Schooling in Pacific Islands Nations (PINs)

*what place, what role?*

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**Abstract**

Concern with the achievements and adequacy of formal education systems in the contemporary Pacific has, over the past thirty years, led many Pacific Islander educationists to advocate the thoroughgoing adoption of cultural approaches as the remedy for perceived deficiencies. Greater use of Pacific epistemologies and cultures in all areas of education—curricula, pedagogy, psychology, learning theories, assessment techniques and so on—is, they contend, the means most likely to break down the 'foreignness' of the school system and step outside the notion that the primary purpose of schooling is national development. This paper, taking account of the contextual realities of the present globalising world, argues that cultural approaches are no longer enough. Systems and teachers must be prepared to operate more flexibly and variously, rising to the challenge of the mixed classrooms and global consciousness that constitute the world of today’s students.

**Keywords** culture and education; Pacific Islands Nations; pedagogy

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PACIFIC ISLANDS EDUCATORS have long been concerned about the state of formal education in the Pacific. In April 2001, many voiced their concerns in a colloquium hosted in Suva, Fiji Islands, by the Institute of Education of the University of the South Pacific (USP). In 2003, Pacific educators came together again, in Auckland, New Zealand, and addressed similar concerns and issues, this time in relation to tertiary education. In both colloquia the key issue underpinning all else was the ‘increasing incongruence between the values promoted by formal western schooling, the modern media, economic systems and globalisation on the one hand and those held by Pacific communities on the other’ (Pene, Taufe'ulungaki & Benson 2002:1). There was therefore a need for ‘Pacific people to reclaim the education process which will, at the same time, allow for the articulation of a Pacific vision for education’ (ibid.:2). In both fora, two main problems were identified as apparent causes of this incongruence:

- the ‘foreignness’ of our current school system in notion, nature and curricula
- the purpose of our school system being envisaged as primarily for national development.

Many people attribute the general observation that national governments have failed in the last thirty years to provide quality human resources (Pene, Taufe'ulungaki & Benson 2002:1) to the ineffectiveness of a formal education system that is alien to Pacific cultures, ‘an instrument designed to fail, exclude and marginalise the majority and therefore irrelevant and meaningless to their way of life’ (ibid.:2).

The purpose of this paper is simply to reflect on the discussion of this seeming and prolonged lack of appropriate advancement in formal education in the Pacific Region and, in the process, to arrive at a clearer perception about why related problems have continued to evade resolution.

The foreignness of schooling

Thoughtful and vocal Pacific Islands educators have become wont to associate the prevailing foreignness of schooling with various aspects of formal education. For one, schooling in its entirety and its component parts is ‘antithetical to Pacific traditional indigenous education’ (Thaman 2002:23). This is demonstrated in the regulated classroom schedule of schooling, during
which students are ‘teacher directed and controlled’, and taught to become individuals, individualistic and competitive (Taufe'ulungaki 2003:31). These, and other western values such as independence, privacy and consumerism, and methods of developing them in decontextualised learning situations delivered mainly through the verbal medium, are alien to Pacific cultural ways of believing, knowing, doing and learning (ibid.). In a recent presentation in the School of Education, USP, Talanga Seminar series, Professor Konai Thaman pointed out that because of the euro-centric world view of universities, ‘... people from the Pacific who study at universities are confined to work and study in a foreign context that may conflict with their cultural background’ (USPBeat 2006:1). One implied outcome of this foreign experience for Pacific Islanders (PIs) is the probability that ‘the more schooling they [PI children] receive the less likely they are to remain members of their village or local community’ (Thaman 2002:24).

Significant criticism has also been levelled at the school curricula as being irrelevant; they are ‘still pro-western in [their] orientation, pedagogies and content’ (Puamau 2002:62), do ‘not place much value on indigenous epistemologies, culture and language’ (ibid.:64) and therefore do not prepare Pacific people to participate meaningfully in their societies and communities. Furthermore the same curricula continue to be offered in spite of high failure rates (Nabobo 2002:44).

The English language, in which schooling is delivered in most Pacific countries, has been identified as the component with the harshest foreign impact. Major concerns about the use of English in school include its westernising effect on the worldview and thinking of Pacific Islanders, the undermining of the vernacular, which is described by Afamasaga as ‘our heritage, our origin, our reason for being and belonging’ (2002:98), and being a learning barrier in the classroom for second language speakers.

