its adaptations and mutations, reflects the evolution of values, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and skills from previous eras. Influences have been and will continue to come from within the local culture and from external stimuli as far-reaching as the international context. Educators must teach the best components of their South Pacific cultures as they exist in people's daily lives.

Education should generate a positive feeling of self-reliance and empowerment of all those involved. In this way, the various developing

nations can become independent actors on the international stage. They should be able to use their local wisdom and exercise a leadership to make the world a better place.

The culture of a group of people is an ever-changing process. Educators must use their professional knowledge and responsibility to provide an appropriate undiluted cultural education that incorporates this process of cultural evolution. Teachers must guard against aberrations by vested interests. They need to ensure that education preserves and transmits those parts of cultures that form a firm foundation for the future. The Ministries of Education of the South Pacific must legislate affirmative action towards meeting individual local community needs and school-based management. Then teachers can become key negotiators in determining a locally-based cultural education that supports harmonious technological, economic, social and political development. This type of education for development will maintain continuous links with the past.

### **Integrating a critical process for discerning social alignment**

Self-management requires an appropriate mix of local, national and international cultures, knowledge and skills. Selecting the most relevant and useful of this vast body of knowledge requires a new pedagogy that enables such development of choice. It requires the wisdom of critical thinking and reflection.

Such leadership at the local and international levels requires a form of critical thinking that enables people to evaluate current events in the light of a sound, principled, local cultural base. It involves making decisions based on rational thinking, true evidence and the use, as guides, of justice, equity, love and care for the people and the environment.

This will entail a form of education that teaches people how to learn for themselves. This is reflective action learning: a process of action, reflection on that action, evaluation and decision making, setting further directions, carrying out further action and so on in a cyclic process.

Education must provide people with a critical consciousness that enables them to develop toward true independence and liberation. In restoring their sense of identity and pride, it will develop in people wisdom, knowledge and skills to meet the international stage on their own terms. Only then will the small states of the South Pacific assure themselves of high quality cultural life that is competitive on the global scale.

Education in the South Pacific must produce people who are independent, ably skilled and able to act as catalysts for the alleviation of global inequalities and injustice. Teachers can contribute to this goal using genuine educational motives. Teachers in the South Pacific need to seize their opportunity to drive harmonious technological, economic, social and political development using educational factors.

## **Conclusion**

Leadership is central to community and national development. It must unify the direction of attainment of any effective and legitimate outcomes. In order to do so, leadership must be locally based where these outcomes eventuate. Funding for development comes from a variety of international and national government bodies that are involved in education throughout the South Pacific region. In a situation where a diverse group of funding agencies is playing such an influential role in directing the development of an even more diverse group of South Pacific nations, an accurate appreciation of local needs and directions can easily be overlooked. Leadership from an international or national body cannot fully support community level development. International, national and local perspectives are qualitatively different.

Local leadership in the setting of directions, with the international and national funding agencies supporting such local leadership, would seem to be the most effective strategy. The thesis of this paper is that aid donor governments must devolve the leadership of aid projects so that direction comes from the grass-roots level where the development takes place. With some guidance, the local communities can become key players in their own development.

By taking the leadership initiative, local communities can choose their own direction of development. They will require a culturally based, critical education to achieve and maintain such a goal. Hence, teachers, as a professional community service group in the South Pacific, must seize their opportunity to take up the challenge as a unified and powerful educative force in a diversified region.

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