

SUPPORTING CURRICULUM REFORM IN THE PACIFIC

**LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE CURRICULUM
REFORM IMPLEMENTATION PROJECT**

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Introduction

This paper explores a range of issues associated with the implementation of curriculum reform in education systems in the South West Pacific. The paper presents my personal reflections and thoughts drawn from my work in PNG with the Curriculum Reform Implementation Project (CRIP) and in the Solomon Islands with NZAID and the Ministry of Education, and reviews of curriculum reform in Fiji and Kiribati. While it is a personal perspective it is also evidenced based and draws on findings of a number of CRIP impact studies, reviews, the pilot Curriculum Standards Monitoring Test and extensive observation of the reform process in PNG and Solomon Islands.

The perspectives I present in the paper focus on strategies to improve the curriculum and educational reform processes and have implications for education systems and their personnel, donor agencies and technical and professional experts and advisers supporting the reform process.

The Education Reform Context

The South West Pacific has entered a period in which reform of education, particularly at the basic education level, has been afforded high priority by governments and donor agencies. The broad focus of education reform in countries such as Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji and Kiribati is similar with particular attention being paid to curriculum reform, student assessment, and teacher training and professional development.

In the Fiji, AusAID is providing funds to support the five-year Fiji Education Sector Program which commenced in 2003. This Program is assisting Fiji undertake a major review and redevelopment of its curriculum, teaching and learning approaches, education delivery models, and assessment processes.

In the Solomon Islands, NZAID and the European Union are supporting a major review and upgrading of the Solomon Islands Education Sector through a range of specific projects. When implemented these programs will support the Solomon Islands redevelop its curriculum, improve teacher training and inservice training, revise student assessment processes and provide additional resources and teacher professional development.

In Kiribati AusAID is supporting the Kiribati Education Sector Program. A major Curriculum and Assessment Review has been completed and AusAID has commissioned the design of Curriculum Reform Project.

In Vanuatu, AusAID will be supporting the Vanuatu Technical and Vocational Education and Training Sector Strengthening Project.

This should all sound very familiar to people in PNG where education reform commenced with structural reform in the early 1990s. With the assistance of AusAID and other donor agencies, programs such as the Elementary Teacher Education Support Project (ETESP), the Primary and Secondary Teacher Education Support Program (PASTEP), the Basic Education Infrastructure, Curriculum and Material Project (BEICMP), the Curriculum Reform Implementation Project (CRIP) and more recently

the Education Capacity Building Program (ECBP) and the Basic Education Development Project (BEDP) have supported the Department of Education undertake major reform of curriculum, teacher training, materials development and distribution, and education systems, processes and policy. This represents an Australian Government investment of more than \$A200 million between 1996 and 2005 in the basic education sector.

While there are variations in circumstances from country to country, there appear to be a number of common factors driving the reform process.

1. A growing realisation that improving the quantity and quality of basic education in particular is fundamental to long-term social and economic development. This is supported by strong evidence in the literature on aid effectiveness that support for basic education reform has greater long term social and economic benefits than the provision of support at higher levels. This does not mean that these can be ignored. In fact, as more students complete basic education to grade 8, there are increased demands and expectations for improved provision and access at secondary and tertiary levels. I will discuss the implications of this flow on effect later in the paper.

This factor is compounded by an acceptance that even small Pacific nations cannot isolate themselves from the effects of an internationalised knowledge market and information and communication technologies. These factors provide both potential benefits and threats to smaller developing nations in our region.

2. The reform process at basic and secondary levels of education is driven also by the desire to develop curriculum, teaching resources and teaching methodologies that are more relevant to each country's culture, or range of cultures, and values.

This action is in part a reaction to the outmoded, irrelevant and inappropriate curricula that, in some cases, is a powerful vestige of colonialism and in others the result of previous inappropriate donor agency interventions. For example, the Solomon Islands primary English syllabus developed in the later 1990's using donor agency funding, not AusAID, and the services of an external consultant, is based exclusively on a whole language approach to learning English. It makes no allowance for the fact that English is a second or third language for most Solomon Islands' students and teachers, that there is a dearth of relevant language resources in schools which defeats any attempt at language immersion and that teachers have limited access to professional development support to implement such an approach.