With regard to teaching and learning methods used in schools, the overarching problem has been identified as the teacher-centredness of the Pacific classroom, another foreign imposition. In such a classroom, critics point out, teachers make little effort to appreciate the learning orientations and needs of the Pacific Islands student and to be culturally inclusive in their teaching. The focus has been on the learning of ‘subjects’, content or disciplines. Sub-standard teaching is seen as an additional problem, teachers as not being effective enough in empowering independent thinking, learning and
appropriate extrapolation and application of knowledge among students (Fasi 2002; Teaero 2002; Robbins 2004).

Finally, the orientation of schools towards exams—and in particular, exams that emphasise academic development in subjects required for jobs in the national economy—enforces an elitist education system that is also likely to contribute towards ‘new power relations’ (Taufe'ulungaki 2002:11). Another educator points out that this orientation ‘will be ... at the expense of developing the child holistically’ and will result in the continuation of ‘the denial of indigenous forms of learning and teaching’; children will therefore continue to fail (Teaero 2002:77).

**Targeting national development**

The forecast by senior Pacific Islands educators of these and other critical outcomes seems, surprisingly, to have done little to influence the shifts that the educators have called for over the years. Substantially, the call has been for revisiting the purpose of education and ensuring its alignment with what Pacific peoples want from schooling. In operational terms, many PIN educators are calling for cultural inclusivity in classrooms and relevance in curricula, so that schools become instruments of cultural preservation and nurturing, as well as for national development. The underpinning belief here is that through the familiarity engendered by epistemological approaches to curriculum, teaching and pedagogy, learning will be more meaningful for PIN students motivated by schooling that is geared towards successful participation in their societies and communities. To the contrary, because schooling prepares students for paid jobs associated with a modern and western economy and thinking, ‘... success in school may be seen as a process by which Pacific young people are extricated from their local communities into what is seen as a superior and external realm’ (Thaman 2002:24).

**Culture and schooling: making the connections**

But thirty years later, what exactly is involved with respect to the culture that PIs are being extricated from? Thaman defines culture as the ‘all embracing framework that helps define particular ways of being and behaving, different types of knowing and knowledge, as well as different ways these are stored, communicated and shared’ (Thaman 2002:25). Right across the Pacific Region PIs are now aspiring to opportunities for good jobs, for travel, for study abroad
Radio and television have penetrated even at village level and video decks are now giving way to DVD players for home entertainment. Mobile phones are carried even to the village and back, and computers and the Internet are strong competitors of traditional media for global connectivity and influence. With the increasing, although relatively slow, penetration of modern technology, this change is happening as well in the type of information that is becoming meaningful in the Pacific, in ways of learning, storing and sharing knowledge and in communicating it. Considering the Pacific Islands diaspora all over the world that supports family and relatives at home with remittances, and the kind of influence these dispersed people will inevitably have on the lifestyle of those they are supporting, it is clear that Pacific ways of ‘being and behaving’ have evolved in significant ways into modernity. In this evolution, further social divides leading to different ways of knowing, viewing and participating in the world have become features of Pacific Islands ways of life: the rural/urban, wealthy/poor and young/old divides, and the hierarchical workforce of professionals, tradespeople and blue-collar workers, are outcomes or manifestations of the degree and level of education and training attained among Pacific Islanders.

Christianity, foreign as it once was, and many would argue still is, has now become an unquestioned, assimilated part of PI culture and way of life (Sanga 2002:53). Schooling, on the other hand, as an instrument for preparing Pacific peoples, young and mature, for the realities of the lives that they now live, is a situation described by Thaman as one in which parents are willingly choosing to become ‘trapped in their own self-defeating formulation, that education is about schooling and that schooling is about getting to the next level’ (2002:24). There are twin implications here: that sound educational decision-making is a prerogative limited to a few, ‘better-informed’ PIs, and that the best educational interest of PIs is served by cultural approaches. The question then becomes: who reclaims the education process and on whose assessment is an appropriate Pacific vision for education articulated?

