The Role of Research: a personal perspective

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This article will focus on my personal perspective of the role of research in the Pacific, mainly because, over the years, like many others in the region, particularly those working in the education sector, I find it increasingly difficult to reconcile my own beliefs and values with those underpinning the notions of ‘education’, ‘equitable’, ‘sustainable’ and ‘development’, as they are used and practised today.

As a Pacific educator, one of the major issues I have been grappling with over the years is the question of what education means in the context of my own country and of the Pacific region in general. The questions to which I have sought and am seeking answers are quite basic: What are the purposes of education and who decides those purposes? What do we mean by ‘equitable and sustainable development’ or ‘development’ per se for that matter? What do these key concepts mean in the context of the Pacific? These key concepts need to be interrogated because it seems that they are often taken to be mutually understood by the aid and development agencies who promote them, as well as by the governments and communities who are the subjects and recipients of aid projects and programmes.

If the policy and planning documents of the UN and other international organisations, bilateral aid agencies, regional institutions, national and sectoral strategic and corporate plans are examined, the same key concepts emerge time and time again: poverty alleviation; good governance; efficient services; expanding opportunities and equitable access to quality education, health services and employment; economic growth; environmental management; and sustainability. These are the defining principles of modern development as we understand and practise it today. The same principles drive educational development, which are
summed up by the embracing concepts of quality, equity, relevancy, and sustainability, which subsume under their broad umbrellas other associated defining concepts, such as access and efficiency.

The concerns raised in this paper relate to the discrepancies that have been found between the outcomes of development as measured against stated goals. The UNDP Human development reports of 1999 and 2000 testify to the failure of development strategies to satisfactorily address the issues they were designed to ameliorate. Thus, today, all around the world, not just in the Pacific, the prevailing form of development, as defined by these key concepts has become contested territory: by the poor countries which have become poorer as a consequence of globalisation; by indigenous peoples, who have become endangered species within their own countries; by feminists who have experienced at first hand the destructive power of male dominance; by communities who find their resources and very livelihoods taken over and controlled by faceless and distant supranational corporations who are accountable to no one but themselves and their own agendas, and by the increasing privatisation of public utilities and user-pay development strategies; by nations whose sovereignties have been eroded and usurped by these very same corporations and private interests; and, not least, by educators, researchers, feminists and concerned individuals searching for alternatives.

As an indigenous woman, an educator and a concerned individual, I, too, am searching for alternatives because I no longer believe that the western development paradigms that we have adopted in the Pacific provide the only appropriate responses to achieving the kinds of societies we wish for ourselves and our children. The reasons for the failures of development strategies are not, I believe, due to inefficiency, nor to a lack of human capacity and strong commitment to good governance, nor to
unconducive economic environments, poor resource bases, political instability or combinations thereof, which are often cited by research and study documents. To me, these are symptoms of fundamental flaws in the paradigms themselves and are not due to ineffectiveness in their implementation or imperfect understanding of their rationale and guiding principles. It is my contention that we need to look for the causes in the core values underpinning western development paradigms in order to understand the inherent contradictions between avowed developmental goals and outcomes.

We, the peoples of the Pacific, need to create our own pedagogy and symbolic orders, our own sources of authority, mediating structures and appropriate standards in development and education, which are rooted in our own Pacific values, beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, processes and practices, and particularly in those values which support sustainability and equity of benefits, not necessarily measured in quantifiable economic terms. Thus, the primary role that I envisage for research in the region is to develop a uniquely Pacific world view, that is underpinned by Pacific values, belief systems, and ways of structuring knowledge, which will become the core values and ideologies driving the development process in the region as well as the education system, the key instrument in its promotion. I believe that, unless we make the attempt to identify what the purposes of development and education are and what they mean in the contexts of the Pacific, development and education in the region and their benefits will continue to be unsustainable and inequitable.

In the Pacific, as elsewhere, western knowledge predominates in higher education and research, which are underpinned by western values, belief systems and epistemologies. They make assumptions about the world, societies, the human conditions, and man’s relationship with nature, and these assumptions, in turn, determine political structures, economic systems and educational philosophies, among other things. As we have seen, because western systems
are dominant and powerful, their particular world-views are adopted or imposed on the rest of the world. There is an assumption that these values, which are made global through hegemonic, economic, education and industrial systems, and, in more recent times, by the great advances in information and communication technology, are universal. A prime example is the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which begins with the statement that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Quite apart from the fact that power structures in western societies are based on property rights, which now include intellectual property, instead of human rights, the underlying assumption is that the declaration is self evident and universal. We need, therefore, to ask, “Self evident to whom?”

The role of regional research, therefore, is primarily not only to identify and promote a Pacific world-view, which should begin by identifying Pacific values, and the ways in which Pacific societies create meaning and construct reality, but also, and complementary to these, to interrogate the assumptions that underpin western structures and institutions that we have adopted without much questioning. But if we in the Pacific are to develop systems, structures and institutions that are appropriate to the Pacific contexts, we have to clearly identify and understand what the values are that should underpin these uniquely Pacific structures.

