

***Jelalokjen* in Flux: Pitfalls and Prospects of Contextualising Teacher Training Programmes in the Marshall Islands**

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*The concept of **jelalokjen**, or education, in the Marshall Islands is constantly being redefined according to the cultural, social and political forces acting upon it. A variety of hurdles exist to codifying a socially relevant and contextualised approach to training teachers in the country, from the lack of a westernised educational legacy to the neo-colonial education policies of the US Department of Education to the possible loss of accreditation at the College of the Marshall Islands—the premier teacher training institution in the Marshalls. It is incumbent upon teacher trainers, then, to develop valid approaches to contextualising education by working towards the creation of a qualified pool of professional Marshallese educators and the adoption of realistic and appropriate education standards. In this paper, I argue that, by constructing an indigenous, yet adaptable, definition of **jelalokjen**, while at the same time liberating the education system from the constraints of its recent (and ongoing) western political-historical legacy, teacher training programmes in the Marshall Islands will ultimately serve to produce capable local instructors and reform the purpose of education from the ground up.*

Education is a universal value, though notions of its role in society differ from culture to culture. In the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), the concept of education is most clearly expressed in the word *jelalokjen*. While to date there has been no formal etymological study of Marshallese, one can divide the word into the following components: *jela* – ‘to know’, *lok* – ‘more’, *ijen* – ‘place.’ It is used in contemporary Marshallese, then, to denote ‘a place of knowledge’ or ‘a place to continuously learn’ (Abo, Bender, Capelle & DeBrum 1976; M. Peter, personal communication, January 19, 2005). But what happens if the notion of learning differs between cultures? What happens when ‘schooling’ replaces ‘knowing’? An American system of education has been imposed upon the RMI and on a culture that does not readily adopt US ideas of education as its own, yet is forced to by dint of economic-political ties. What is the solution to building a culturally appropriate transition between what has been imposed from without and what is acceptable from within?

This paper attempts to explain such a situation, and the role that teacher-training programmes can play in contextualising the education system in the RMI and adapting the definition of *jelalokjen* to current realities.

### **How did we get here?**

#### **Colonisation and its discontents**

*Jelalokjen* as a concept has traditionally been practised in the Marshall Islands within the community sphere as a way to develop skills among younger generations. For girls this meant cooking, weaving and midwifery; for boys, fishing, sailing and house- or boat-building. Regardless of specialisation, though, education was always a community activity (Kabua 2004). To take the example of the canoe: women wove the sail while men built the boat and learned how to navigate between distant atolls. This function of *jelalokjen* had one main goal: survival in a hostile environment. The modern western concept of education—which could alternately be termed ‘schooling’—appeared in the Marshalls fairly late compared with the rest of Micronesia: in the late 1850s with the arrival of Protestant missionaries. The Marshall Islands was one of the last places in the Pacific to have regular western contact, due to its remoteness, lack of natural resources, and a general reputation for unfriendliness to foreigners. As a result, its development was much slower than that of the neighbouring Micronesian islands (Hezel, 1984). While there was some interest in Christianising the islands with the first wave of American missionaries and in developing a relatively small copra industry by the Germans and Japanese, the islands were largely ignored by the colonising powers prior to World War II. Therefore, unlike the Marianas or western Caroline Islands, where successive empires (Spain, Germany and Japan) established a tradition of education as a formalised concept—taking place in a school building, training locals to be of service to the colonising power, ranking students by grade levels—no such legacy ever took root in the Marshall Islands (Hezel 1984).

The pivotal moment in modern Marshallese education—the point where *jelalokjen* transforms from a traditional and cultural method of ensuring the survival and propagation of the Marshallese to a mode of promoting the values

and standards of the newest (and most engaged) colonisers<sup>3/4</sup> comes with the ascension of the United States in Micronesia after 1946. The United Nations granted the US trusteeship over Micronesia, which became known as the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI) “in a manner that would ensure nearly absolute US political control” (Dorrance 1992: 74). Unlike British or French influence in the Pacific, wherein those powers openly colonised South Pacific Islands and proceeded to advance the basic development of social, economic and political infrastructures, the US interest was limited to military and strategic interests. As a result, there was almost no effort put into building up sectors of society, including education, that were not linked to military supremacy in the region (Dorrance 1992). If a country does not officially have colonies, then that country does not officially have to take responsibility for them; regrettably for the Marshall Islands, along with the rest of US-administered Micronesia, this meant that the United States would not hold itself accountable for the islands’ lack of development.