One of the interesting counter-effects of globalisation which is driving the development of culturally relevant curricula is an appreciation of the threat that an "internationalised culture" is to traditional cultural values and vernacular language. The effects of this are often exacerbated by large-scale emigration of Pacific Islands' people to larger Pacific Islands and to New Zealand and Australia.

The development of culturally relevant curricula presents curriculum developers with some significant challenges which include:

- attaining an appropriate balance between local cultural relevance and globally significant content –making decisions about the language of instruction at different levels of schooling
 - deciding which elements of tradition cultural values, beliefs and practices should be included in the curriculum, a problem made more difficult in many cases by the presence of competing cultures and languages - thus the PNG vision for basic education in the next 10 years is “integral human development through an affordable education system appreciates Christian and traditional values”
 - building the capacity of local professionals to develop local curricula rather than relying on outside experts who will not have the required understanding of traditional cultures
 - developing locally relevant resources, particularly in vernacular if this is used as a medium of instruction.
3. The need for societal renewal and reconciliation in some countries and the view that education reform must drive the renewal. This perspective is apparent particularly in the Solomon Islands where the previous model of education was seen as contributing to instability and conflict. A reformed education system is seen as critical to the reconciliation. A similar, though less pronounced perspective is apparent in the Fiji Education Sector Program.

If the impetus for reform is similar in South West Pacific, the focus of reform efforts is closely aligned also. Curriculum reform, the alignment between technical and vocation and general education, structural reform, infrastructure improvement, teaching and learning practices, assessment and reporting, provision of teacher support materials and student resources, teacher development and preservice teacher education, and system development are the priority issues, even though the scale may be somewhat different in various countries.

The other common factor is the move from a focus on access and quantity to a focus on quality. The reason for this shift in emphasis is that many Pacific nations have made significant progress on improving access to basic education, for boys and girls. While further work is required to achieve total access and participation, particularly in remote areas, and the situation varies from location to location, in PNG for instance, between 1992 and 2003 the number of children attending school had doubled from 510,000 to over one million and 4,200 elementary schools have been established by provincial governments (AusAID 2004). Department of Education projections indicate continued improvements in access over the next ten years (DoE 2005).

Table 1: Projected elementary school enrolments – 2005 to 2014, selected years

	2005	2008	2011	2014
Prep	123,522	156,228	188,933	211,033
Elem 1	110,368	142,419	174,470	201,250
Elem 2	97,691	129,101	160,511	191,921
Total	331,582	427,748	523,914	604,204

Table 2: Projected primary school enrolments – 2005 to 2014, selected years

	2005	2008	2011	2014
Grade 1	50,407	28,279	7,646	0
Grade 2	49,224	30,780	12,523	0
Grade 3	125,345	139,968	152,113	168,301
Grade 4	110,292	124,837	137,984	154,197
Grade 5	93,792	106,607	119,692	133,793
Grade 6	82,005	91,799	103,787	114,585
Grade 7	62,618	78,235	93,853	104,078
Grade 8	52,048	66,152	80,265	90,703
Total	625,731	666,658	707,863	765,657

Table 3: Primary School retention rates

	2005	2008	2011	2014
Grades 1 to 6	56.2%	61.1%	62.8%	66.0%
Grades 1 to 8	38.8%	52.2%	52.1%	54.3%

This focus on quality improvement is reflected in the *National Education Plan 2005-2014* which, in addition to improving access, has as its core objectives:

- *Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children*
- *The learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programs*
- *Improving all aspects of the quality and excellence of education with measurable learning outcomes. (PNG DoE 2005)*

A focus on quality rather than quantity has additional significant implications for all players involved in the reform process.

It is the lessons learned from my involvement in reform process in a number of Pacific countries and their implications for education systems and personnel, donor agencies and technical advisers that I will focus on for the remainder of the paper.

LESSONS LEARNED

Two key elements of the reform process, the development of new curricula based on traditional values and the emphasis on improvements in quality, have particular and significant implications for the all key players in the reform process. It is these implications and issues that I will focus on in this section by addressing five critical issues.

