

RE-THINKING AND RE-SEARCHING PACIFIC EDUCATION: further observations*

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*You say that you think
Therefore you are
But thinking belongs
In the depths of the earth
We only borrow
What we need to know*

*Tulou mo e tangata'l fonua kae 'uma'a 'a kimoutolu katoa kae 'ata ke hook
atu 'a e katoango lea he 'aho ni.* I wish to acknowledge the tangata whenua, in particular, the NgaiTahu, and thank the organizers for the kind invitation to present today. I am indeed delighted and honored to be invited again by NZARE to participate in this conference.

A few years ago at another NZARE conference, I outlined some of the educational problems facing many Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and suggested the need for Pacific*** people to reclaim their education by making the school curriculum more relevant and meaningful for learners through incorporating elements of local and Pacific knowledges, skills and values. In this address I would like to share with you some of the things that we have been trying to do in our attempt to further our goals through focusing a little more on research and development.

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*** Pacific is used here for convenience to refer to the diversity of Oceanic cultures

As most of you know, teaching and research in higher education in developing countries, including in the Pacific, continue to be dominated by Western, scientific and liberal thinking. Writers such as Memmi (1965), Fanon (1967, 1986) and Said (1978) have referred to this as the intellectual colonisation of the East by the West. In Australia, Sykes (1989) exposes the annihilation of indigenous Australians and the on-going eradication of their languages, wisdom and knowledge while in Aotearoa, Tuhiwai-Smith (1999), questions Western research paradigms, encourages the use of culturally appropriate research practices and the conscious development of Maori and indigenous peoples as researchers. Some of us who live in the small islands of Oceania have also been working to develop alternative research frameworks in our search for more culturally meaningful and appropriate intellectual tools with which to educate and explore our own societies, together with their knowledge and education systems. Beginning with the Tongan framework of *Kakala* (Thaman, 1992), recently modified and enhanced by the works of scholars such as Manu'atu (2001) Taufe'ulungaki and Johansson-Fua (2005), and Maka & Johansson-Fua (2006), there are other examples, including the Samoan *Fa'afaletui* (Tamasese, et.al., 1998), Cook Islands *Tivaevae* (Maua-Hodges, 2001) and Fijian *Vanua* (Nabobo-Baba, 2006).

The movement to better contextualise Pacific teaching and research has come as a result of critical reflection by a number of Pacific researchers and educators upon what has been happening in our region in the name of educational reforms which began in earnest almost forty years ago. In particular, a number of Pacific scholars and researchers are focusing on the processes whereby ways of knowing and knowledge that are used in western, economically developed countries, continue to be cultivated and perpetuated in Pacific formal education, particularly higher education, and calling for a paradigm shift (Thaman, 1997; 2003; Taufe'ulungaki, 2001; Nabobo-Baba, 2006). The fact is that in the culturally and linguistically diverse region we call the Pacific Islands, live hundreds of indigenous communities who have their own unique ways of knowing and

understanding the world, dating back thousands of years. Their cultural histories and knowledge systems have sometimes been compared with the relatively recent history (only 300 years old) and limited range of knowledge represented in Western (scientific) research (Bear & Slaughter, 1989). Those of us who continue to live and are involved in education in Pacific Island Countries (PICs) have come to the realization that the best way to address educational challenges in our region is to try and create (alternative) approaches to teaching and research by bringing together the best of Western and Pacific values and ways of knowing, and working together in order to better contextualize our work as teachers, administrators, lecturers and researchers.

The continuing underachievement of many Pacific students at university among other things, have also contributed to a more diligent questioning of the value assumptions upon which Pacific school and university education continue to be based. What we found was that formal education's claim of cultural neutrality is best naïve and at worst arrogant. We thus agree with Taylor (1975) that the cultural neutrality of formal education is neither possible nor desirable, and its partisan beliefs and values like other beliefs and values, are embedded in its own cultural curriculum and agenda. We believe also that the values of our various Pacific communities need to be identified and underpin the education systems of PICs in order for more Pacific children to learn about their responsibilities to themselves as well as their communities and countries. Unfortunately, in this regard, we continue to face opposition from many international consultants as well as academics who object to the teaching of values and beliefs that might appeal to customs, traditions or religious authority, yet are often surprised when their own arguments are not readily accepted by those who insist upon limits to values related to critical rationality because *they* take their own ideological axiom for granted (Vine, 1992:178).

