

# Joining the dots in the Pacific Ocean



**Kaye Schofield**

It is hard not to be passionate about the Pacific. Its physical beauty, geographic, ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity and its long, rich and complex history make it one of the most fascinating regions on earth – as outsiders such as Gauguin, Robert Louis Stevenson, Margaret Mead and James A Michener all found. It is also a region confronted by a unique combination of challenges as it tries to manage change arising from globalisation, modernisation, environmental degradation and climate change.

## Not in my neighbourhood

Those of us who live in the Pacific are forever destined to be neighbours so what happens in our neighbourhood matters a lot. It is disappointing then to see that the Pacific is often overlooked in international discussions about development which seem increasingly focused on sub-Saharan Africa and the sub-continent. Perhaps that is just the way the world is – we are all concerned about our own neighbourhoods and the Pacific neighbourhood lies at the bottom of the schoolroom globe. Perhaps it is simply a question of size. Excluding Australia and New Zealand, there are only 8 million people in the neighbourhood which comprises some of the smallest countries on earth. If a large population were the only criteria for international focus, then the Pacific is a cluster of small dots in a vast ocean. However, it warrants broader international attention precisely because it is small. A recent review commissioned by the Pacific Island Forum found that many of the Pacific Island countries are ‘close to the knife edge of economic and social viability.’<sup>1</sup>

But there are other compelling humanitarian, environmental and security reasons why social and economic progress in the Pacific is important not just for those 11 countries that are members of the Commonwealth.<sup>2</sup> Over and above these reasons is the value to the world of cultural and linguistic diversity. As globalisation drives a process of cultural and linguistic homogenisation, we need to value more than ever the diversity of the Pacific region as a whole and its three sub-regions: Melanesia (West), Micronesia (Central and North) and Polynesia (South-East).

This diversity in a sea of bright blue is a great strength, but also the source of some of its greatest challenges. Nowhere is this more evident than in the sphere of education.

## You only see what you want to see

More often than not, descriptions of education in Pacific Island Countries (PICs) have a terrible sameness about them. Usually they start with a long litany of multiple shortcomings of education in the various nations, and a statement that many will not achieve the Millennium Development Goals for education and gender parity. The starting point is failure. Then the argument moves predictably to causes of these ‘failures’: poorly qualified teachers, poor teaching and learning environments, poor pedagogy, poor curriculum, poor school management, poor financial management by governments and the *pièce de résistance*, poor economic and political governance.

This line of argument seems intended to engender a sense of guilt and urgency in Pacific Island Countries which will generate national policy shifts and make space for donors to step into the breach with money and solutions.

As with most things, there is an element of truth embedded in such arguments. Fees and other charges, even at primary level, keep large numbers of students out of school. The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Nauru and Solomon Islands are some way from achieving universal primary enrolment. In Papua New Guinea (PNG), half of all children fail to complete a basic six years of primary schooling and there was a decline in gender parity between 1998 and 2002. Levels of retention (grades 1 to 5) in Fiji Islands, FSM and Samoa are worrying. There are also high levels of inequality in access to education services especially at the secondary levels. Across much of the Pacific, a ‘youth bulge’ is fuelling a decline in quality as ever more children enrol in already over-stretched schools. Books and adequately trained teachers are in short supply. Teaching and learning resources in the local language are rare. Curriculum design skills are underdeveloped and bilingualism has a long way to go. Management capacity is limited at all levels of the education system. Capital funds to build schools are inadequate and the flows of recurrent funding into schools are often erratic. Open and distance learning is underdeveloped, constrained by poor postal services, geographic distance and inadequate telecommunications. In the Pacific region, English is the language of trade and commerce, higher education and tourism. World Bank studies in 2004 indicate that in English language tests for Year 4 students, several countries had around 40 per cent of students at risk of failure, and even worse performance levels were reported at Year 6.<sup>3</sup> But there are other ways of seeing.



The example given in Box 1 could be presented dramatically as an example of how lack of teaching resources limits student achievement in numeracy. Alternatively, it could be presented as an example of how affordable local resources can be used by creative teachers to support student learning and as an example of the community's commitment to education.

The example described in Box 2 could be used to show the paucity of teaching and learning resources. And it could be used to illustrate poor language teaching and the prevalence of rote learning. On the other hand it could be presented as an example of a truly dedicated teacher doing whatever it takes to help her students achieve the learning outcomes specified in the curriculum.

Education in the Pacific, and subsequent external assistance to it, could look very different if we used a different lens. We could start not with a litany of failures and deficiencies but with a celebration of achievement and progress, without obscuring the mountains still to be climbed and the seas still to be crossed in the search for quality education for all Pacific islanders.

### Box 1 Limited resources ...

#### ... or creative use?

We were visiting a satellite school on the island of Abaiang in Kiribati. The school was three huts, all built by the local villagers so that the youngest children would not have to walk so far to the big school for their education. The walls and roof were thatch, the floors were crushed coral. Four subjects are taught in the early primary years and each corner of the room had been arranged around one of these subjects. The mathematics corner was made up of row upon row of shells. I looked at these and thought how pretty they were. Then I really saw. They had been carefully graded by size. And they were arranged in a series of complicated mathematical sets, designed to build sophisticated number skills: 3:6:12:24, 3:6:9:12, 3:9:12:15:18.