- Local Ownership
- Capacity and Capability Building
- Evidence-Based Decision-Making
- Integrated Action
- Regional Partnership.

1. Local Ownership

While I have listed these as separate issues they need to be considered together. Establishing local ownership requires donor agency programs to have an intense focus on local capacity building.

Once education reform programs move to a focus on quality, traditional cultures and vernacular, local ownership must become an essential feature of the reform and development processes and donor agency interventions. By local ownership I mean:

- the need for national education systems to take responsibility for the development and reform processes as part of their own education reform strategy and using their own resources
- the importance of Pacific Islands' educators undertaking the development and implementation of the reform curriculum.

Neither of these precludes the participation of outside technical advisers or the provision of donor agency funding but it does mean that the nature of their participation must be of a particular type.

Local ownership is invariably presented as one of the fundamental principles of donor agency programs and agencies are generally genuine in their in-principle commitment to the concept. However, ensuring local ownership in practice is problematic. Aid agencies always have a set of outcomes and a program timeframe which form part of contractual arrangements with technical adviser or managing contractors and treaty arrangements

with partner governments. This is understandable as no agency can provide an open-ended commitment to the provision of donor funding.

This dilemma can be addressed by recipient governments and donor agencies by developing technical support programs that acknowledge the complexity of education and curriculum reform and design and implement longer-term and integrated programs of support that identify clear outcomes but provide sufficient flexibility to enable programs to respond to emerging issues. AusAID's Education Capacity Building Program, with 15 year indicative timeframe is an example of an initiative which is using these principles. Unfortunately, this program is the exception not the rule in the Pacific and there are many more examples of short-term and inflexible aid programs than there are of long-term and flexible programs.

While CRIP, for instance has been extended to a sixth year, and has a degree of flexibility, there is no way that the curriculum reform process can be embedded in PNG within the six year timeframe of the project. In fact the reform process will probably enter its most critical phase, local implementation and institutionalisation in schools, after CRIP has ended.

This means that the success of CRIP, for instance, will depend on how well we as a team have assisted the PNG Department of Education to build the capacity of its people and systems, and implemented sustainable support and implementation processes. Our success in this regard depends on how well we have responded to the challenges of building genuine local ownership.

Meeting this challenge requires donor agency advisers to implement an approach in which the substantive work - curriculum development, inservice support, monitoring and evaluation – is undertaken by local professionals with technical support provided by technical advisers. There are too many examples in education in the Pacific, I think Solomon Islands is a classic example, where the substantive work has been undertaken by expatriate experts, while local professionals have been essentially passive recipients.

Local ownership also means that donor agency programs must focus on assisting local professional establish the conditions for reform, provide policy options and advice about the implications of alternatives, helping build the human and organisational capacity of local education systems and assist with the development of systems to implement reform and monitor its quality and effectiveness.

The implementation of longer-term and flexible programs placed significantly increased obligations on recipient governments. In particular, if they are serious about local ownership they must establish clear strategic plans and demonstrate a long-term commitment to the reform process by ensuring the provision of sufficient human and material resources for the duration of the reform. If this does not occur there is little chance that local ownership can be established or real development will be achieved.

2. Capacity and Capability Building

Like local ownership, every aid intervention has capacity building as one of its core principles and elements, a position which I support fully. It is important for the success of technical support programs that capacity and capability building are given the highest priority and that approaches to capacity and capability building are based on the same principles that relate to local ownership. That is, capacity building must be part of an education system's longer term education reform strategic plan and that the education system, not the donor agency or the technical advisory team, take leadership responsibility for the development and implementation of the program of capacity building.

It is critical for human resource development that capacity and capability building strategies are:

- based on a sound body of evidence about priorities that have been identified by technical advisers and local professionals working together
- strengths-based, that is they recognise the skills and knowledge that are present and build on these as well as building capacity in deficit areas
- focus on the achievement of agreed outcomes
- undertaken as an integral part of the person's program of work and are ongoing over the life of a project
- based on effective and professional relationships between the technical advisers and the participants.

