Ever since schooling was introduced to the Pacific Islands (in the early part of last century), there has been a continuous flow of conflicting assumptions, beliefs and techniques relating to what is worth knowing and what education (defined for my
purposes as an introduction to worthwhile learning) is all about. In my view, the
most important question Pacific Island educationists are grappling with today is
how we can reflect the best of our traditional educational systems through the
introduced structure of the school so that our children are able to survive in the
modern world without completely obliterating their cultural identities.

The above question has been particularly important for curriculum developers,
who, especially during the past two decades, have been forced to the forefront of
educational planning. Their experiences during this time have not been entirely
without problems; in fact, the history of curriculum development in the Pacific
Islands has been fraught with conflicts, most of which can be traced to different
perceptions of what education is or ought to be. It has not been easy for us to free
ourselves from the unconscious grip of our traditional notions of what is worth
knowing on the one hand, or from the new ideas/values we have picked up from
foreign institutions and their litany of mind sets on the other.

Add to this problem of "educational schizophrenia" the increasing economic and
technological dependence of most of our island nations on "outside" agencies of
various shapes and sizes, and you end up with a pathetic picture of someone who
is dying slowly because she cannot afford to say no to any of her suitors: someone
who had mistakenly thought that she was playing one against the other but in the
end, believes that all of her wounds have been self-inflicted.

Some Curriculum Development Issues

While there have been a number of issues facing curriculum developers in our
region, I would like to focus on three main types: (1) pupil-related issues; (2)
teacher-related issues, and (3) curriculum-related issues.

Pupil-related issues

Much remains to be learned and/or understood about the ability and/or readiness
of Pacific Island children to learn different concepts and skills. For example,
many of us have adopted the use of the spiral model of curriculum development,
much influenced by the work of Piaget. This has probably led some curriculum
consultants, for example, to underestimate the ability of our children to understand different and complex kinds of social relationships to which they are socialised from a relatively early age. On the other hand, it has been found that many Pacific Island students have difficulty learning certain basic science concepts and/or performing simple experiments (Muralidhar, 1989).

Moreover, the language of instruction is closely linked to the issue of pupils’ ability to learn and conceptualise. Pupils’ “inability” to learn concepts in their second and third language (English) is wrongly, in my view, equated with cognitive inadequacies.

Experiences during trialling of new social science curriculum materials in Tonga in the early 80’s clearly indicated that questions posed in a respondent’s mother tongue elicited responses indicative of much higher levels of understanding and conceptualisation.

Teacher-related issues

While teachers generally have a favourable attitude towards participating actively in curriculum development, many do not have the skills to fully and effectively take part (Thaman, 1988). Teacher education programs throughout the islands have not really prepared teachers for this new role.

Furthermore, the amount and degree of teacher influence in curriculum decision-making depend largely on the country under consideration. In most situations, the major curriculum decisions rest with a few senior educational officials and/or overseas consultants. Workshops are held in which teachers are sensitised or briefed about what to expect or do, but these are usually infrequent and do not adequately prepare them to effectively participate even in the classroom implementation stage.

Finally, there are not many incentives offered to teachers to get involved in different aspects of the curriculum development process. The nature of incentives varies from country to country, but teachers are generally expected to give up much of their own time (especially holidays), in order to attend curriculum
workshops, and/or prepare new curriculum units. Financial assistance to teachers, (mainly in the form of a small allowance), is a relatively recent phenomenon, and even that is minimal compared to the huge sums of money spent on overseas consultants. The truth is that many practising teachers lack the necessary professional as well as material support to be actively and effectively involved in curriculum development.

Curriculum-related issues

Many curriculum developers in the Pacific Islands are unsure as to which strategies are more effective in inquiry-based learning, given the differing cultural contexts in which they find themselves. Moreover, much of our curriculum work tends to ignore research findings dealing with the development of attitudes and values, and although attitudinal objectives are included in the curriculum, learning experiences tend to focus only on the development of knowledge and understanding of concepts and thinking skills.

