Socio-cultural contexts of education in Pacific Island Countries

Konai Helu Thaman
(The University of the South Pacific)
Main themes

• Introduction – the Pacific Paradox
• Culture of Formal education
• Formal education as culture clash
• School & Out of School realities
• Conflicting expectations
• Cultures & cultural rights of Pacific peoples
• Neglect of Pacific cultures in Policies & Plans
• Problems & Challenges
• Regional Responses
• Pacific Regional Strategy for Culture & Education
• Concluding questions
Introduction – Pacific Paradox

1997 - ADB’s identified socio-cultural factors that influenced Pacific development at the turn of the century:

• High % of scarce resources devoted to higher education compared to primary education
• General decline in quality of primary & secondary schools
• Migration across and within national borders
• Poor return (economic & social) for education investment (education at all levels remain of poor quality)
• Today the situation for most PICs has not markedly changed

Culture is defined here as a way of life & includes knowledge & value systems expressed through language. In most Pacific languages, the word for ‘culture’ is the same as that for ‘life’ & is all embracing of social, economic, politics etc.
Current Pacific Realities

• Isolation & smallness
• Cultural & language diversity
• Hundreds of living cultures with their own epistemologies
• Focus on collective rather than individual achievement
• Kin-based social systems, behaviour & performance
• Rapid population growth especially in Melanesia
• Low economic growth
• High aid dependency
• High remittance dependence
• Environment degradation & extreme climatic events
• High rate of out migration – education as extractive business
School realities

- School learning **culturally undemocratic**
- **Foreign language**; roll calls; uniforms; books; chalk; computers; sitting in rows; abstract learning; **foreign values**
- Important knowledge, skills, & values prescribed in curriculum & books & officially sanctioned by MOEs & teachers & monitored by them - seldom known to parents
- Today, add world of videos, TVs, computer games & internet
- For most students - school is a **site of struggle** leading to cultural conflicts; denial; pretensions & competing demands & aspirations
- Purpose of school world is to **pass examinations**
Out-of-school realities

• **Familiar world** - realm of parents; siblings; aunts; uncles & other relatives

• Life determined by **relationships**; church; youth meetings; string bands; relationships determine tasks not clock; non compartmentalisation; tentative; learning from working together; competing in fun; purposeful socialisation;

• Children are prepared for **adult life**; knowledge, skills & values needed for living are learnt through participating as members of societies & communities

• Behaviour is **context-specific & relationship focussed**

• However, far more attention has been given to the school culture – reflected in political, structural & administrative attention given to it as well as financial allocation
Conflicting expectations

School culture
- Purpose-change
- Content – derived from W. Epistemologies in form of subjects & disciplines
- Teachers – specially trained personnel
- Pedagogies – based on research in foreign places
- Assessment – largely pencil & paper (tests)

Out of school culture
- Purpose- survival & continuity
- Derived from Pacific epistemologies & eco-cultural environment
- Parents, community elders & peers
- Context & task specific
- Assessment through behaviour & performance
Cultural Gaps & school failure

• Culturally undemocratic learning environment expressed in: medium of instruction (English or French); teaching & learning styles; and assessment methods

• Mostly underprepared teachers expected to bridge many ‘cultural gaps’

• Most education reforms have neglected teachers

• School life still modelled on Western forms of administrative development, originating from different cultures that promote different teaching & learning styles leading to educational failure & extinction of many Pacific languages
Neglect of Pacific Cultures, Languages & Knowledge Systems

• Benign neglect of Culture in all modern development
• 1992- UNESCO sub-regional seminar - Rarotonga Declaration – urged MOEs to integrate culture & languages into the curriculum
• 1998: Auckland Pacific seminar on Collective Human Rights of Pacific Peoples – many resolutions
• 1998 Apia Symposium on Culture, Rights & Cultural Rights – urged PICs to set up a Pacific Languages Commission & prioritise research in education & human rights
• Resolutions from all three largely ignored
• 2007 UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples gave new impetus for work in the area of culture & education
Cultural Rights of Pacific peoples

• International conventions such as Rights of Indigenous peoples promises access to cultural life; participation in cultural life; access to cultural identity; cultural survival; use of one’s mother tongue; media in one’s language; culturally appropriate ways of teaching & learning, and most importantly -

• Protection of cultural heritage
Cultural Rights of Children

• Four important areas: right to access information; right to education; right to cultural identity; and right to participation in cultural life

• Today increasing proportion of urban young people not culturally aware & not fluent in their mother tongues

• Urban young people tend to behave less consistently with cultural expectations; some are abused; and many are disconnected from their cultural heritages
Culture, Policy & Planning