The importance of the last point cannot be overemphasised. In my experience the most effective capacity building achievements have been the result of ongoing mentoring and coaching based on a professional relationship of trust and confidence between the adviser and the participant. Other strategies are important and useful, but they cannot overcome a fundamental failure of relationship. This has critical implications for the selection of advisers and the partnering of advisers with local professionals. The most important selection criterion and responsibility is not technical knowledge but the capacity to work in a professional partnership relationship with counterparts to share technical knowledge and build professional capacity. Unless an adviser can demonstrate they have this capability they should not be engaged.

A second important issue relating to capacity building is that it requires a mutual commitment to the achievement of outcomes by the participant and the provider. There is a strong element of mutual obligation. Capacity and capability building is essentially a personal or system learning process that requires a commitment to learning by the individual participant, and in regard to systems, and the organisation. If that commitment is not given it is unlikely that the desired outcomes will be achieved.

For this reason, and to ensure that education authorities maintain a strong focus on quality improvement, capacity building programs need to be balanced by appropriate and supportive performance management programs, implemented by the employing authority. In my experience performance management is not undertaken effectively in most

locations. Establishing agreed work priorities and targets, providing feedback on performance and outcomes and designing and implementing programs of support are key components of capacity building and represent the most important role of supervisors and managers. Developing effectiveness strategies and practice in this area is not just a problem facing developing countries in the Pacific. It is a weakness in education systems and large organisation in Australia as well. Part of the reason for this is that education systems seldom prepare people adequately for leadership and management positions. However, this is a major issue which I do not have time to address in this paper.

The third fundamental issue relating to the implementation of effective capacity and capability building initiatives is that they must address at the same time *systems and organisational development*, and *human capacity development*. Individual learning must be supported by organisational learning. If organisational systems and processes do not facilitate effective practice it will lead to the frustration of individual development.

A fourth important issue in regard to capacity building for effective education reform is that it must be undertaken at both the national and sub-national levels. Generally in donor agency education support programs the focus is on the national level. This is of course important but is not sufficient. In the PNG context for instance, the next wave of capacity enhancement must be at the provincial, district and school levels or the curriculum reform process may stall. This will require a substantial commitment to inservice provision, leadership development and preservice teacher education for at least a period of ten years. The education reform process in PNG is not finished because the syllabuses have been written. The hard work starts now. Most reforms fail because they are not implemented and institutionalised in schools. The real test for the Department of Education and donor agencies is to make sure the curriculum and the teaching, learning and assessment processes that it promotes, are embedded in the work of schools. Only then will the nation realise the benefits of the curriculum development process. This is the challenge for every Pacific Islands country implementing reform.

Before moving to the issue of evidence-based decision-making I would like to reflect on the achievements of the PNG Department of Education in relation to capacity building outcomes in its Curriculum Development Division. The real test of the quality and effectiveness of any learning experience is the extent to which the learner can transmit that learning to another person. This is also the critical test for the success of capacity building programs. I am of the opinion that there is a significant group of officers within CDD who are ready to provide leadership and technical advice in regard to curriculum reform to colleagues in other Pacific nations. They will be much more effective in this task than most expatriate advisers because they have developed culturally relevant curricula and support teacher and student support materials and they have a much greater appreciation of the particular challenges and cultural contexts of their Pacific Islands colleagues. PNG is ready to move into the export market in regard to curriculum development.

3. Evidence-Based Decision-Making

Because long-term commitment to reform, especially when reform is focussing on quality improvement, is required from both education systems and donor agency partners, it is critical that the fundamental policy decisions about the nature and extent of the reform process, and ongoing decisions about the progress and impact of educational reform, are based on valid and reliable evidence rather than assumption, supposition or, dare I say it, political whim.

This is perhaps the greatest challenge facing Pacific education authorities as the gathering of data and information, their analysis and interpretation and their application for policy making purposes is in an early stage of development. As a minimum every reform program, and the donor agency programs that support them, must include a strategy and systems for:

- reviewing and analysing relevant research to guide the development of the program of reform
- collecting baseline data about organisational performance, system quality, human capacity and student performance at the commencement of the reform process
- collecting and analysing ongoing performance data in these four areas at appropriate intervals over the life of the reform process
- using these data to track the impact of reform and donor agency programs of support
- using the data to make key decisions about the direction and focus of reform efforts and for guiding policy decisions and resource allocation.