Furthermore, the content of many curricula appear too deterministic, in that there is a tendency to overemphasise the need for people to adapt to their physical and social environments, rather than to deal with their role in changing these environments. This somewhat functionalist view of the curriculum has also been largely responsible for an apparent avoidance, by curriculum planners, to deal with various conflicts inherent in societies undergoing rapid change (Thaman, 1989).

Finally, there has been the additional problem of dealing with new ideas enthusiastically championed by many education experts/consultants operating in, or passing through, our islands. The main underlying values and assumptions of our school curricula continue to be basically foreign, liberal and middle class, with a strong emphasis on academic/intellectual skills, individual achievement and competition. Such relative neglect of the social and moral aspects of the curriculum is contrary to the expectations of many parents as well as teachers who regard the school as an important place for social and moral training (Thaman, 1980, 1987, 1988).

Many Tongans, for example, consider learning in school as important not for
developing one's intellectual capabilities per se, but as part of the process of achieving *poto* (knowing what to do and doing it well). The achievement of *poto* is, in the Tongan sense, the equivalent of being educated.

For Tongans, therefore, the purpose of education (*poto*) is inextricably linked to social and moral considerations. *Poto* is the key to survival in society because it provides the individual with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes with which to operate, particularly with respect to other people and other groups. Within this context, intellectual skills are only part of the requirements of the *poto* person.

This is probably why "character training" was regarded by many Tongan parents as well as teachers as a very important aspect of a school curriculum as well as the teacher’s role (Thaman, 1980, 1988). Concern with pupils’ behaviour has continued to be an important aspect of school education throughout Pacific societies, although an apparent lack of emphasis on this aspect of education is increasingly evident in more "modern", often urban, schools.

Towards a culture-sensitive model of curriculum development

Lawton (1981:37) identifies three "influencing factors" in the context of (social studies) curriculum development. These are: (1) society’s needs and priorities; (2) students’ needs and priorities; and (3) the organised bodies of knowledge. He further emphasises the need for what he calls "cultural analysis", which he defines as the systematic process of examining a particular society in its social and historical context. Such an analysis will involve an examination of a society’s culture, language, technology, knowledge, beliefs and values, in order to make better judgements about what ought to be transmitted to the next generation - in other words, what is worthwhile to teach or learn.

Cultural analysis has been, in my view, the missing link in curriculum development in many Pacific Island nations. We have been in too much of a hurry to get on with the work of producing materials, because of the constraints and exigencies associated with (outside) funding and therefore the administration of many curriculum and other projects. Furthermore, most of the consultants we
get have been unfamiliar with and/or insensitive to our cultures, and they often assume that, because they are working with a local (curriculum) team, the "locals" will provide the necessary input and cultural analysis. More often than not, however, consultants are over-eager to impose the latest fads from their own systems!

There are three basic questions which everyone who is involved in curriculum planning, in my view, ought to continuously ask. These are: (1) what are the underlying values of this curriculum and do they agree with the prevailing values of the (target) society? (2) what role does the language of the curriculum play in teaching/learning, where, for example, English (or French) predominates as the language of instruction (at least in theory) while the language of the home and of socialisation, in most cases, is different? and (3) what important knowledge, skills and values are contained in the (new) program?

The answers to the above questions will assist the curriculum developer in planning all aspects of the curriculum development process. More particularly, curriculum personnel would have a much better idea of how both teachers and pupils might react to any new materials that are to be included.

Cultural analysis, in my view, is particularly important for our small island countries because of the contrasting nature of our traditional models of education with the predominantly 'western' ones that we have adopted. It seems to me that our work in curriculum planning has not been inspired by the kinds of things which our people value and emphasise and which influence their thinking. These are different from those which are emphasised elsewhere, although, through modernisation - including of course over a hundred years of schooling - new values have been introduced.

It is unfortunate that many of us who are in the forefront of curriculum development in the islands have not had the time or the inclination to seriously consider this "questioning" aspect of our work - this cultural analysis. Furthermore, when we have attempted to do it, hardly anyone listened, perhaps because of the inflexibility inherent in their own modes of operation. We therefore have been left with no choice but to jump into the void, together with our foreign
helpers and advisers, to "develop" or "re-develop" our curriculum, before their funding runs out, which is usually in two to three years.