The *Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative* (RPEI), established in 2001 is a network of Pacific educators and researchers who were concerned

about the deteriorating quality of education in most PICs despite heavy investment in educational reforms by many foreign donors, including New Zealand (ADB, 1997). The concerns were formally raised at an Education and Aid Symposium in 2000, organized by the Research Unit in Pacific Education, School of Education, University of Auckland. The meeting resolved that more opportunities needed to be provided for Pacific Island people to discuss their educational issues among themselves without the usual 'advice' from foreign 'experts', a need that continues to exist, I might add.

In 2001 a Re-thinking Pacific Education symposium, hosted by the Institute of Education at the University of the South Pacific, provided an opportunity for a select group of Pacific educators and researchers to identify what they considered the main educational problems facing their respective countries' education systems. Their responses were gathered together and discussed, and their various concerns seemed to fall within two main categories - lack of (an educational) vision; and, lack of ownership (of the education system). A meeting of Pacific Forum Ministers of Education held in Auckland later that year heard these concerns. I am, however, not in a position to say that those who drafted the Forum Basic Education Plan took these concerns on board but I do know that at least one staff member of the Pacific Regional Initiative for the Delivery of Basic Education (PRIDE) team was a member of the original Re-thinking group.

Nevertheless we are not totally depending on PRIDE to advocate for and/or action the RPEI philosophy. Previously based at the Victoria University, Wellington, the University of the South Pacific's Institute of Education is now host for RPEI as it continues to be committed to acknowledging, valuing and advocating Pacific knowledge systems and processes together with the development and enhancement of Pacific approaches that are useful for teaching, learning and research. Towards these ends, a multi-pronged strategy has been developed, involving, among other things: advocacy (of the need to re-

think Pacific education in light of Pacific values, people and their cultures); leadership training that interrogates different leadership and management theories in light of traditional and local ones; sharing of innovative ideas and experiences (using old and new ways of communicating); and, acknowledging and valuing Pacific research processes and frameworks. This presentation would focus more on our work in the area of research.

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Research is a major component of RPEI, and in its early days NZAID funded 12 research projects from 7 Pacific Island Nations (PINs). Most of these projects were completed in 2003 with a number of studies commissioned on the impact of educational aid in selected PINs including: Solomon Islands, Republic of Marshall Islands, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. The results of these studies were presented at a *The Re-thinking Educational Aid Conference* held in Nadi, Fiji with most papers appearing in a 2006 book edited by Sanga and Taufe'ulungaki. But perhaps the most innovative initiative of RPEI to date is a regional research project known as SLEP (Sustainable Livelihood and Education Project), funded by NZAID, and managed by the IOE/USP. A pilot study (SLEP 1) was carried out in Tonga in 2005 in partnership with the Tongan Ministry of Education and the Tongan Institute of Education.

SLEP is linked to both the Asia Pacific and Pacific Frameworks for Education for Sustainable Development which encouraged educators to take into consideration different cultural conceptualizations of ESD and the ensuing reorientation of curriculum as well teacher education towards ESD. SLEP is also in line with the view recently expressed by the then head of the Geneva based International Bureau of Education which warned that educational change strategies, approaches and methods needed to take into account the perceptions of (the) actors in the educational process.

The Tonga study used an adapted version of the *Kakala* framework in planning the project. The new *Kakala* framework incorporated new elements; a

preparatory stage known as *teu* (Taufeulungaki & Johansson-Fua, 2005) to precede *toli*, and a final process of evaluation using two Tongan indicators of success, *malie* and *mafana* (Manu'atu, 2001). Tongan methodologies of *talanoa* and *nofo* were the main tools for information gathering from the various communities that participated in the project; and Tongan research ethics (Maka, et al, 2006) guided both the preparation and conduct of the project.

