

## EDUCATIONAL PLANNING IN THE PACIFIC: PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES

### INTRODUCTION

*G.R. (Bob) Teasdale and Priscilla Puamau*

This book reviews the way education has been planned in the Pacific, and seeks to develop new approaches that reflect the values and ways of thinking of Pacific cultures. It does not reject the planning processes of the global world. Rather, it seeks to identify the best that the global world has to offer, and to blend it with the local to create new and more culturally appropriate ways of planning.

The development of new ways of planning that draw on the ways of thinking and knowing of the Pacific is a big challenge. The old colonial ways of developing and managing education systems have had a pervasive impact in the Pacific, and are deeply resistant to change. Colonial assumptions about the nature of the Pacific and the needs of its people need to be much more carefully and critically questioned.

For example, those who occupy continents on the rim usually view the Pacific Ocean as a vast expanse of water dotted with tiny, isolated islands, their inhabitants disadvantaged by smallness and remoteness. Pacific Islanders are now rejecting this colonial assumption, arguing that they do not occupy 'islands in a far sea', but 'a sea of islands' (Hau'ofa, 1993: 7). Their ancestors clearly viewed the sea not as a barrier, but as their livelihood and highway. They were seafarers who were equally at home on sea as on land. They lived and played and worked upon it. They developed great skills for navigating its waters, traversing it in their sailing canoes, and forming a 'large exchange community in which wealth and people with their skills and arts circulated endlessly' (Hau'ofa, 1993: 9). In this way the sea bound them together rather than separating them. This idea of 'a sea of islands' captures a holistic sense of people sharing a common environment and living together for their mutual benefit. Many people in the Pacific are attempting to reactivate this ethos, seeking ways to help and support each other, rather than constantly turning to the nations on their Ocean's rim for aid and advice. It is, however, a slow and uneven process, much hindered by regional politics, by the insistent pressures of globalisation and by the continuing impact of colonialism, which not least, has divided the Pacific linguistically, creating a gulf between groups of English-speaking and French-speaking islands. It has also divided the Pacific politically, with France and the USA still ruling their colonial empires in the Pacific in ways that isolate their people from many regional forums and networks.

Somewhat constrained by such divisions, this book focuses only on those countries that are politically independent and therefore able to participate in the dominant political and economic policy grouping in the Pacific, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF, but familiarly known as the Forum): Cook Islands; Federated States of Micronesia (FSM); Republic of the Fiji Islands; Kiribati; Nauru; Niue; Palau; Papua New Guinea (PNG); Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI); Samoa; Solomon Islands; Tonga; Tuvalu and Vanuatu. To this list should be added Tokelau, which is in the process of achieving self-government in free association with New Zealand, a similar status to that enjoyed by Cook Islands and Niue. Australia and New Zealand are also full members, but given their metropolitan heritage, they are not included in this chapter.

Founded in 1971, the Forum brings heads of member governments together annually for dialogue and decision-making on regional policy issues, and is administered by a large secretariat (PIFS) based in Suva, Fiji. At its meeting in Palau in November 1999 there was considerable debate about human resource needs in the Pacific, and the failure of most education systems to satisfy them, thereby perpetuating the region's dependence on highly paid people from elsewhere. Schools and their curricula were criticised for not providing relevant life and work skills, for being too focused on academic success in external examinations, and for not graduating young people who could become productive members of their own villages or urban communities. Accordingly, the Forum directed its secretariat to bring together the Ministers for Education of the region, asking them to deal with the concerns that had been articulated.

The Ministers eventually met eighteen months later in Auckland, deliberating on what they referred to as 'basic education', which they defined as all educational provisions for children and youth, both formal and non-formal, except for higher education. The major outcome of the meeting was the development of the *Forum Basic Education Action Plan* (FBEAP) (PIFS, 2001), a short but important document setting out visions, goals and strategies for the future of basic education in the Pacific. Its vision is clearly specified:

Basic education as the fundamental building block for society should engender the broader life skills that lead to social cohesion and provide the foundations for vocational callings, higher education and lifelong learning. These when combined with enhanced employment opportunities create a higher level of personal and societal security and development.

Forum members recognised that development of basic education takes place in the context of commitments to the world community and meeting the new demands of the global economy, which should be balanced with the enhancement of their own distinctive Pacific values, morals, social, political, economic and cultural heritages, and reflect the Pacific's unique geographical context. (PIFS, 2001:1–2)

The Ministers requested the secretariat to ensure the implementation of FBEAP, and recommended that they themselves continue meeting on a regular basis to monitor and support this process. Following this first meeting, discussions took place with representatives of the European Union (EU) and a provisional agreement was reached that funding for a project to implement FBEAP might be made available under the union's 9th EDF Pacific Regional Indicative Programme. By the time the Ministers came together for their second meeting in December 2002 these plans were well developed, and a sub-committee of Ministers was formed to finalise a submission.

This sub-committee, under the leadership of the Samoan Minister of Education, the Honourable Afioga Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, developed a proposal in the form of a Project Financing Agreement, which was accepted by the EU, for funding of €8 million over a five-year period for a new project to be called 'Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of basic Education', abbreviated to 'The PRIDE Project'. The University of the South Pacific (USP) agreed to manage the Project on behalf of PIFS, and the New Zealand Government, through NZAID, agreed to join as a funding partner with an initial grant of NZ\$5 million over three years. The Project was officially launched at USP by the Samoan Minister for Education on 14 May 2004 in conjunction with the first meeting of the Project Steering Committee.

