

5 Curriculum Development in Pacific Island Countries

With specific reference to Tonga

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Konai Thaman draws on a decade of experience as a curriculum consultant and teacher educator at the University of the South Pacific following service as a teacher in her native Tonga. Her comments emphasise the necessity for small countries to utilise their scarce professional resources to the full in meeting the challenge of national curriculum renewal. In the island nations of the South Pacific it is clearly important to utilise teachers in curriculum development in a way that large systems, with their more diversified and specialised service may find inappropriate or unmanageable. This may be conceived as a benefit of smallness of scale. It sets challenges for establishing ways of working which advance the professional development of teachers through the utilisation of their experience and skills, whilst maintaining their day-to-day teaching duties. For most teachers these are new roles for which they have received little or no professional development.

Konai Thaman sets these observations in the context of the external component of curriculum development upon which all the small countries of the South Pacific are dependent, be it in terms of

finance, materials or expertise. Drawing on the experience of the Tonga Secondary Curriculum Project, she outlines a model for the successful integration of resources utilising local skills, the ministry of education, the regional university and external aid donors. The Project is examined against a wider Pacific background in which many educational innovations have failed or only been partially successful because they have had an over-ambitious time frame and a lack of realism about the capacity of small systems of education to manage information, materials and people in ways thought to be appropriate by external agencies.

Characteristics of curriculum development in the South Pacific

There are two important characteristics of curriculum development in the South Pacific, and in many other small nation states. They are related, and to some extent mutually supportive:

- 1 The central role played by the national ministry of education in determining curriculum content; and
- 2 The strong impact of external influences in the curriculum development process.

The central ministry of education is directly responsible for, and controls the content of, the education offered in schools. Central government tries to ensure that the curriculum reflects the overall objectives of the educational system. The process invariably begins by the ministry appointing curriculum teams, panels or committees, which are usually comprised of teachers, officials and curriculum co-ordinators and administrators. Curriculum materials are produced, first for trial, and subsequently for wider adoption. The overall responsibility for this activity falls directly with a senior officer of the ministry of education or with an individual appointed to direct curriculum change. In some states there may be a curriculum

development unit. Through these agencies, the ministry of education produces not only a subject-based curriculum but also supplementary materials, including pupil and teacher guides. This contrasts with a system-based model where curriculum developers may produce guidelines and the teachers are left to determine the details of what to teach in their own particular grades.

Most such curriculum development projects have been, or are, externally funded and/or administered. In the South Pacific there are a number of external aid sources involved, notably the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); the Government of Australia; and the Government of New Zealand.

Teachers as curriculum developers

The need to involve teachers in curriculum development and the implications of this for teacher education, and general policy relating to conditions of service, are significant issues in the Pacific island countries.

In the South Pacific, the curriculum development task has fallen squarely on the shoulders of practising teachers. Their active role in designing and producing curriculum materials and implementing them has not only been encouraged, but, in some countries, demanded by educational authorities. Consequently, the preparation of teachers is of critical importance if the exhortations of educational administrators are to make any sense.

The active role of teachers in the process of curriculum development became increasingly obvious in the early 1970s. This was mainly associated with the UNDP/Unesco Secondary Curriculum Project (1970-75), a regional project funded by UNDP with its headquarters at the University of the South Pacific's (USP) School of Education. Curriculum materials for junior secondary schools in several subjects were researched, designed and written by regional curriculum teams, made up primarily of teachers who were either in schools or had been seconded to national curriculum units. Furthermore, the Project insisted on an active role by teachers in each

country, in the preparation of local units to complement the 'core' units prepared as a result of regional curriculum seminars and workshops.

At the end of the Project in 1975, some countries continued curriculum work according to their own styles and resources. Whatever happened in each country, it became obvious that teachers were being drawn into the centre of curriculum development in a very practical way.