### Box 2 Limited resources ...

#### ... or devoted effort?

The Samoan teacher was standing in front of a stack of butcher's paper covered in beautiful copperplate writing, which had been carefully tied together with string and put on a stand. She was reading a sentence and then the children would read it aloud together. I asked her what the class was and she said English. I asked what resources she was using and she pointed to the butcher's paper. Because they have no books, she had spent her Christmas holidays transcribing the full text of a book she had borrowed – *Treasure Island* – on to butcher's paper. All 260 pages of it.

## A new door opens

Most Pacific countries are very small indeed. The largest is Papua New Guinea which is the size of Denmark. The smallest, Tuvalu, has less than 12,000 people. In between, Kiribati is home to around 100,000 people and Samoa is home to less than 200,000 people.

Irrespective of size, the international community expects each country to provide the full range of education services that are provided by rich developed nations. To provide access to quality education for all they are expected to allocate around 20 per cent of their national budget for education, with 50 per cent of that allocated to primary education. They are expected to: have sufficient numbers of well-qualified teachers at all levels; good curriculum, teaching and learning resources; good managers and administrators at all levels; suitable, safe and healthy physical infrastructure; sound education policies, plans and good information systems; participate in international forums; and retain the confidence of their citizens in the value of formal education.

This is a 'big ask' for small countries with negative economic growth (e.g. Solomon Islands), budget deficits (e.g. Fiji Islands), large public debt burdens (e.g. Vanuatu), rapid population growth (e.g. PNG), population decline (e.g. Cook Islands), heavy reliance on remittances (Tonga) or reliance on aid (e.g. Kiribati).

There is an emerging consensus that regional cooperation and integration is the key to the Pacific's sustainability in a globalising world – a consensus that has emerged more clearly in the aftermath of September 11 and growing regional security fears.

Pacific Leaders have developed the Pacific Plan to create stronger and deeper links between the sovereign countries of the region. The search is on for 'Pacific Solutions for Pacific Challenges'. This is not an easy path for countries who have relatively recently emerged from a colonial period and who cherish and are keen to protect their national sovereignty.

Regional cooperation and integration is particularly hard in education which is an expression of cultural and social identity, and is a means of passing it from one generation to the next. As Le Métails has noted: '...any education system, at any given point in time, is a combination of the past, the present and the future.'<sup>4</sup> Despite their many similarities, each country of the Pacific has a unique past, a different present but they all share an uncertain future. These differences play out in the determination of the aims and values of education, in the way education systems are organised, the way schools work and the way teachers teach.

The countries of the Pacific are caught between a rock and a hard place. Each wants an education system that reflects its own unique identity and inducts the next generation into it. Each wants to develop its own curriculum and teaching and learning materials, train its own teachers and set its own standards. At the same time they are coming to acknowledge that they cannot avoid the future and that the growing demand from citizens for access to quality education for all is unstoppable and unaffordable within current policy settings.

Regional cooperation in education is not new to the Pacific. Regional Ministerial meetings and other forums are common.



Regional institutions such as the South Pacific Board of Educational Assessment have long supported cooperation in assessment and examination. More recently, regional programmes have emerged with support of donors, three of which are particularly important. The EU- and NZAID-supported Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of basic Education (PRIDE) is designed to strengthen the capacity of Pacific education institutions to effectively plan and deliver high-quality basic education. The Australia-Pacific Technical College is in development and will offer Australian qualifications in a range of technical and vocational occupations through existing national institutions and industry training centres. The aim is to contribute to the development of a skilled and competitive Pacific workforce. The Asian Development Bank has initiated a major programme of technical assistance for the development and implementation of a Pacific Education Strategy for Skills Development. These three programs are taking cooperation to the next level.

The next level of regionalism, regional integration, will be slow and hard but is essential. The pooling of functions and resources to provide education services on a regional basis challenges the Pacific Island countries to exchange some aspects of national sovereignty for national survival and progress. But only through such pooling will the small dots in the Pacific Ocean be truly linked and only then will access to quality education for all become a reality.

## Endnotes

- 1 The Eminent Persons' Group Review of the Pacific Islands Forum, April 2004
- 2 Pacific Island Countries who are members of the Commonwealth, excluding Australia and New Zealand are: Fiji Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Other Pacific Island Countries are Cook Islands, Marshall Islands, Niue, Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau. French Polynesia and New Caledonia enjoy a special relationship with France and are not considered within this article.
- 3 Duncan, Ron and Gilling, James (2005) Pacific Island Countries, Analytical Report for the White Paper on Australia's Aid Program, Australian Government
- 4 Le Métails, Joanna (1997) 'Values and Aims in Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks', The Archive of the International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks Project, June 1998

## Biographical notes

**Kaye Schofield** is an independent development consultant working mainly in the Pacific and South East Asia. Her former roles have included Chief Executive Officer of the South Australian Department of Employment and Technical and Further Education, Adjunct Professor of Education at the University of Technology Sydney, and Executive Director of the National Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training. In 1999 she was awarded the Australian College of Education Medal for services to education. She currently chairs the New South Wales Board of Adult and Community Education and is a Director of the International Centre for Excellence in Water Resource Management.