One of the myths that we have internalised is the belief that scientific enquiry is neutral and objective. However, it is now realised that research occurs as part of a social process and within a social and cultural context. The work of science is the work of people who are striving to understand and improve social conditions and institutional patterns. The competing assumptions, questions and procedures of research contain values that represent different perceptions about authority, institutional transformation, and social order. Embedded in research are issues of epistemology, political and cognitive theory as well as peoples’ responses to their material existence.

Certain social dimensions of research are evident. Social inquiry
emerges from a communal context in which there are norms, beliefs and patterns of social conduct that are not static but involve continual debate. The debate evolves around differing assumptions about the nature of social life and the purpose of science, as there are various intellectual traditions that compete to establish standards of inquiry.

Social science can be thought of as dialects of language, which provide the comforting myth that the world is this or that way. These myths or theories are made to seem neutral by the conventions of science which decontextualise language and make knowledge seem transcendent. But the languages and procedures of science cannot be divided from human hope and interest. The methods of research emerge from social conditions and provide means through which we seek to make sense of our world.

Thus, researchers, themselves, bring to the inquiry process the values and belief systems and epistemologies of their own social and cultural contexts. They appropriate, exploit, reformulate and verify ideas that have their roots in social and cultural contexts. Thus, in many ways, they act as experts-in-legitimation, creating symbolic canopies that make the interests of a few seem the interests of the society as a whole. At the same time, there is a critical and probing attitude towards human society and its particular situation in time and place.

The socio-cultural contexts and the values that underpin relationships within those contexts also determine the research paradigms, methodologies and the questions, concepts and data-gathering procedures. In other words, the particular data-collecting techniques assume meaning and significance only in relation to the assumptions of the larger intellectual traditions in which the techniques are applied.

Thus, research is erroneously thought of as a series of techniques in statistics, testing or observation that are practised independently of questions, assumptions or concepts, without situating them within
their social and philosophical contexts. Underlying the practice of social research, however, as already stated, are assumptions about society, and about social control, order and responsibility. Far from being neutral, inquiry is a human activity, which involves hopes, values, and unresolved questions about social affairs.

Some of the questions with which we need to constantly remind ourselves in any research activity -are:

- Whose values?
- Whose knowledge?
- Whose cognitive and philosophical theories?
- Whose research paradigms, methodologies, techniques and procedures?
- Whose agenda?

My response is that, if research is to make a meaningful contribution to Pacific societies, then its primary purpose is to RECLAIM Pacific knowledge and values for Pacific people.

Another aspect of the research issue is the insider and outsider dimension of Pacific research. I am not one of those who believe that only a Pacific Islander can fully understand Pacific ways and values and thinking. Many non-Pacific Islanders have some understanding of these and, sadly, many Pacific Islanders have so completely internalised western values and that their worldviews are wholly western. When it comes to research, I believe that there must be balance in the representation and interpretation of the Pacific social cultural contexts. Today, most of the writing and research on the Pacific is carried out by outsiders. Given the fact that research and writing etc, are largely western-derived skills, this is not particularly surprising. However, while outside researchers bring valued different perspectives, they also bring their own cultural baggage and they see Pacific societies, cultures, structures and institutions largely through the ‘lenses’ of their own socialisation
they see Pacific societies, cultures, structures and institutions largely through the ‘lenses’ of their own socialisation values and codes. This provides, in my view, a distorted perception of the reality that is the Pacific. We need, therefore, Pacific researchers who are firmly grounded in their own cultures and contexts to balance these distortions and present to the world the Pacific realities as they experience them and as interpreted through Pacific cultural ‘lenses’.

However, validation and equal recognition for Pacific constructions of reality are likely to be difficult, since validation and legitimisation of research and academic knowledge are done elsewhere – by a closed research and academic community – from which outsiders, such as Pacific research scholars, are excluded. This supports my previous argument for the Pacific to establish its own standards and benchmarks for development and education, informed by its own values.

Another constraint to making Pacific worldviews known is the fact that Pacific societies have oral traditions and much of Pacific knowledge is transmitted orally. For the sake of future generations of Pacific Islanders, we need to document in written forms or use media – such as TV, video, CD and audiotapes, to record our Pacific knowledge, because otherwise, the distorted written forms that have been produced by outsiders, like Margaret Mead for Samoa, will become the heritage of our children. They will have no other views to compare them with and learn from, only those documented by outsiders. Because validating and legitimising bodies outside of the Pacific do not know a great deal about Pacific societies, they judge the validity of Pacific studies on the research methodologies and techniques used in the studies. If these conform to accepted research norms, they are assessed as valid and their conclusions equally so, which might be completely at variance with the views of the people and societies studied. So another role for Pacific research might be to act as legitimation processes for Pacific knowledge.

With the overwhelming effects and impacts of globalisation, Pacific
societies and cultures are becoming endangered species, and not just from global warming. It is estimated, for example, that by the middle of this century, 4/5th of the world’s smallest languages, which include many languages from the Pacific, will have disappeared. Already in Vanuatu, there are only two speakers left of one language, out of the 105 languages found there. The Maoris of New Zealand and the Polynesian Hawaiians are among those in the region who are desperately fighting to avert language loss and, with the language, their cultures and ways of life. It is not just languages, however, which are threatened but values, beliefs and knowledge systems, ways of life, and the flora and fauna of the region, to name but a few. The list of threatened items and species is overwhelming.

