

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION IN THE PACIFIC

CHAPTER 2

**THE EDUCATION AND CARE OF 0 – 8 YEAR-OLDS:
BUILDING STRONG FOUNDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

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The years 0-8 are foundational years for all individuals. Children in this age range therefore need special attention in their care, nutrition, education and development. Importantly, they need to be nurtured and educated in the ins and outs of their cultural practices, values, traditions, knowledge and wisdom. They also need to be gradually prepared to live in a rapidly globalising world that extends beyond the shores of their local and national communities.

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is not just concerned with children who attend pre-schools or kindergartens (usually 3 – 5 age range) which, historically, is the way it has been perceived by Pacific governments and communities. Instead, there is consensus that it should be concerned with the development of children from birth, through pre-school/kindergarten to grade/class two, and that it should be holistic, embracing their physical, emotional, psychological, cognitive, spiritual, cultural and social development.

Historically, ECCE in the Pacific emerged through the efforts of concerned educators, parents, community members and stakeholders, such as NGOs and church organisations. International organisations have also played a pivotal role in advancing the development of ECCE and basic education in the region.

Because of the enormous costs associated with ECCE, Pacific governments have yet to fully commit to supporting and funding ECCE activities. However, with increased lobbying by ECCE advocates, ECCE is gaining prominence such that some Pacific Ministries/Departments of Education have developed or are in the process of developing ECCE policies and guidelines and other activities at the national level.

Pacific vision for education

Political recognition of the importance of ECCE is inherent in the support that Ministers for Education of Pacific Island countries have accorded it in the *Forum Basic Education Action Plan (FBEAP)*, a document guiding educational development in fifteen countries of the region.

The Ministers for Education of the Pacific Islands Forum met in Auckland in 2001 at the instruction of the Forum Leaders (at their meeting in late 1999) to consider issues related to human resource development in their countries. The vision of the Ministers for Education was articulated thus.

Basic education as the fundamental building block for society should engender the broader life skills that lead to social cohesion and provide the foundations for vocational callings, higher education and life long learning. These when combined with enhanced employment opportunities create a higher level of personal and societal security and development.

Forum members recognised that development of basic education takes place in the context of commitments to the world community and meeting the new demands of the global economy, which should be balanced with the enhancement of their own distinctive Pacific values, morals, social, political, economic and cultural heritages, and reflect the Pacific's unique geographical context (PIFS, 2001).

The Forum Ministers for Education reaffirmed their commitment to the Dakar 2000 Education for All Framework for Action goals which included expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. The Ministers further agreed that in relation to improving quality in basic education, early childhood education (ECE), amongst other things, was highlighted as an important component. In particular, the Ministers for Education agreed:

[t]hat while continuing with collaborative efforts with NGOs, church and community organisations in providing ECE to pre-school age children, governments should address resource requirements for ECE teacher training and assess how ECE teachers can obtain appropriate status and conditions of employment (PIFS, 2001).

In the 2002 review of FBEAP, the shift in terminology from ECE to ECCE was obvious with Ministers for Education recommitting themselves to ECCE. Specifically, they recognised that 'high quality ECCE programmes can benefit countries by promoting intelligence of young children' and acknowledged other benefits of ECCE to other sectors of education, to society and the economy (PIFS, 2002). The Education Ministers acknowledged that 'integrated ECCE

programmes may be the single most effective intervention for helping children, families, communities, and nations break the cycle of poverty' (PIFS, 2002). Ministers agreed that they would undertake country reviews of national policies on ECCE using a set of prepared guidelines.

The PRIDE Project

The PRIDE¹ Project, an initiative of the Forum Ministers for Education, was designed to implement the Pacific vision for education encapsulated in FBEAP. Implementation of this project began in 2004 and is expected to end in December 2009. Its overall objective is:

To expand opportunities for children and youth to acquire the values, knowledge and skills that will enable them to actively participate in the social, spiritual, economic and cultural development of their communities and to contribute positively to creating sustainable futures (www.usp.ac.fj/pride).

The Project seeks to strengthen the capacity of each of the 15 countries identified above to deliver quality basic education through both formal and non-formal means in order to achieve its objective. The development of strategic plans for education in each country that blend the best global approaches with local values and ways of thinking is the expected key outcome. Support for the implementation of these national strategic plans is provided by the Project. Sharing of best practice and experience amongst countries is also an important project outcome, evidenced by the development of an online resource centre (see www.usp.ac.paddle). Ministers for Education have defined basic education as all educational provision for children and youths, ranging from early childhood, through to primary, secondary and technical/vocational in both the formal and non-formal sectors. In fact, it is everything excepting higher or adult education.