Kabini Sanga describes the current dichotomous view of what is taught in school and what is the realm of the cultural communities as the In-School (IS) and the Out-of-School (OS) entities of education. The former is related to education that prepares young people for ‘a good paying job, in the city’, the latter about preparing children ‘with skills and values that are needed for them to live and participate as members of their local communities’ (2002:53). The
literature strongly suggests that schools can do more in the education of, in and through cultural ways to bridge the gap in this divide, by way of: relevant curricula, pedagogy that is sensitive to the learning orientations of Pacific Islands students and intellectual, emotional and social development founded on Pacific cultural values that fit the students for effective participation in life outside the classroom, be it in the community, at home or in the workplace. This implies for teachers the responsibility 'to make sure that teaching and learning accomplish these outcomes, and make the necessary adjustments in order to facilitate their achievement' (Thaman 2002:29). Furthermore, Pacific Islands teachers are best placed to undertake these tasks on the acceptance that people who 'understand the way a society acquires and imparts knowledge [are] better placed to develop pedagogical strategies that are more conducive to effective learning by members of that society' (Teacro 2002:79).

Is it all really about schooling?

Before considering these desired outcomes further, it will be helpful first to sort out a number of other issues included in the general discussion about schooling that clearly do not belong there. Making use of schooling as a tool for national development, for instance, and related concerns, is an issue that must be attributed to national developers; it should not, in any way, denigrate schooling as a means of educating and learning, whatever its target. The implication in the literature is that education for national development, through its teacher-centredness, its subject-based orientation and its delivery in the English language, is eroding the cultures of the Pacific. Considering the huge challenge that PIs now face with the onslaught of globalisation and related developments, it is difficult to imagine how their preparation, through schooling, to deal with international issues that can subjugate them all over again in the form of dependence on foreign aid under unsatisfactory conditions, trade imbalances and new power blocks (Taufe'ulungaki 2002:11) can actually be in conflict with their survival as a nation and a people. This challenge calls for the development of Pacific Islands economists, environmentalists, development planners and technology experts who can participate in dialogue and negotiation on behalf of their region. Proficiency in English is a critical prerequisite for this global communication. Not only are knowledge and skills in these and other relevant subjects important; the skills to extrapolate and apply these to Pacific Islands contexts, to use the knowledge in situations that call for critical thinking and
problem-solving, and in visionary and creative ways to protect Pacific Islands identities and resources in the voracious modern world, are imperative. Schooling can, and should, be used to make all of this possible.

That the jobs obtained by those who are qualified through schooling are located in the cities and urban areas is also a problem for national leaders. Many among the populace share the ideal that these good jobs should be spread throughout the nation, should span the spectrum of skills and talents represented by the population and should provide better choices than those the situation currently allows. This lack of choices is now the major cause of migration abroad by many of our skilled and talented, young and mature alike. The lack of choices, however, and associated brain drain, be it into urban areas or overseas, is not caused by schooling. A well-paying job is a source of living for many Pacific Islanders these days, and parents and community leaders are well aware of the connection between higher-level schooling and secure, comfortable lives, through the examples of PIs who have made it in and through schooling. Aspirations for good jobs are therefore understandable and logical, as also for proficiency in the English language as the means to them. Again, that these are decisions seen and made by people as a means to attaining the kind of lives that they desire is not a weakness of the formal education system.

Recently, 20 young people—ranging in age from 17 to 26 (and including one 40-year-old) representing various ethnicities and first languages, both genders, village and urban upbringing, working and still at school—were surveyed on their views on formal education. In particular they were asked to address the notion of its foreignness, learning in English, choice of first languages for learning, purpose and appropriateness of school examinations, and appropriateness of formal education in the pursuit of their own personal goals. In summary, all, or nearly all of them:

- expected to go to school as a matter of course
- did not have any problems with being taught in the English language, many having been prepared from home, and others transferring to English with some initial difficulty only
- did not consider it wise to learn in the vernacular, as English, being a universal language, was essential to their success and future goals because it was the language of their textbooks and learning resources, it enabled
cross cultural and global communication, and it was the language of the workplace. The mother tongue, on the other hand, was considered limited in its capacity to cope with new developments and concepts foreign to their culture.

- saw exams as a good way of measuring their performance relative to the rest of the class and a way of ensuring they worked hard all the way, although some admitted that they can encourage cramming
- wanted to serve their country through good jobs, and to be effective in their specialised areas of interest; a few wanted international marketability while a couple were just ‘going with the flow’.

All in all, schooling did help them in achieving their main goals in life. The main criticism the group expressed about schooling was that it did not sufficiently prepare students for the practical world, such that some respondents felt that specialised skills were best learned on the job.