### **The PRIDE Project**

Essentially the Project is designed to implement, in the fourteen Pacific member states of PIF, together with Tokelau, the Pacific vision for education encapsulated in FBEAP. Its overall objective is:

To expand opportunities for children and youth to acquire the values, knowledge and skills that will enable them to actively participate in the social,

spiritual, economic and cultural development of their communities and to contribute positively to creating sustainable futures. ([www.usp.ac.fj/pride](http://www.usp.ac.fj/pride))

To achieve this objective, the Project seeks to strengthen the capacity of each of the fifteen countries to deliver quality education through formal and non-formal means. The key outcome will be the development of strategic plans for education in each country, plans that blend the best global approaches with local values and ways of thinking. Ideally these plans will be developed following wide consultation with all stakeholders and beneficiaries, including parents, teachers, students, NGOs, private providers, employers and other civil society groups. The Project also will assist countries to implement their plans and to monitor and evaluate the outcomes. Capacity building activities will be provided for educators at national, sub-regional and regional levels. To give further support to these activities the Project will develop an online resource centre to encourage the sharing of best practice and experience amongst countries.

In discussions of the PRIDE Project with educators throughout the Pacific and beyond, a frequently asked question has been: 'How is it different? We have seen many donor-driven education projects and initiatives come and go: why is this one unique?' Their cynicism is justified. The history of educational aid in the Pacific, as elsewhere, is an ambiguous one, with at least as many negatives as positives. The present project, however, does have a number of unique features, and there is considerable optimism that it can achieve its goals in ways that others have not. Six of these features are listed here.

1. The Project was designed and approved by the Ministers of Education: the process started with them, not with the donors. It was very clear at their third PIFS-sponsored meeting in Apia in January 2004 that Ministers saw this as 'their' project, and were determined to guide and direct it according to their priorities. Subsequent meetings with individual Ministers have reinforced this view. The donors, in turn, have shown quite remarkable preparedness to allow this to happen.
2. The Project is distinguished by the significance of the acronym: its choice clearly was deliberate, and reflects the wishes of the Ministers. Each country is being encouraged to build its education plans on a stronger foundation of local cultures, languages and epistemologies, thus enabling students to develop deep pride in their own values, traditions and wisdoms, and a clear sense of their own local cultural identity.

3. In strongly emphasising mutual collaboration and support, the aim of the Project is to help countries to help each other. Earlier projects brought consultants from outside the region, and therefore became donor-driven as they responded to donors' priorities and preferences. The PRIDE Project will source most of its consultants from within the region, and already has built up an impressive data-base of qualified people from Pacific nations. Furthermore, it will fund local educators to go on study and training visits to each other's countries, not to those on the rim and beyond.
4. The Project encourages consultative and participatory approaches to educational planning within each country: there is a clear wish to avoid top-down models of planning and policy-making, and a strong commitment to bottom-up processes involving parents, teachers, students, private providers, NGOs, employers and other civil society groups.
5. The Ministers want the Project to promote a more holistic and lifelong approach to education, with effective articulation between sectors, and between school, TVET and the world of work.
6. The PRIDE team is committed to building strong conceptual foundations for the Project. Earlier projects brought outsiders to the Pacific with western 'recipes' for the reform of education. The PRIDE team is committed to helping countries develop their own theoretical foundations, doing so via the creative fusion of their own epistemologies, values and wisdoms with the most useful ideas and approaches of the global world beyond their shores.

### **The first PRIDE Project workshop**

In September 2004 the Project held its first regional workshop in Lautoka, Fiji, bringing together an educational planner and a data manager from each of the fifteen countries it serves. The key focus of the workshop was strategic planning methodologies for basic education. In particular, the workshop sought to develop planning principles and processes that are firmly grounded in Pacific values and ways of thinking, yet are fully syncretised with the most tried and tested techniques of the globalised world beyond.

The workshop used an interactive, consultative and participatory approach. Much of the time was spent in small groups working collaboratively on preassigned tasks, sharing experiences, showcasing achievements, and sometimes even sharing approaches that did not work, and discussing why.

Before attending the workshop, participants were asked to reflect on any training they had received, or studies they had undertaken, in the field of strategic planning and/or data management. What had they learned that had really helped them as educational planners? What ideas worked particularly well in Pacific settings? What were their most significant achievements in the area of strategic planning?

They were asked also to talk with their colleagues, and perhaps with a few older, retired educators and friends, about the kinds of planning processes that have been used in their own society/culture, or are still being used. What are the underlying values, beliefs, wisdoms and epistemologies that have guided the way that Pacific people reflect on the future? How have people planned ahead?

This book draws together any of the ideas that were shared at the workshop, as well as the conclusions that were reached. In particular, it seeks to challenge anyone who may be involved in the planning of education in the Pacific to think about what they are doing from the perspective of their own local culture.

## **References**

- Hau'ofa, E. 1993. 'Our sea of islands'. In *A new Oceania; rediscovering our sea of islands*, eds E. Waddell, V. Naidu & E. Hau'ofa. School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific, in association with BEAKE House, Suva.
- PIFS (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat). 2001. *Forum Basic Education Action Plan (FBEAP)*. Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), Suva.