In Western Samoa, for example, a new secondary teachers' college was set up in 1980 to provide among other things, '... a detailed curriculum development programme...', and its staff was charged with the '... responsibility for leading teacher committees in the preparation of curriculum suited to the objectives of the [new] evolving [secondary] schools'.¹

In the Solomon Islands, the Secretary for Education, in a paper presented to a national curriculum workshop said, 'We're not only permitting but demanding that they [teachers] get involved in curriculum decision-making'. Curriculum work in the Solomons is currently being carried out by curriculum teams, consisting mostly of teachers, working with overseas consultants predominantly from Australia.

In Tonga, the Senior Education Officer-in-Charge of the Curriculum Development Unit, A.M. Taufe'ulungaki, writing about curriculum work in that country, said, 'The most interesting aspect [of the New Maths curriculum] is the attempt to involve teachers in all stages of the curriculum development process'.²

In Kiribati, teachers were actively involved in curriculum writing workshops which have been organised during recent years under the Kiribati Project, funded by ADAB and executed by the Salisbury College of Advanced Education in Australia, in co-operation with USP's Institute of Education.

Recently a Minister of Education in Fiji, in an address to the Fiji Principals' Association, stated, in relation to the development of new curriculum materials for senior high schools that, 'The staff of the Curriculum Development Unit would prepare curriculum materials

in partnership with teachers in schools'. He also stressed the need for Fiji teachers to be able to adjust and adapt to [new] curriculum changes as, '...the country could not afford to retrain its teachers every time there is a major curriculum change'.³

It is therefore clear that Pacific Island teachers are not only required to utilise new curriculum materials but also to produce and test them.

The Tonga Secondary Curriculum Project

There are several examples of curriculum development projects in which teachers are actively involved. They include regional projects, such as the UNDP/Unesco/IOE-USP Vocational Curriculum Project, and national projects such as the Kiribati Language Project, Tuvalu Language Project, Kiribati Project, Western Samoa Secondary Curriculum Project and the Tonga Secondary Curriculum Project. The last named will be used as a case study through which to test the reality against the model.

The Tonga Secondary Curriculum Project (TSCP) began in 1976 for the purpose of developing curriculum materials for junior secondary schools. A year earlier, when the UNDP/Unesco Regional Curriculum Project finished, there was a lot still to be done in the production of new materials, as well as in revising or replacing existing materials. Following a report by a New Zealand curriculum team in 1975, the New Zealand Government agreed to fund the new project out of its regional aid (but now under bilateral aid arrangements), with the USP's Institute of Education (IOE) being the executing agency. This means that the Tongan authorities submit their plans and requests to the Institute, which facilitates the requests. Such requests range from the provision of subject curriculum consultants to the acquisition of items of hardware and software.

The curriculum consultants are drawn from the academic staff of the University of the South Pacific or from other parts of the Pacific, including New Zealand. They are either requested directly by the Education Department, Tonga, or recommended by IOE and approved by Tonga. All financial transactions are handled by the USP

Bursary. All requests for funds by the Tonga Curriculum Development Project are fulfilled by the Bursar on the advice of the Director of the Institute of Education.

The procedure follows the Tonga Secondary Curriculum Model in which the work of writing and revising curriculum materials is the responsibility of a local subject curriculum committee, consisting of a co-ordinator (from the Ministry of Education) plus about five or six subject teachers who represent the different school systems in Tonga. This committee works closely with an Institute of Education consultant, not only in the materials production area, but also in the in-service training of teachers in trial schools. All curriculum writing workshops are held in Tonga, and in-service teacher training sessions are held in the three main centres - Nuku'alofa, Lifuka and Neiafu - before new materials are trialled.

The usual procedure is to send the new curriculum units to the executive of the appropriate subject teachers' association for their comments before they go to the National Curriculum Committee for approval. This committee consists mainly of secondary school principals. The units are released for trialling in schools after approval by the Ministry of Education.

By 1982, local prescriptions and curriculum materials had been prepared in the areas of Social Science, English, Industrial Arts and Home Economics. There were setbacks in the area of Commercial Studies with the departure of the University consultant. However, the Regional UNDP/Unesco/IOE Vocational Curriculum Project (based at the USP) took over the work in this area in 1983.