Can Pacific research assist in developing the structures, systems and institutions appropriate to the Pacific that could reverse the process of desecration and decimation of Pacific societies and their environments, or is it too late? Would Pacific research be reduced to simply documenting and capturing in a time capsule Pacific societies and contexts before they disappear forever, or can they be catalysts for transformation and survival? Again, we come back to the importance of developing worldviews that are uniquely Pacific. But how do we put this into practice? This is where Pacific research and institutions created principally to promote Pacific research can play useful functions, by increasing our understanding of the issues at stake, by developing consistent future scenarios and by increasing awareness of problems and solutions. Thus, their role is not merely to reclaim Pacific knowledge and structures but to use that knowledge to improve the life of peoples in the Pacific.

Another important aspect of research is the relationship between theory and practice. Personally, I think there is a false dichotomy in the split between the two and between basic or pure and applied research. My own personal stance is that praxis makes perfect. Underlying praxis is the belief that we are part of the world we study
and we cannot be expected to theorise in some detached, neutral manner. Praxis demands commitment and change and therefore thinking is praxis and its role is not to contemplate the universe but to transform it. While I argue that we need to underpin theoretical constructs with Pacific values, belief systems and knowledge structures, theory should be part of the process of change and transformation, which is rooted in constructive action. Research in the Pacific must be aimed at transforming Pacific societies, but in accordance with Pacific values and aspirations. Critical social research should take as its first assumption that the world is constantly being made and re-made in the day-to-day reflective, practical actions and interactions of its subjects. It has the outcome of transforming the practices of those in power and of influencing policy. Indeed a critical role of Pacific research and institutions devoted to Pacific research is to ensure that development and educational policies are informed by sound research outcomes.

Part of the role, therefore, of Pacific research and Pacific research institutions should be the provision of a training ground for Pacific Island researchers in the process of transformation, if we are to achieve the critical mass of researchers and outcomes needed to influence and change policies and practices. The researchers must be individuals who are actively involved in society, constantly struggling to change minds and to expand the power and control of the group to which they are committed, in this instance, the Pacific region. They need to be able to engage with dominant intellectual territory and research paradigms and contribute towards their transformation as well. Information technology may provide a useful tool for encouraging not only such engagements but also collaboration with others and increasing accessibility of outcomes.

In arguing for praxis for transformation, however, we must also take into account the need for social responsibility and one of the roles of Pacific research institutions is to address the technological,
ecological and ethical questions of inquiry. Truth and its application must be pursued with responsibility. The contributions of research should be for the well-being of Pacific societies as they perceive them and, therefore, the two values of freedom and responsibility must be kept in perspective, which relates in fact to the question of funding and the issue of academic freedom. The question that we need to ask is how far such institutions, which are likely to derive almost all of their funding from outside, will be permitted to pursue their own research interests, underpinned by their own values. Experience in both the Pacific and elsewhere suggests that contracted research that is externally funded is often used to legitimise the funding agents’ own agendas and beliefs. How much freedom would Pacific research institutions hope to have if they are funded by outside agencies, which might wish to impose, directly and indirectly, their own research priorities and research programmes? What would be the worth and meaning to Pacific societies, then, of the outcomes of such research activities?

If research outcomes are to be used to inform policy and strategic changes, the usual process of change ? research, development, diffusion, adoption ? is known to be ineffective, and is too long a process. By adopting praxis, the process is embedded in the theoretical construct. The uses of research are already foreshadowed in the selection of research paradigms and emphases, and in the values, beliefs, and knowledge constructs that underpin the theoretical paradigms. There are existing reporting systems within Pacific societies, and mechanisms for dissemination of information which might prove more effective. This might well be one of the research areas prioritised by Pacific research institutions.

Finally, Pacific people look at the world holistically. Most researchers on the Pacific tend to focus very narrowly on specific problems and, therefore, the outcomes and knowledge gained can only be applied in a limited way. To gain universal understanding of issues,
research needs to be at worst interdisciplinary and intersectoral and at best, should employ new theoretical frameworks that explore the holistic nature of the universe and the interdependence and complex dynamics of communities and their relationships to their environments. It should be noted that the artificial divisions into subject disciplines and sectors, which characterise western research, stem from the ways in which western knowledge is structured.

What I have attempted in a roundabout way to get across in this article is not a new idea, for it has been advocated more convincingly and eloquently by others with far better credentials than I have, but I believe that the more people say it, the more likely it will reach receptive ears among those who make decisions and control resources. I do not, however, underestimate the combined power and will of the human spirit. We, the heirs to the spiritual kingdoms of Maui and Tangaloa, need to stand up and be counted. After all, if western-derived forms of development are allowed to proceed unchallenged in the Pacific, as they largely do today, we might not have a Pacific region at all, either to boast about or to fight for. And Maui and Tangaloa fished to no purpose.