Cultural analysis: It can be done

For what it's worth, I wish to share with you something which I recently did (in Tonga), in order to satisfy myself that some of the things which I have been saying above were real. I attempted to identify the kinds of things which seem to be emphasised by Tongans and which tend to preoccupy their thinking - what I called "valued contexts of thinking". This work was based on two important beliefs I had which were: (1) that the kinds of things which preoccupy the thoughts of people in a given society affect what they consider "worth-while" to teach/learn; and, (2) a people's language provides an important key to understanding their notions of worthwhile learning - of education.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this work was partly provided by the tradition of cognitive anthropology, more particularly its assumptions about human nature and society which seem to concur with some of my own ideas. For example, cognitive anthropologists make assumptions which are not necessarily based on so-called "observable" behaviour, but rather on people's values, beliefs and attitudes - sometimes referred to as "mentalistic cultural patterns" (Jacob, 1987:35-36).

These assumptions include: (1) that culture is central to understanding human beings; (2) that each group of individuals (culture) has a unique system for perceiving and organising the world around them (Goodenough, 1957, cited in Tyler, 1968:3); (3) that different parts of a culture are interdependent and form a whole; (4) that cultural patterns are reflected in language, especially meaning, and, (5) that it is useful to see parts of a culture as they are conceptualised by members of that culture.

From an analysis of the Tongan language of education, together with interviews and a study of Tongan teachers' role perceptions, I identified several valued contexts which, in my view, Tongans generally emphasise. It is vital to note the
importance of the term "emphasise" here because I do not wish to imply that all Tongans value all of these things. Rather, I wish to suggest that these contexts seem to me to be important in motivating and explaining their behaviour. These include emphases on: (1) the supernatural; (2) concrete situations; (3) formal conformity; (4) rank and authority; (5) social relationships. (6) kinship relationships; (7) 'Ofa (love/compassion); and, (8) restraint behaviour.

The emphasis on the supernatural is still strong in Tonga. Lotu (religion/church/prayer) permeates every facet of Tongan life, both among Tongans at home and abroad. Together with "traditions" they form a powerful force in the life of most Tongans, whether they admit to it or not. Religious and traditional reasons provide the rationale for almost every family, village, or school function, and many teachers I interviewed regarded teaching as their duty to God and/or country.

Concrete and specific contexts are emphasised rather than abstract and universal ones. This is not to suggest that Tongans are incapable of abstract thinking; rather that abstract ideas are always expressed in concrete and specific ways. The Tongan language contains figures of speech aimed at enhancing the meaning of expressed ideas. For example, the idea of reciprocity is often expressed as a form of sharing of a common resource maka fetoli'aki (a rock that is being chipped on both sides). This implies shared rather than individual ownership.

Formal conformity to social norms is still highly regarded in Tonga. Many believe that (conformity) is vital for sustaining what they perceive as the uniqueness of their culture. Some anti-culture analysts would perhaps have us believe that this is just another example of how the "privileged" few assert their influence over the less powerful. They may have a point, but for now, striving to conform to a "Tongan Way" (faka-Tonga) is still strong, even among those who have been exposed to alternative ways and lifestyles.

Tongan society is socially stratified. Most people are expected to show deference to those of high rank and social position. Persons of higher rank are accorded appropriate behaviour by those lower down. The concept of faka'apa'apa
(reciprocal display of respect) is related to the continuing emphasis placed by Tongans on one's social position vis a vis other people in the society.

Within the large extended family, people's statuses are defined, and kinship provides the basis for norms and behaviour. One's social rank is not fixed but dependent on the particular context, so that one may find oneself to be in a privileged position in one context but not in another. Outside the kinship system, ranking may be defined according to certain professional or other criteria, but *faka'apa'apa* behaviour is still maintained. For example, many Tongans will not offer a critical opinion of a guest or a superior, as this is not in keeping with *faka'apa'apa* behaviour.