According to Johansson-Fua (2007) the data obtained from the Tonga project were robust, rich and informative on several educational fronts. As well as data relating to knowledge, skills & values associated with sustainable livelihoods in Tonga, information about other areas of concern such as students' learning styles, team strategies, evaluation and monitoring processes and their implications for teaching were also obtained. For example, the research showed how learning in Tonga usually involves *sio* (observation); *ala* (touch); *fanongo* (listen); and *ta* (perform or act). This meant that a teacher would need to be able to demonstrate (*fakatata*), important knowledge and skills, working together with the student (*kaunga ala*), interacting with them (*talanoa*) and closely observing their performance (*sio*). In other words, the notion of the teacher as role model, described by Thaman twenty years ago (1988) seemed to be important still for Tongans. A SLEP II is being planned, being the continuation of the project in eleven other member states, using different research frameworks and methodologies sourced from the cultures and languages of the people in these places.

The findings of the Tonga pilot study were reported at a regional meeting in Fiii to consider the second phase of SLEP, to be conducted in the rest of the USP member countries. Researchers showed us a broader, more fluid and less structured way of conceptualizing sustainable livelihoods than is commonly assumed in ESD literature. Johansson-Fua, the coordinator of the Tongan study reported that the Tongan conceptualization of living sustainably, known as *mo'ui fakapotopoto* (l. living wisely) was all embracing and holistic, linked to the Tongan

notion of the ideal person or *poto*, and rooted in Tongan core values, appropriate behaviour and performance that were context-specific (Johansson-Fua, 2006).

The results of SLEP will be used to inform the design and implementation processes of SLEP II, which will be country-specific using country-specific research frameworks and methodologies. SLEP II is planned to begin in 2008 with the overall outcome of research findings being used to identify policy options and practical strategies that MOEs can adopt in order to ensure sustainability as well as address issues of access and equity in educational development. SLEP I results will also be used, I am told, in a major curriculum re-development project in Tonga that is funded by NZAID. The SLEP II project proposal has been endorsed by NZAID and various MOEs and so far, the involvement of stakeholders not only in the conduct of the research but also in the planning process is seen as important for encouraging participation and ensuring ownership. A key output of SLEP will include detailed evaluation of how partner governments have used the research findings to inform their own policies and practices.

The new approaches to research that RPEI advocates and promotes acknowledge, and are based, on Pacific ideas and theories of education, personhood, community and wisdom. For example, SLEP is predicated on the importance of human relationships as markers of identity and sustainable development. It recognizes the importance of webs of relationships, reflected in many Pacific cultures' idea of a metaphorical space between and among persons known in Polynesia as *vaa/wah*. These spaces need to be protected and nurtured with respect, tolerance and responsibility (Thaman, 2002). *Vaa* was important in the design of the Tongan study as it involved nurturing the relationships among Tongan scholars and researchers who were related in both cultural and professional contexts. SLEP also required that researchers were able to speak the local language(s) and the research report would be written in language other than English. These requirements were seen as important for the

sustainability of the project itself. In the case of Tonga, the research report was written in the Tongan language and later translated into English for the benefit of those who didn't understand Tongan, such as staff of NZAID and USP.

The RPEI research approaches have also been informed by the results of previous conceptual analyses of Pacific indigenous educational ideas conducted by staff and students at our university. These studies revealed systems of learning and teaching underpinned by cultural values, the most common of which were inter-personal relationships and social responsibility (Thaman, 2003). Different analyses showed that the ideal person in many Pacific communities was the one who behaved and performed culturally appropriate ways in different and specific contexts. In Tonga for example, the ideal citizen is one who is *poto* – one who knows what to do and does it well. *Poto* is achieved through the appropriate and beneficial use of *'ilo* – defined by Tongans as knowledge, skills, understanding and values that a person acquires through the process of *ako* or learning. Among indigenous Fijians, similar notions exist. The closest equivalent of *poto* in Fijian is *yalomatua* or *yalovuku*, the culmination of learning or *vuli* aimed at the acquisition of useful knowledge, skills and values or *kila ka* (Nabete, 1997; Nabobo 2003). In Kiribati, a person with wisdom is *wanawana* (Teaero, 2003) while among the Lengo in Solomon Islands, a wise person is *manatha*, who, through *nanau* (learning) may obtain *ligana* (wisdom), seen as vital for living and surviving in Lengo society (Vatamana, 1997).