Although these were the views of only 20 people and are therefore restricted to anecdotal evidence at best, they do provide some interesting features and indications: the respondents’ view of their formal education experience was pragmatic and concise; their indication that schooling as it is and was for them as a group drawn from mixed socio-cultural backgrounds is largely in tune with the aspirations and goals of younger PIs that they collectively shared; and that a number of issues of thirty years ago are no longer as relevant or critical in the current, more modern Pacific.

Traditional ways, and the practices that ensured their strengthening and existence, existed long before the establishment of schools, within families and communities. It is here that confidence in who and what one is—one’s individual, social and cultural identity—is developed and affirmed. It is here, within the OS environment where it is most meaningful, that concerns about the survival of a Pacific culture, its language and practice, should be primarily addressed, in the upbringing of children, in the values underpinning the relationships of the household and in the customs that communicate community mores. Schooling extends the education of PIs to meet the economic, social and political challenges brought about by modernity, by skilling them for income-earning opportunities, professions and for life in general. Delors pointed out that it was ‘the view of the Commission that, while education is an ongoing process of improving knowledge and skills, it is also—perhaps primarily—an exceptional means of bringing about personal development and building relationships
among individuals, groups and nations’ (1996:12). It is in this latter realm that schools and community converge, in the teaching of life skills and values of good character and citizenship that help develop responsible and principled members of society and the world.

**Defining the changes**

Given this framework of operation for schools, and the developments that have affected the lives of Pacific Islanders in the last thirty years and more, where exactly should we be looking to make the changes, and changes of what kind? Teachers have been identified in the literature as the professionals tasked with ensuring appropriate educational outcomes. Concern has been raised about the unsatisfactory level and quality of teaching in the region. The literature has also called for relevant, ‘pacificised’ curricula to replace current western orientations; pedagogy and classroom methodologies appropriate to Pacific Islands students; a high level of competence in English among teachers; and the inclusion in the curricula of life and character-building skills in keeping with values of Pacific cultures. It is expected that the development of enabling skills in all of these areas, and the educational principles and philosophies underpinning them, constitute the training provided to trainee teachers in national and regional institutions, and institutions of higher learning. That schooling, teachers and worst of all, students, are failing, does not, to a large degree, reflect well on the kind of preparation these professionals are receiving to meet the demands of their profession. The claim that some of this failure has to do with western educated Pacific Islands professionals having partially or wholly internalised western values, beliefs and knowledge systems (Taufe’ulungaki 2002:9) can no longer hold, given the fact that Pacific nations have long been independent and self-determining countries, and many of the structures and systems now in place are of either their own making or the lack of it. Furthermore, it is also the case that while many of these professionals are critical of ‘exogenous’ ways, they continue to ‘teach’ using the lecture podium, the one-way classroom, the English language and reading resources as the main means of teaching and learning. The calls by Pacific Islander educators for changes fall short of the provision of an alternative blueprint for a pacificised school system to address the claimed shortfalls in current westernised education systems and more importantly, to provide a tangible way forward for curriculum developers and teachers in the Pacific.
Critical reflections

Thirty years ago the number of expatriate teachers in classrooms was significant and schools throughout the region were still teaching imported curricula and evaluating student performance in exams based on them. Today the Pacific has national and regional curricula and teachers are mainly Pacific Islanders, largely taught and trained locally. In the past thirty years and more, teacher training institutions, including USP, which turned out its first teacher graduates in the early 1970s, have placed their own people in strategic areas of Education: in policy and planning, curriculum, leadership, management and administration and significantly, in classrooms at all levels. To the extent that in spite of this, Pacific educators continue to observe the precepts and practices of an ‘alien’ formal education system calls rightly for rethinking Pacific education so that Pacific peoples can reclaim the education process and align it with their vision of the future. The aspirations of Pacific peoples have developed and expanded over the years to include and embrace their place in a globalised world and the challenges it poses for them. It is a world that especially challenges the young of the Pacific, whose lives are not necessarily the same as the lives of those who were young thirty years ago (Reeves 2003: vi). It is also a world that has brought into Pacific lives, as pointed out earlier, further divides that challenge the pedagogies that are decided for today’s classrooms. While PI students have a significant right to education that is culturally inclusive where that is called for and effective, there must, in the multicultural and socially-mixed classroom that increasingly characterise the present, be caution that the rights of other groups are also respected and that inclusivity on the part of a dominant or favoured group does not lead to the exclusion or neglect of others.