In relation to ECCE, the PRIDE Project Benchmarks document (see www.usp.ac.fj/pride), a key document that contains 11 benchmarks used to review national education strategic plans, articulates Benchmark 6 as a holistic approach to basic education. One of the three principles underlying this benchmark includes the

1. PRIDE is an acronym for the Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of basic Education, a project funded by the EU and NZAID and implemented by the University of the South Pacific. More information is available on (www.usp.ac.fj/pride).

following statement: “The Plan addresses the challenges of effective articulation between each level of education: from pre-school/early childhood to elementary/primary, from elementary/primary to secondary, and from secondary to TVET”.

There are two other PRIDE benchmarks that have relevance for ECCE. Benchmark 1, pride in cultural and national identity, clearly stipulates that national education plans of the fifteen Forum countries ought to be built:

on a strong foundation of local foundations of local cultures and languages, thus enabling students to develop a deep pride in their own values, traditions and wisdoms, and a clear sense of their own local cultural identity, as well as their identity as citizens of the nation. (www.usp.ac.fj/pride)

Implicit in this is the understanding that the language for ECCE should be the mother tongue of the child and that his/her cultural values will be valued.

The second benchmark that has salience for ECCE is Benchmark 3, alignment with National Development Plan and Regional and International Conventions, which has this statement as an indicator: ‘The Plan contains a statement of commitment to regional conventions and frameworks, such as FBEAP... and international commitments such as EFA,...Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC)...’ (The PRIDE Project, 2007: 3)

Increased focus on ECCE at national level

The increased emphasis on ECCE is evident when one searches through some Pacific national Education Strategic Plans and ECCE policy documents. An examination of three strategic plans should be sufficient evidence of this. The Tonga Education Policy Framework 2004 – 2019, for example, devotes two pages to early childhood education, the first part on the policy issue and outcome; the second part on what government’s policy response is; and the third part on the proposed new investments in ECCE. In acknowledging the ‘high rate of return from investments in early childhood education’, particularly its importance in ‘laying the foundation for primary schooling’ and ‘equity dimensions’ where ‘children from least disadvantaged communities are likely to benefit from early childhood education’, some of the policy responses include the following strategies.

- Form national working parties to survey and report on early childhood provision in Tonga
 - Formal registration of all pre-schools
 - Development of an early childhood education curriculum
 - Production and dissemination of culturally appropriate developmental learning resources
 - Provision of pre-service and in-service training and professional development programmes for early childhood teachers
 - Support for parent education initiatives.
- (Tonga Ministry of Education, 2004: 33)

Similarly, Samoa devoted a section of their education strategic plan to ECE. It recognised the importance of early childhood learning and noted that since 1999, 'government support of ECE has increased' (Samoa Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 2006: 19). An ECE Coordinator was appointed in 2000 and all registered ECE centres are now eligible to obtain financial assistance from the Government through an annual Government grant.

Tokelau is in the process of developing standardised curriculum statements for each learning area from ECE to Year 11 'adhering to the policies as outlined in the National Curriculum Policy Framework' (Tokelau Department of Education, 2005: 5). While the focus for Tonga and Samoa is pre-school education, Tokelau's early childhood curriculum is intended to cover the years from birth to school entry age and identifies three broad overlapping age ranges: infant (birth to 18 months); toddler (1 – 3 years); and young child (1 ½ years – school entry). The Tokelau Department of Education (2007: 19) 'will develop minimum standards' for schools and will be guided by the four curriculum principles of empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships.

I have already mentioned above that support for the implementation of key priority areas from national education strategic plans is a key function of the PRIDE Project. Tonga has three sub-projects in the area of early childhood education: one on the development of an early childhood education policy, the second on ECE teacher in-service training and the third on ECE curriculum development at the teacher training institution. Similarly, Fiji has a sub-project on the development of their early childhood education curriculum framework. Both Vanuatu and the Cook Islands also have a sub-project in the area of ECCE—the Early Childhood

Bookmaking in the Vernacular Project in Vanuatu and the Enhancing Creativity and Learning in Early Childhood Education Project in the Cook Islands.