Between 1982 and the present, much of the curriculum work of the Tonga Secondary Curriculum Project has been in the development of curriculum materials for Forms 3 to 5 English. All schools in Tonga are now using the Form 3 books produced by the Project, and by 1986 Form 4 books were available to all schools. The trialling of Form 5 English materials began early in 1986.

It appears that the intention of the Ministry of Education for 1986-90 is to develop further materials in Science, Mathematics, History, Geography, Agriculture and Tongan Studies. The vocational

subjects, Industrial Arts, Home Economics and Commercial Studies are now the responsibility of the UNDP Regional Project (UNDP/ Unesco/ IOE), and work in producing and trialling new materials in that area is underway.

The Tonga project has several features which seem attractive from the host country's point of view when one compares it to other externally assisted projects. These are:

- 1 Curriculum materials are prepared and used by teachers who are familiar with the schools and communities from which pupils come.
- 2 Consultants from the regional university are also familiar with local conditions. Most of them are involved in the pre-service as well as the in-service preparation of the teachers who will eventually use the materials. In Tonga, for example, in Social Science, pre-service and in-service teacher education students at the University participated in curriculum materials production through their curriculum studies courses. The same students, upon graduation, continued their involvement in curriculum development either as members of subject curriculum committees or as resource persons during in-service courses organised by the Curriculum Development Unit.
- 3 Training in curriculum development for curriculum officers was carried out on-the-job, through short courses, as well as some initial practical attachments with the Institute of Education. While on attachment, curriculum officers spent part of their time preparing materials, part on teacher education courses in curriculum studies. Some teachers from outer islands and remote rural schools were able to participate in these courses. For many of these teachers these were the first in-service courses they had attended since taking up their teaching responsibilities - over ten years in some cases.

- 4 Funding for the project is concentrated in Tonga. With many externally assisted projects much of the aid remains in, or goes back to, the donor country in one form or another, but in this case most of the aid money is spent in Tonga. For example, apart from consultant travel, which amounted to just over 10 per cent of the total expenditure in 1984, all other expenses were incurred in-country, mainly in printing costs. This picture is quite atypical when compared with some projects where most of the expenditure is usually on consultancy fees/travel/per diems, often provided for by the donor country itself.

Because of the relative success of the TSCP model, a regional curriculum development project which began in 1982 adopted the Tonga model. This regional project has a full-time co-ordinator and secretary, based at USP. Using consultants from the USP, Australia and New Zealand, curriculum materials production is the responsibility of national curriculum teams. This facilitates national identity in curriculum development. There is, moreover, a vital element of on-the-job training for curriculum workers as well as an important attempt at national institution building, through the provision of hardware and software to local curriculum development units.

Implications for the management of curriculum change

Experience with the TSCP has brought to light issues which many small island countries have to address.

Political considerations

In the Pacific Islands, curriculum development projects provide one indicator of how countries are trying to meet the challenges of independence and decolonisation. Together with other indicators, such as national airlines, universities, and television stations, politicians in particular see national curriculum and examinations as ways of decolonising education systems. As such, curriculum development

needs to take into consideration internal politics as well as the politics of overseas aid. The national selection of particular trial schools is just as important as decisions of funding agencies or donor countries; both affect, in their own ways, the outcomes of a project.

Furthermore, the dependence on overseas services may work against the identification of curriculum development problems. It is unlikely, for example, that education officials, teachers and curriculum developers will be critical, particularly if aid donors or sponsors are strong advocates of a project. Some steps which may help alleviate such problems would be to relax somewhat on the duration of curriculum projects, thus relieving the pressure to obtain quick results; to concentrate more on the realities of implementing the reform rather than the theories of curriculum design; and to place evaluation in the hands of teachers, who know whether or not something works well at the school level.

Planning and implementation

Many curriculum projects in the small island nations of the Pacific lack what curriculum experts refer to as high 'a priori explicitness'; in other words, an administrative plan charged with setting out the desired conditions in terms of personnel, materials and organisation. Perhaps such explicitness may not be desirable in the small island countries, given the high staff turnover rates experienced, especially in the curriculum development area. Because of the small pool of qualified personnel that exists in many of the Pacific education systems, it would be very difficult, and perhaps undesirable, to make implementation dependent on a rigid set of conditions. In Tonga the retraining approach has had to be the one used, otherwise the process of curriculum development would have been long delayed.