In Tonga, a person is considered *poto* if she knows her social responsibilities to other persons and other groups. Failure to maintain such relationships and/or contribute to one's group's responsibility to another group is an indicator of failure to learn and would reflect negatively on teachers who include parents and other community elders. Knowing and maintaining good inter-personal relationships is the responsibility of everyone in society and a person's wealth is often measured in terms of how well s/he maintained good relationships through meeting his/her social obligations and protecting her *vaa* as

alluded to earlier. A person is considered poor if she is not able to maintain positive or good relationships by 'breaking' and/or harming *vaa*. Thus *tauhi vahaa* (l. space nurturing) is a core value observed by many Tongans and is evident in their daily lives (Johansson-Fua in 2006).

Tauhivaha'a (l. protecting relationships) unfortunately is not a value that is emphasised in our schools or university curriculum, perhaps because formal education is meant to be abstract and unrelated to people's social realities. Moreover, formal education does not seem to emphasise the moral development of children but rather their intellectual development, where critical thinking is perceived as private and independent of will, and the mastery of the environment a desirable feature of mental functions (Serpell, 1993:77). As indigenous peoples, we know that this perspective conflicts with our (indigenous) notion of nature as an integral part of indigenous cultures where we are expected to respect and protect nature rather than conquer or master it. *Tauhivaha'a* is central, in my view, to the development of a peaceful and sustainable Pacific.

What RPEI has been advocating is putting back Pacific values into Pacific education because that might ensure that young people learn about themselves, their cultures and their relationships to one another. We also believe that this is important for addressing some of the problems faced by our region today which include - social and cultural breakdown, hiv/aids, environmental destruction, land alienation and landlessness, malnutrition and poor health, violent crime, corruption and spiritual impoverishment etc . These issues are particularly worrying for the larger islands of Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Solomon Islands, where modernisation has resulted in mass migration to towns and cities and where many citizens, especially the young, have not been taught the values and wisdom of their cultures.

My own advocacy for incorporating Pacific cultural knowledge and values in formal education from pre-school to university is based on my belief that

intercultural understanding is predicated upon our understanding of our own cultures first. I also believe that teaching about and studying Pacific cultures and understandings is an important activity in itself. My own re-imagining and re-thinking of my own work has moved from protesting the dominating and dominant paradigms to creating something that is more culturally inclusive of my students by drawing from the rich oral literatures of the Pacific as well as the written texts of world writers and thinkers.

Teaching and research for me are not just educational activities but are also art forms. Let me illustrate. In fashioning *Kakala*, my framework for teaching and research, I draw from both Western and Pacific epistemologies (Thaman, 1997). Three processes are central to *kakala*: *toli*, *tui* and *luva*. *Toli* is the gathering of the material need for making a *kakala* such as different types of flowers, leaves etc. This process requires knowledge of and experience in picking/gathering the appropriate materials at the right time and the right place; storing them in a cool and safe place in order to ensure freshness until they are ready to be made into a *kakala*. The second aspect is *tui*, and refers to the actual making of a *kakala*. This too requires special knowledge and skills of different types of *kakala* depending on the occasion and/or who would be wearing the *kakala*. Some *kakala* are known to be more important than others (*kakala 'eiki*) while others play supportive roles and are placed underneath the important *kakala* (*kakala vale*). However, the combination of both is needed in order to 'complete' the perfect *kakala*. The final aspect, *luva*, is the giving away or presentation of a *kakala* to someone else. In my culture, a *Kakala* is always given away as a symbol of two Tongan core values, '*ofa* (compassion) and *faka'apa'apa* (respect). For me, *kakala* has been a useful and culturally meaningful philosophy and framework: It ensures cultural inclusivity and provides for ownership of the educational process, whether it is teaching or research or something other educational activity, such as curriculum development. Over the years, researchers found *Kakala* to be relevant for teaching and research not only in the Pacific Island region but in the wider Oceania region as well.