Increasingly, ECCE is being recognised as an important area for government intervention in the region. Forum Ministers for Education have in the past endorsed various recommendations on ECCE, including strengthening national policies, clarifying government roles and responsibilities, addressing resource requirements and developing national plans of action. Despite this, development in ECCE has been erratic in Pacific island countries.

Regional partnership: ECCE workshop, Solomon Islands, March 2007

An experiment in collaborative partnerships between development partners in the Pacific was carried out in the organisation and management of a regional ECCE workshop. 'Supporting learning from 0-8, creating the future' was the theme of the workshop held in Solomon Islands from 26-30 March 2007. It was co-hosted by seven agencies, including Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL), Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of basic Education (PRIDE), Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA) and the Solomon Islands Government.

Attending the workshop were 42 participants, representing government policy makers and NGOs engaged in ECCE in all the Forum countries except Palau.

The workshop objectives included:

- reconfirming the importance of the care, development and learning of 0 – 8 year-olds
- getting government policy-makers and practitioners involved in the education of 0 – 8 year-olds to commit to developing a vision, a policy, curriculum guidelines/frameworks and appropriate programmes and initiatives for this age group in their own country
- strengthening national and regional networking amongst 0 – 8 practitioners
- sharing assessment techniques used for 0 – 8 years-olds.

The workshop covered the following four areas for 0 – 8 year-olds: importance and effectiveness of their education; commitment to develop vision, policy and curriculum; assessment; and culture and language. There were keynote presentations on both the global and local perspectives to ECCE and case studies from Fiji, the Northern Pacific and Papua New Guinea. There were also group sessions and panel discussions to tease out the main issues around ECCE and to discuss the way forward in national contexts.

The following are some of the struggles in ECCE that were identified at the workshop.

- Government support can be problematic since ECCE is not generally seen as part of basic education and many governments place an emphasis on primary education, with very little support, if any for ECCE.
- The links between the education and health sectors are weak and need strengthening.
- The most vulnerable age group in ECCE is 0 – 3 years, yet programmes and strategies for this age group are neglected. Who is responsible for the care and development aspects of the 0 – 3 year-olds before they attend preschool centres? There is an understanding that parents are but who provides education and training for those parents who need it? How do parents become educated on the physical, emotional and development needs of their children? Should governments not be concerned with the care of their national treasures—the children who will become the leaders of the future? There is the recognition that parent-community-government partnerships are vital, as are government partnerships with NGOs, and with religious and community organisations.
- An important question that some ECCE providers struggle with is what and whose values should their programmes be grounded in and what language should be valued?
- The importance of play in preschool years is not fully appreciated by some teachers as they place a premium on preparing students for class one by, for example, teaching them English or arithmetic. There is a struggle here between formal instruction and learning through play in ECCE.

The workshop participants recognised that interventions for ECCE ought to begin at birth and would continue into preschool, kindergarten and the transition to classes 1 and 2. They acknowledged that all agencies dealing with the health, care, development and education of young children from birth to 8 years of

age ought to work collaboratively to ensure that children are well prepared to enter the formal school system. Moreover, they acknowledged the importance of grounding ECCE in the children's own languages and cultures.

The participants noted that many Pacific countries were yet to develop their ECCE policy and did not have an adequate data management system to capture relevant ECCE data. The workshop also noted that national governments have been hesitant to commit to ECCE because of high budgetary implications.

Highlights of the workshop included field visits to three ECCE centres, the insights provided daily by critical friend and workshop evaluator, Ufemia Camaitoga, and the formulation of an outcomes document.

Outcomes of the workshop

There was a sense of excitement and accomplishment during the latter part of the workshop, when the participants realised that they had the agency to place a recommendation on the way forward for ECCE to a high policy forum—that of the Forum Education Ministers' Meeting that was scheduled for the latter part of the year.

The following recommendations from this regional ECCE workshop were presented to and endorsed by the Ministers of Education when they met in New Zealand in November 2007:

- a) that each Government work with stakeholders to develop its national policy for early childhood care and education with age parameters to be set nationally;
- b) that a national advisory body is established to advise government on early childhood matters;
- c) that a regional council is established to coordinate professional and community issues relating to early childhood in the Pacific;
- d) that early childhood curriculum, teaching pedagogies, assessment strategies, resources and teacher education are grounded in local cultures and languages; and
- e) that data for 0-8 year olds in both licensed and unlicensed centres are included in the education management information system (PIFS, 2007: 3).

The onus now rests with workshop participants, ECCE providers and advocates to continue to work with their government and other stakeholders to build a solid foundation in ECCE.

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