- P&Ps continue to be defined by principles & ideas originating from UN & international aid agencies & not social & cultural realities of Pacific peoples
- Many are prepared by foreign technical experts from funding governments, & largely derived & based on western values, beliefs & knowledge systems: Pacific peoples who helped, have been educated in the same principles & ideologies
- Since 2000, higher investment in education by governments & aid agencies to improve policies & planning based on the same assumptions & using the same processes
Stock take 2012

• PICs educational achievement FAIR cf other developing nations, BUT
• Universal primary education STILL an issue (especially in PNG, Solomon Is & Vanuatu)
• Remote & rural schools still disadvantaged
• Opportunities for girls & women still scarce
• Most schools are still poorly equipped & staffed
• Literacy & Numeracy still low & of poor quality
Stock take (cont)

- Increasing push out rates
- Increasing unemployment of school leavers
- Curriculum still academic & exam oriented
- School systems still inefficient & ineffective
- Quality of primary & secondary schools still poor & deteriorating in many areas
- Most people have not benefitted from educational & curriculum reforms
- Public sector reforms creating a new social class of affluent people (some are assuming roles originally held by traditional leaders)
- Rural & outer islands still pay higher fees for services
Recent problems

• High prices & costly imports especially of food
• Trade imbalances
• High debt levels
• High unemployment
• Deteriorating health
• Increasing digital divide
• Increasing urbanisation leading to problems of land tenure & social dislocation
Problems (cont)

• Drug abuse, youth alienation & suicide (one of the highest in the world)
• Uncontrolled population growth (especially in Melanesia)
• Overpopulation & de-population in some countries
• Corruption in some governments & businesses
• Environmental degradation & unsustainable practices (e.g. fishing, logging)
• Managerialism & increasing impersonality
• (Cold comfort – similar experiences in other countries!)
Challenges

• Formal education (ECE to higher ed) continue to be **culturally undemocratic** & reproduce inequalities in social & economic relations

• Flawed & **culturally inappropriate** measuring instruments

• Input-process-output model – outmoded & limited (to small group of input variables such as enrolment; public expenditure as % of GNP; number of teachers & their qualifications; teacher-pupil ratio etc.) and ignores qualitative differences in students’ socialisation in other (especially affective) domains

• **Value of individualism pushed at the expense of collective values** as shown by the preoccupation with numbers in the formal sector - e.g. HDI – measures life expectancy at birth; educational attainment & standard of living. Non-marketable knowledge, skills & values not emphasised, are invisible & not counted (such as women’s work in the home)
Challenges (cont)

- Many Pacific leaders unaware of the value of their cultures & languages for social & economic growth
- Most Pacific ‘educated’ elites reluctant to advance mother tongue teaching & learning
- Many educational aid consultants lack understanding of Pacific cultures & do not promote Pacific languages
- Many Pacific parents still consider English & French as higher status languages compared to Pacific languages
- Many teachers are not fluent in their mother tongue
- Indigenous cultures & indigenous education continue to be marginalised nationally, regionally, as well as internationally
- Dearth of cultural and/or language policies to deal with global pressure & protect & promote Pacific cultural heritage & languages
Summary of challenges:

• Lack of Collective Vision

• Lack of Ownership

• Lack of Contextualisation

• Lack of Coordination
Some regional responses

• UNESCO Chair in teacher education & culture
• Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative (RPEI) - curriculum, research & leadership
• PRIDE Project (policy & planning)
• Various ESD & Sustainable Livelihood Initiatives
• Pacific Education & Development Framework
• UNESCO/USP Pacific Heritage Hub
• Pacific Education & Culture Strategy
• Problem with regional initiatives – lack of stakeholder engagement
Pacific Strategy for Culture & Education - 2010

Vision: Culture Inclusive Education for ALL

Goal: Education at all levels must develop, maintain and strengthen Pacific cultural identities and provide new opportunities for ensuring sustainable and peaceful livelihoods for all Pacific peoples
Key Areas

1. Culturally inclusive education for all (e.g. Inclusion of Pacific values & ethics; language & art education policies)
2. Strengthening of Cultural Sector (e.g. Heritage & TK; higher education studies)
3. Improvement in Culture & Communication (e.g. Regular meetings of ministers; establishment of culture & education networks; ICT applications)
Concluding Questions

• How can awareness of Pacific cultures, languages & knowledge systems, and (cultural) rights be better promoted & enhanced?
• How can the culture of schooling and that of Pacific children’s home cultures be brought closer together?
• How can PICs be helped to develop language policies that protect Pacific vernacular languages & encourage cultural and language diversity?
• How can PICs be assisted to develop & implement (educational policies & plans that are culturally inclusive?)
• How can Pacific indigenous voices be better represented in the global discourse on education, knowledge production & management?