Teacher education

Teacher education programmes, especially pre-service (primary), do not always keep pace with what is happening in curriculum development. For example, in a survey of teacher-training programmes in Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa, published in 1978, the lack of

courses relating to curriculum theory and practice was highlighted.

Most teacher education programmes are traditional in the sense that they assume a definition of the teacher's role which concentrates on classroom. Important though this role is, the curriculum changes of the 1970s not only required a new style of teaching (one which went beyond rote learning, to questioning and child-centred discovery activities) but also the involvement of teachers in translating curriculum guidelines into learning experiences, and the evaluation of these activities. It is vital that current teacher education programmes provide future teachers with training and support that go beyond what they do in the classroom.

This need was recognised by teacher educators at USP. In 1976, courses in curriculum theory and practice were introduced into the B.Ed and Post-Graduate Certificate of Education programmes. Methods courses were modified and renamed Curriculum Studies courses. The two courses on curriculum theory and practice required students to research, write, trial and evaluate curriculum units in selected schools in Suva, Fiji, and both pre- and in-service teacher trainees produced curriculum units related to their respective countries' curriculum plans. Some of these were later incorporated into the curriculum materials which were being prepared in Fiji and Tonga.

Since 1980, an increasing number of countries in the South Pacific have taken responsibility for the pre-service training of secondary school teachers. It is to be hoped that the curriculum role of teachers will be an important consideration in their planning. The integration of curriculum development and teacher training is of vital consideration for small island states.

Resources

Lack of time and insufficient supply of materials were two problems often commented on by teachers implementing the Tonga Social Science curriculum for Forms 3 and 4. Although pre-trial workshops were always held in order to familiarise teachers with new methods and materials, no in-country programmes existed in which all

teachers were familiarised prior to national implementation. In many curriculum projects in the Pacific, the time in which a particular curriculum is expected to be produced and implemented is unrealistically short. For example, the UNDP/Unesco/IOE Vocational Curriculum Project was initially for two years; it normally takes that long just to produce new materials for one level, let alone trial them. One can understand the immediacy of the need for change in small newly independent island nations, but an unrealistic time frame may in the long term be detrimental to meeting new curriculum objectives.

Curriculum feedback

This refers mainly to the interaction between curriculum administrators, consultants and teachers. Feedback methods are supposed to identify problems encountered during the production and implementation of a project. In the Tonga Secondary Curriculum Project, the absence of a feedback network and mechanism was a problem. The lack of any critical feedback severely limited the value of the trial phase of the curriculum development process. Feedback exchanges with consultants are almost always valuable. It is usually very difficult to obtain any kind of critical feedback from the majority of Pacific island teachers, often because many feel on trial. This both reduces their capacity to profit from the experience and adversely affects their feedback to the centre. Furthermore, the expectations for success on the part of the sponsors, administrators and others create unrealistic pressure on teachers.

In the case of TSCP Social Science, the best feedback was through the Social Science Teachers' Association. During regular meetings of the Association, many teachers pointed out the difficulties they faced, and the Association's executive organised special demonstration lessons by their more able teachers. In an area where the majority of curriculum consultants are from outside the region, it is important for ministries of education to encourage and develop this kind of national feedback.

Teacher participation

Although in theory teachers are supposed to be the curriculum developers, in practice most of them play a minimal role in curriculum decision-making. Of course, the amount of teacher influence on major curriculum decisions depends on a country's particular political and social context, and the educational level reached by the majority of its teachers. In many situations major decisions, and much of the work, seem to rest with one or two more active members of the curriculum team, working together with a foreign consultant. There is a need for research in this area. The limited data available from Tonga would suggest that there would probably have been a more positive attitude from teachers in respect of implementation, if they had participated in curriculum writing workshops. Perhaps the important thing is for teachers to feel that they have contributed to the preparation of curriculum materials, rather than major curriculum decisions *per se*. Tonga teacher trainees at the USP, who participated in the preparation of teachers' guides in Social Science, are still active members of the Social Science, History and Geography Teachers' Associations in the country.