CRIP and ECBP are working closely with the PNG DoE to achieve these outcomes through impact studies, the Curriculum Standards Monitoring Test, review processes, improving DoE knowledge management systems and technical capacity. Donor agencies are becoming much more attuned to the importance of these processes, but I would recommend that they increase their focus and emphasis in this area for all education reform support programs. This may require the appointment to all donor agency programs, or groups of programs, of highly specialised advisers who can work with local authorities assist develop initiatives and build individual and organisation capability and capacity in these areas. It may also require negotiation with education authorities to ensure that these processes and strategies are central to the reform process before funding is provided.

4. Integrated Action

The fourth key issue that I believe is vital for effective curriculum reform is the implementation of integrated action at three levels:

- between education authorities and donor agencies
- between donor agencies

- between donor agency programs
- between teams of technical adviser and education authorities.

These propositions are not new. In regard to the first three, there have been efforts in the region to improve integration and coordination. In PNG the implementation of ECBP has been undertaken to address these issues. However, I suspect, and I am sure to be challenged on this position, that total commitment to the first two principles has not been achieved at the policy-making levels of education authorities or donor agencies. There are benefits to education authorities and governments in the Pacific to maintain separate inputs by different donor agencies. Likewise, donor nations have different policy objectives that sometimes are realised through donor agency programs. So I suspect that total integration at the policy level will difficult to achieve.

However, I see no reason why greater integration of action cannot be achieved at the program level between initiative funded by the same donor agency and between individual programs and education authorities. This can be achieved through appropriate design, clear contractual arrangements and total commitment to effective partnership by teams of technical advisers and education authorities.

From the CRIP perspective, our co-location with CDD, our joint planning and implementation processes, and the commitment of advisers and curriculum officers to joint action has resulted in the establishment of an effective partnership model. Policy-making in regard to the reform is a DoE responsibility. The provision of technical and resource support to enable the collection of data and evidence on which to base the decisions and the provision of technical and resource support to assist with the implementation of the policy decisions has been the main focus of the CRIP team.

This approach is feasible when there is a tight and clearly focused relationship between the **team** of technical advisers, rather than individual advisers, and the responsible education authority. It is less feasible where individual advisers are recruited by different donor agencies using different selection process. This approach often reflects weak strategy and poor integration but unfortunately is still occurring in the Pacific region.

5. Regional Cooperation

The final point I would like to make is that the time is right for integration of effort to extend across national boundaries. The similarities in approach to curriculum reform in Melanesia and other Pacific countries, the similarity of challenges facing Pacific countries and the need for more effective utilisation of resources can all be addressed through an approach that encourages cooperative effort.

In a report I prepared this year for NZ AID in regard to curriculum reform in the Pacific, I recommended the establishment of a formal South West Pacific Curriculum Reform Alliance involving PNG, Kiribati, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Fiji. The Alliance would be supported by all donor agencies and education authorities acting in partnership.

The Alliance would:

- establish formal links between the curriculum divisions and their directors
- provide formal and regular opportunities and strategies for curriculum officers, particularly directors, to share information about and seek advice to support their curriculum reform processes
- improve the knowledge and skills of curriculum officers by providing access to an increased range of support
- share lessons learned from implementing curriculum reform
- develop common terms of reference for the development of teacher and student resources.

These purposes could be achieved through an annual curriculum reform workshop, ongoing communication and joint activity through visits, work placements and ICT communications and the sharing of resources and materials. Such an approach would reduce duplication of effort and improve dialogue between professional educators.

PNG has a leadership role to play in such an alliance. It has achieved a great deal in the last five years, although there is still much to be done. From its position of strength in curriculum development, monitoring and assessment and teacher inservice it can contribute significantly to the implementation of curriculum reform in the Pacific and the improvement of the quality of education for all young people.