

Teacher education in the Pacific: issues and challenges



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The aim of this paper is to discuss issues and challenges facing teacher education in the Pacific. The ideas in this paper are taken from my collective experience of over two decades of working in teacher education and in education in general in the Pacific region. I have also drawn from some of the presentations arising out of the fourth PRIDE Regional Workshop on "Reconceptualising Pedagogy and Learning in the Pacific" held in Samoa from 28 November to 2 December 2005. 'PRIDE' is an acronym for the Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of basic Education; see www.usp.ac.fj/pride for more information.

For the purposes of this paper, the Pacific refers to the 15 independent countries in the Pacific region. This includes four larger nations: Fiji Islands, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands and Vanuatu; seven not so large nations: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Kiribati, Palau, Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI), Samoa and Tonga; and four small island nations: Niue, Nauru, Tokelau and Tuvalu. From the smallest nation of Tokelau to the largest of PNG, many reforms are being undertaken in an attempt to improve the quality of their education systems.

The total population of the region is close to 8 million. By and large, the majority of people in each country are indigenous. (The exception is Fiji Islands where a little less than half of the population is Indian.) The Pacific is the most linguistically complex region in the world with one fifth of the world's languages. More than 1,000 distinct languages are spoken by less than 8 million people with multilingualism and bilingualism the norm. The dominant religion in the Pacific is Christianity.

Issues and challenges in teacher education

Dismantling colonised mindsets

At the heart of any educational system are teachers and students engaging in the teaching and learning processes. The preparation of teachers, both pre-service and in-service, is vitally important if Pacific educational systems are to produce quality learning outcomes and if students are to attain an appropriate standard of success, however that might be defined. Given their colonial past, a great challenge facing these countries today is that they have inherited all the ideological and physical structures, including the fact that instruction continues to be in the colonial language. Dismantling these

structures or even finding alternatives has been difficult given that these countries have not experienced anything different.

Copycat mentality

What this has also meant is that teacher education systems in Pacific countries have been modelled on western systems, thus perpetuating the cycle of 'copycatting' what happens in metropolitan countries. Curricula, pedagogical approaches, assessment methods continue to be derived from the west, to the extent that western theories of learning and teaching, psychology and assessment permeate teacher education institutions in the Pacific. Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner, Maslow and Gardner continue to be served on a silver platter to student teachers in the Pacific. Similarly, practicum or teaching practice models are imported from another context.

Culture sensitive pedagogy

Hence, Pacific teacher education training programmes would closely resemble what happened in England, New Zealand, Australia or the USA, in many cases, one to three decades earlier, as if caught in a time warp. What this has also meant is that teacher education institutions and schools have not valued indigenous epistemologies or the culture and value systems of Pacific children. This has contributed in significant ways to schools being perceived as an alien and unfriendly place, with seemingly irrelevant content and practices that marginalised students and led to underachievement, which was narrowly defined as failing local and national examinations. The need for a culture sensitive pedagogy in teacher education programmes is crucial.

Aid dependency

Pacific educational systems, including teacher education institutions, have benefited significantly from assistance from their developmental partners. This has shaped curricula, pedagogy, assessment, resources and the like. Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau, for example, have systems similar to those in New Zealand. Nauru is trialling a curriculum first developed in Queensland schools while Fiji Islands, through the Australian Assistance for International Development (AusAid), are currently in the process of following the New South Wales outcomes based education approach. FSM, the Marshall Islands and Palau continue to be influenced by the USA.



What is obvious is that whichever donor partner happens to be the flavour of the year in a particular ministry of education, will determine the kind of curriculum that the country will follow. Then when another donor comes along, the country trials another reform package. Some countries are taking the lead, however, in contextualising changing reform agendas in an attempt to localise content and the like.

It is imperative that Pacific countries stand back and reflect on exactly what kind of children they would like their educational systems to 'produce'. They need to backward map to ensure that their vision is not swamped in the different reform agendas of their development partners. They need to make sure that they own the reform process, are active participants and have a clear sense of direction where they want their country to go in the education sphere. They need to ensure also that their educational systems are firmly grounded in their own epistemologies, cultural values and languages while taking on the best of what regional and global systems have to offer.

Shortage of appropriately trained teachers

There is also no escaping the fact that there is a shortage of experienced, appropriately trained teachers in many Pacific countries. In Nauru, for example, approximately 4% of teachers at secondary level are trained in the art and science of teaching. The situation is so desperate that primary-trained teachers are 'promoted' to be secondary school teachers without the requisite knowledge and pedagogical skills. Nauru has also been recruiting appropriately trained expatriate teachers from the rest of the Pacific.

Another challenge faced by Pacific education systems is the recruitment of teachers in secondary schools without the requisite teacher training qualification, although they may have had a degree. This situation is akin to the erroneous expectation that a driver, while qualified to drive a car, would also be able to repair the car when it breaks down without the relevant knowledge and skills to do so. This has had serious policy and pedagogical implications and has impacted negatively on the quality of student learning.

Moral or values education

Another serious issue facing Pacific teacher education, and therefore schools, lies in the area of values education. The issue of making moral and ethical decisions is significant in these new times of rapid social, cultural, political, economic and technological change. Student teachers and classroom students will need to be guided into making sound moral and ethical choices in everything they do, whether inside or outside the classroom.