Teacher incentives

It is generally true to say that few incentives are offered to teachers to involve themselves in curriculum development, either as writers or implementers, despite ministerial proclamations about the need for their involvement. Moreover, their nature varies from country to country. Curriculum writers in Tonga for the TSCP are now provided with a daily allowance when curriculum workshops are held, but teachers are still in general expected to give up their own time in order to meet curriculum writing requirements. Many curriculum workshops are held during school vacations because some headteachers are unwilling to release teachers during term time. As far as classroom teachers are concerned, many lack the necessary support both professional and material, to be actively involved in curriculum work.

The role of overseas consultants

It is easy to be cynical about the role of overseas consultants and advisers in any area of development in the Pacific. Some spend very little time in Pacific countries and end up writing massive reports with far-reaching recommendations. Others spend far too long on their consultation, becoming in the process insufficiently external. Obviously some sort of balance is required between these extremes. Ideally, of course, the best consultants and advisers are those who possess not only knowledge and understanding of the different cultures and countries but also the sensitivity to realise that people rather than plans are paramount in any development project. It is essential that each island country selects aid packages which guarantee its involvement in selecting consultants – people with a long-term commitment to a place and a willingness to learn as much as they can about ‘what is’ before recommending ‘what ought to be’.

Conclusions

Providing a broad base

There seems to be merit in supporting broad-based curriculum development, as well as providing local support for specific development in particular areas. The TSCP is an example of such a project. Initially, it provided not only for the development and implementation of curriculum materials in different subject areas, but also facilitated the establishment of a curriculum development unit, including secretarial staff support.

Providing local experimentation

Curriculum projects should allow for local experimentation in both the design and implementation stages, even if for practical purposes the materials produced have to be printed abroad. For example, due to the small number of schools selected for trialling of Industrial Arts materials in Tonga, it was decided that Industrial Arts curriculum materials would be printed in Suva. This system worked well

especially when the Curriculum Officer was attached to a USP department and supervised the preparation and printing of these materials. However, in the field of Social Science it was found cheaper to print materials locally, and this was the route that was followed.

Integration of roles

In the process of developing and implementing curriculum, certain goals became apparent which were not consciously identified prior to the beginning of the project. For example, the need for teacher support materials in Social Science prompted the consultant to use the opportunity at USP of incorporating this task into curriculum studies assignments. In this way, the efforts of university specialists, teacher trainees, curriculum officers and practising teachers were integrated – a situation probably not experienced in large metropolitan countries.

Strengthening local capabilities

External support for a project should be initially directed towards facilitating and strengthening local system capabilities. This is often overlooked. The Tonga Secondary Curriculum Project has successfully facilitated local curriculum development work, especially in the areas of Social Science, English, Home Economics, Industrial Arts, and Agriculture and Commercial Practice. A look at Tonga's curriculum plan for 1985 reveals that the Project is facilitating development in almost all areas of the secondary curriculum.

Incentive systems, professional and material, need to be worked out for all aspects of curriculum development work, including the writing and implementing stages. For example, absence of regular interaction between consultants, writers and teachers is costly. Teachers and writers need positive support to maintain the momentum of curriculum development between regular, formal activities such as workshops. Time is as critical a factor as money in curriculum development. Small countries cannot afford to be hasty, because resources are scarce and the margin for error is small.

In developing models of assistance, people development must go together with materials development. Effective implementation will only occur if people-based interaction systems are recognised and encouraged, such as the teachers' subject associations in Tonga. Unfortunately, the political realities in some countries are such that this suggestion may seem naive. Nevertheless, the point remains that quality education can only be brought about by quality teaching and as such teachers hold the key to any new development in education in the countries of the South Pacific.

References

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- 3 Ali, A, Minister of Education's Address to the 57th Fiji Principals' Association Conference, 1985