Kinship relationships, expressed through a complicated pattern of rights and obligations, largely influence the pattern of social relationships among most people in Tonga. This, together with an introduced system of law and order provide a system of social sanctions. The metaphor of kinship, therefore, is pervasive, even among those who do not live in Tonga. Most Tongans know that everyone belongs to the Tongan *kainga* (extended family) and is expected to behave accordingly, especially during life crises, such as birth, death or marriage.

'*Ofa* is the Tongan version of the Polynesian concept of *aroha* (Maori), *aloha* (Hawaiian) and *alofa* (Samoan), and commonly translated as "love" in English. Tongans believe that *ofa* is the motivating force behind all that is good and moral (see Kavaliku, 1977, for a detailed analysis). Teachers often quoted *ofa* as the most important characteristic of a good teacher.

The importance of inter-personal relations, of what Tongans regard as *vaha'a* or *vaa* (space between two people) is reflected not only in the idea of the process of striving to fulfil one's obligations (to family, church, village, etc.) but also in the emphasis on restraint behaviour. Direct personal confrontation is regarded as harmful for human relationships and must be avoided at all costs. Such an emphasis might have led many westerners to conclude that the spirit of criticism is weak among Tongans, or that Tongans do not like to be criticised, especially by those regarded as socially lower ranked or younger in age. This emphasis on
restraint may have significant implications for curriculum planners who have emphasised inquiry-based modes of instruction and learning in new curricula. It may also pose interesting questions relating to the relationships between foreign and local curriculum personnel.

The above contexts have been identified for a culturally homogeneous society. Nevertheless, it is possible to carry out such an analysis for a multi-cultural society, only the task would be more difficult, in that there would have to be a genuine search for similar as well as contrasting emphases. Whatever the outcome, it is my belief that such findings will assist not only curriculum planners but also classroom instructors, in both diagnostic as well as remedial learning situations.

Conclusion

In short, I see cultural analysis as an essential factor in making curriculum development more appropriate and meaningful in Pacific Island contexts. Furthermore, it will assist curriculum planners in solving problems often associated with materials production, trialling, and implementation, especially problems related to teachers' attitudes and behaviour. For example, many teachers will not publicly reveal shortcomings of new curriculum materials. This is because they often see themselves rather than the materials, as on trial, or, they may simply be trying to avoid confrontation with superiors. Other teachers may prefer to seek assistance either from their peers and/or relatives rather than the (foreign) consultant or curriculum officer.

Cultural analysis is particularly important for Pacific Island countries now as our schools (and therefore teachers and pupils) have increasingly become targets of many curriculum development and redevelopment projects. The future of formal education in our region will depend on how we in the islands tackle this important task. It will also depend on the extent to which our foreign advisers, consultants, experts, and the like, are willing to recognise its importance and listen to what we have to say. This latter concern is very important because Pacific Island countries will, in the foreseeable future, continue to depend on metropolitan countries for financial and other assistance, in order to "develop" their education systems.
I therefore envisage a need for a new orientation in Pacific Island education in general and curriculum development in particular. I see Pacific Islanders becoming increasingly aware of the problems related to their acceptance and/or adoption of relatively foreign educational institutions/models and their associated ideas, values and assumptions: ideas which Pacific peoples have had to translate into their own local cultural contexts in order to make them meaningful and worthwhile. In the process of cultural analysis, I hope that we Pacific Islanders will once more look towards our cultures as major sources of curriculum objectives, and view "culture" as a privilege rather than an excuse for inaction.

I also envisage a need for an increased number of culturally sensitive educational advisers and colleagues, who appreciate the fact that in our islands, they do not operate in a cultural vacuum. I hope they will make time to be sensitised to our aspirations and ways, by listening attentively to our voices, as well as to our silences. In either case, a certain degree of humility and tolerance is required; after all, it did take millions of years for polyps to build our islands, but it will only take one arrogant human act to obliterate them.

References