While the family, as the basic social unit of society and the church, can play a significant role in this area, their impact is neutralised by the changing dynamics brought about by urbanisation, globalisation, changing economic structures including high levels of poverty and the like. It is therefore imperative that schools also take the lead in 'teaching' and 'practising' sound moral values. The building of character through moral education should be strongly emphasised in school organisation and curriculum so that upright, law-abiding citizens are produced who can live lives of moral significance.

In this conception, teachers have to lead by example. They need to be role models and exemplary leaders if they are to facilitate moral and ethical decision-making on the part of their students. They need to be culturally and spiritually grounded to make a positive impact. If they are unable to provide moral and ethical leadership in the classroom, their role as 'teacher', facilitator and guide will not be effectively fulfilled. Teacher training institutions must develop appropriate programmes to help foster the development of teachers of integrity and sound character who, in turn, will be able to guide their students into making moral and ethical choices in their learning and living.

Teaching conditions

One cannot talk about teacher education without a commensurate look at their teaching conditions. An inescapable fact in the Pacific is that teachers are underpaid and overworked. Unreasonable demands and pressures are laid at their feet, particularly in light of the appalling living conditions they sometimes find themselves in, more so when they get transferred to rural or island communities where the living standard is generally lower than in urban centres.

Policy makers will need to ensure that teachers are treated well so that they can give of their best in the classroom and communities. For example, incentive allowances have been paid out in Fiji Islands, but the amount was a token one. Their teaching conditions therefore need careful re-evaluation since nations depend on them to provide quality education to their children.

Teacher induction

New teachers

Another area of great concern is the need to have newly trained, inexperienced teachers undergo an intensive induction programme when they join their first school. There is no national policy on new teacher induction in any of the countries of the Pacific and this situation needs rectifying. What needs to be remembered is that ultimately, it is the students who will suffer the consequences of inadequate support for teachers starting out on their teaching careers.

Ongoing professional development

It is not unusual in the Pacific for teachers who are trained to go without further upgrading of their knowledge or skills for the rest of their teaching careers. In Fiji Islands, for example, it is common for primary teachers teaching in either rural or urban schools to fail to undergo any refresher courses for a very long time. They are required to attend short in-service training courses only when there are changes made to curricula. This has serious implications for the quality of their teaching and the calibre of their students' learning.

It is imperative that ministries of education devise strategies whereby their teachers would be continually upgraded on curriculum, pedagogical and assessment areas in their respective fields. Additionally, teachers should be encouraged not only to become lifelong learners but to also attempt to upgrade their qualifications to the highest possible level.



An area which is often neglected is in the area of ongoing professional development at the local or school level. School principals and heads of teacher education organisations ought to be capacity built and supported in order to develop in-house staff professional development programmes for the teachers.

Teacher education and educational reform

Teacher educators ought also to be updated whenever there is any new reform initiative developed from the centre, that is, from ministries or departments of education. They also need to keep abreast of the latest theories and ideas about learning and pedagogical changes.

In many Pacific countries, teacher education institutions are usually the last to be informed of any new reform agenda. The most that might happen is a cursory mention of any new developments in a common circular that is usually sent to primary and secondary schools without further thought or instruction given to teacher education institutions to consider the implications for their own teaching programmes.

There needs, therefore, to be better coordination between ministries of education and teacher education institutions on educational reforms or any international developments of significance to teaching and learning. How many teacher educators and consequently, trained teachers, in the Pacific know of the most recent educational reform at the national level or are familiar with regional conventions like the Forum Basic Education Action Plan (FBEAP) or even international agreements like UNESCO's Education for All initiative, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), Education for Sustainable Development and so forth? This situation needs urgent attention.

Conclusion

Teacher education in the Pacific is at a crossroad. How do pre-service and in-service teacher preparation institutions reconstitute or reconceptualise themselves in a rapidly changing, intensely globalising world? How do they plan their activities and programmes taking cognisance of what is best international practice in curriculum, pedagogical approaches, assessment and educational theory? How do they best do this and yet retain the best of local 'theories' and practice? In other words, how do they

synthesise the best of local or indigenous ways of thinking and doing things with the best of contemporary global practices in teaching and learning?

Pacific ministries of education are faced with many challenges. One thing that must not be forgotten, however, is that in order for quality learning to occur, nations need well qualified, competent and experienced teachers. Teacher education institutions have been neglected for far too long. They need more attention and support.

Biographical notes

Dr Priscilla Qolisaya Puamau has worked in the field of education for 25 years in various capacities: secondary school teacher of English, Head of Languages (secondary school), Head of Education (tertiary teacher education), performance management trainer, senior education officer, Deputy Principal and Principal of a teacher education institution in Fiji Islands. She has undertaken consultancies nationally and regionally and serves on a number of boards and committees.

Her current work is as education advisor on the PRIDE Project (the Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of basic Education). This means extensive travel around the 15 participating countries, providing support and advice in the Pacific region.

Her research interests are in the areas of ethical and moral leadership, educational reform, educational underachievement, indigenous education and teacher education. She obtained a doctorate in education from the University of Queensland and a masters in education from the University of the South Pacific. Her contribution to the community comes mainly in the form of services as a motivational speaker to young people, women and parents. She is a citizen of Fiji Islands and is married with four wonderful children - Seini, Lai, Eileen and Manoa.