If then, this rethinking is to be effective, there needs first to be a determination of what constitutes ‘worthwhile learning’ (Thaman 2002:23) for PIs that takes into consideration developments in the last thirty years. These should contribute significantly to a ‘Pacific vision for education’ without which it will be difficult to judge whether schooling is effective and appropriate. The 20 young PIs whose views were adumbrated as part of this paper provide indications of a converging recognition of schooling as the instrument for preparing them for a globalised future, indications that would be well worth following up in a scientific research study. If the purpose of formal education is to have any meaning and relevance for PIs, it should be decided by stakeholders—parents,
community leaders, national planners, public and private sector employers and NGOs, to name some—who, in the final analysis, are best placed to decide and articulate educational outcomes conducive to the realities of their lives and the lives of those in their charge, and how these are to be achieved.

The review of national and regional teacher training institutions, their programmes, goals and orientations must feature significantly in the rethinking, in order to ensure that these are indeed aligned with the outcomes to be attained, especially those related to young people 'whom we need to welcome into society, unreservedly, offering them the place that is theirs by right therein . . .' (emphasis added; Delors 1996:12). The teaching profession is one that is continuously challenged as societies respond to changes; teachers, and indeed all educational professionals, must undergo continuous in-service professional development to ensure currency of knowledge and practice. Most importantly, it would assist the effectiveness of this development if the trainers were to lead by example and demonstrate in their teaching: how to decide what is relevant knowledge, at the same time assisting teachers to be innovative and creative in choosing educational (re)sources; appropriate ways of obtaining, delivering and applying this knowledge that take Pacific learning orientations into account; and assessment methods meaningful to Pacific Islanders.

Taufe'ulungaki, speaking about the University of the South Pacific, commented that 'it is also a testimony to the resilience of the Pacific student that despite the continuing mismatch between the institutional culture of USP and those of its “Pacific” students, that still so many have managed to succeed' (2003:32). This resilience is shared in common with successful higher education students the world over grappling with the alien culture of universities and the demands of academia. To acknowledge this resilience is to accept evidence that PI students are capable of coping with demands beyond the familiar, in this case by adapting to and adopting what has been described in the literature so far as 'foreign' approaches to learning: the capacity to prioritise their studies over other commitments, to develop attributes such as self-discipline, efficiency in planning and time-management, self-motivation, and independent, reflective learning. Moreover, these qualities, and those attributed by Pacific educators to communal orientations of PIs—such as cooperation and sharing, reciprocal relationships, peer group orientation and participatory involvement in concrete and context-specific situations—are at the core of learner-centred and
constructivist approaches to teaching, recognised and practised over several generations in western schools, as they are being advocated by PI educators for PI students.

**Concluding comment**

The Pacific classroom is no longer characterised by the homogeneity of thirty years ago that made the cultural approaches alone a feasible and pragmatic adjustment; teaching methods must now be as diversified as the mixed classrooms in which they will be used. Teachers now and in the foreseeable future will find themselves dealing with diversity even in rural schools and especially at higher-level institutions. For today's teachers and teacher-training institutions, therefore, the crucial problematic is not just about cultural ways but about ways that will work in the diverse classroom. It will be about teaching students to think critically, using the best approaches of both worlds to arrive at appropriate choices and decisions. It will be about knowing that the ethics and values that govern the disciplines that they teach, and that they should in turn teach as part of their subjects—honesty, integrity, responsibility, hard work and commitment—are the same that have been handed down by traditional forebears, and have universal application. Alongside their subject areas, and educational principles and theory, it will be worthwhile learning for teachers to be given opportunities to develop the qualities of versatility, flexibility and creativity to enable them to make learning possible, meaningful, enjoyable and successful for all learners schooling in their care. Above all, it is about ‘giving (the students) the capacity to do well without us’ (Hughes 2002:35).

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**Notes**

1. The colloquium, entitled ‘Re-Thinking Pacific Education’, was held 25–29 April 2001.

2. In February 2003, a colloquium for tertiary teachers entitled ‘Teaching and Learning with Pasifika Students’, hosted jointly by the University of the South Pacific and Auckland University of Technology, was held in Auckland, New Zealand.
References


Hughes, P, 2002, ‘Our greatest successes come from giving to others’, Campus Review, April/May.