Researchers in New Zealand for example, have used kakala as well as other Pacific frameworks in their research involving Pacific people (see Koloto, 2000; 2002; (Tamasese, et al., 1998; Maua-Hodges, 2000; Koloto, 2003; Nabobo-Baba, 2006).

RPEI continue to advocate for education systems in which young people, learn the necessary skills necessary to live in a modern, globalised world as well as their own cultural knowledge, skills and values; systems where teachers use culturally appropriate methods of teaching, including teaching in a language that students can understand, and recognising the importance of context-specific learning. Systems where the modern, scientific perspective constitutes only one way of seeing the world , where higher education teaching personnel regularly interrogate the scientific and liberal educational traditions with their emphases on certainty, objectivity, predictability and instrumental rationality; where young people are not only well versed in or understand modern science and technology but understand their strengths and shortcomings as well. This is particularly important because of the intellectual ethnocentrism inherent in Western science and the intrinsic sense of the superiority of western liberal ideologies and value systems that often result in the denigration of indigenous knowledge systems and their processes of analysis and transmission (Teasdale and Little, 1995:588).

We acknowledge also that western knowledge systems have become a part of our education but our hope is that we would develop and encourage a pluralistic view of learning, knowledge and wisdom, in order to reflect our region's rich and diverse heritages. This will not only help us to re-claim our education but also to reconstruct the knowledge-generation process we call 'research' (and its associated practices) and move beyond the fascination with ethno-science and other ethno-things, that have no intention of questioning the power relations between various knowledge systems, Hountondji (2002).

We know also that questioning long held beliefs is never easy. I had already alluded to the challenge of the ideology of western rationality that continues to be advocated in our universities. There is also the continued epistemological silencing and efforts to pre-empt any meaningful discussion and exchange of ideas about Pacific and indigenous knowledge systems in the Academy and those institutions and organizations that continue to privilege Western epistemologies. At this point I want to acknowledge the role of NZAID in assisting RPEI to get to where it is now. For us, the challenges to re-thinking our education remain real as we struggle to narrow the ever widening gaps between Pacific formal educational institutions and the societies which they are supposed to serve (Thaman, 2003).

At times, the challenges seem particularly insurmountable particularly given the intensity of the recent industrial revolution created by the technology of computers. This revolution, like previous ones, is causing havoc to our social relationships, as well as in our social institutions such as the family, work places and the school. However, Pacific people are using new ICTs to stay connected to one another as evident in the numerous personal and community websites on the WWW. In terms of the globalisation process and the dominance of the imperative of the market place in our education systems, especially higher education perhaps the time is now right for us to work towards an educational theory that will help us reclaim an education that values human relationships and collectivity rather than machines and individuality. For me, participating in this conference would help me to move closer towards this aim.

Finally, educating for social responsibility using Pacific frameworks and ideas is a good alternative to the homogenising effects of globalism with its McWorld culture that requires no responsibility. The new global order, based on individualism and privatisation totally undermine the collective approach, and is perceived by many Pacific people as a social liability rather than a social good. The kind of economic reforms and restructuring that is now being forced on most

PINs by external financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank threatens the growth not only indigenous social and economic institutions but ultimately democratic governments because it preaches the idea that wealth equals material accumulation rather than the enhancement of social relationships. Perhaps we need to take the risk and promote a new, Pacific, conceptualization of wealth in the world – as productive, social relationships - and begin to educate ourselves and our children accordingly.

*everyday do something
that scares you he said
take risks
but don't forget
to wear sunscreen*

*so i took my laptop
and deleted my past
saving only the part
that threatened to digest
the dreams that dared
to frighten a frail
and divided heart*

*and in my attempts
to re-create the moment
i found several scars
left by unknown people
i have loved in my mind
and wondered*

*what judgements or inconvenience
i would cause if caught
trying to escape
from the fear of getting burnt
basking in a slice of sun*

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