### **The (lack of) language issue**

One unfortunate and ever-present result of the under-development of the Marshall Islands by the United States over the last 60 years has been the consistent hurdle of language. While the official language of the region became English with the advent of the Trust Territory administration immediately following World War II (Dorrance 1992), it did so because the islands were forced to do business primarily with the United States. However, beyond training more than a handful of elite politicians and negotiators, the majority of the Marshallese population lagged behind in developing comparable English skills. The first missionaries to arrive in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century immediately set to work writing the Bible in Marshallese (Hezel 1984)—and for 120 years, that was the only Marshallese text of any significance. The written Marshallese language was not formalised until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Abo *et al.* 1976). The idea of a written Marshallese ‘literature’ is, even today, something of a fantasy. The language always has been, and will continue to be, an oral one; indeed, the current generation of Marshallese is the first to grow up with any kind of official alphabet or dictionary.

The language issue, then, presents itself as yet another stumbling block for Marshallese striving to succeed in a westernised education system: literacy is difficult in a second language—especially if one is uncomfortable communicating in that language—if one has no grasp of literacy in the first language. The issue facing education in the Marshalls now is that the government mandates a language policy intended to develop students into bilingualists, but without appropriately trained teachers. The language law states that there is to be a progressive approach to English-language instruction from 1<sup>st</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> grades, and that by 6<sup>th</sup> grade all instruction—with the obvious exception of Marshallese Language Arts—is to be conducted in English (Ministry of Education 1991). However, there are very few teachers who are capable of delivering such instruction, as evidenced by the recent Marshall Islands English Language Test for Teachers (MIELTT) wherein 33% of teachers tested passed—meaning they can read and write English at an 8<sup>th</sup> grade level (*Marshall Islands Journal* 8 Oct. 2004:3). More alarming are the corresponding results of the English Placement Test of high school seniors applying for admission to the College of the Marshall Islands, wherein 2.7% of potential freshmen—a total of 2 out of 73 entering the college in January 2005—passed at an 8<sup>th</sup> grade level (Office of Research and Planning 2005). A vicious cycle therefore ensues, as unprepared teachers cannot build the language skills of their students, who in turn will lack the necessary language skills once they become the next wave of teachers.

### **Secondary barriers (of primary importance)**

There are, of course, factors unrelated to US neo-colonial policy in the Marshall Islands that impact notions of *jelalokjen*. These factors—land ownership, the social hierarchy of traditional Marshallese society and transportation problems—become issues for the teacher trainer because of the intersection of conflicting cultural values and standards. None of these were of much concern prior to the introduction of western schooling; yet today they are as much a set of barriers to successful education and active teacher development as the lack of an educational legacy and difficulties with a second language.

Land ownership in the RMI is an integral part of Marshallese culture, and there is no concept of public space as is defined in the west (Kabua 2004). Thus, even land that contains a public school is privately owned, and the school stays open essentially as long as the landowner allows it to. In August 2003, landowners in Delap village in Majuro decided to renegotiate the lease with the Ministry of Education and, in doing so, reclaimed a number of the school's buildings as private residences. The school year was delayed for over two months, and students were either relocated to other elementary schools in the area or simply sent home (*Marshall Islands Journal* 15 Aug. 2003:17). This sort of event is sadly not isolated. More recently, a similar dispute arose on Kwajelein atoll, and high school students also began the school year late (*Marshall Islands Journal* 10 Sept. 2004:22); the main elementary school on Mili atoll was also closed at the start of the school year (*Marshall Islands Journal* 10 Sept. 2004:6). The ripple effect of such actions—closed schools, interrupted school years, time lost for both students and teachers—point to yet another instance of an unclear vision of how western ideas of schooling can or should be imposed on a culture that does not share the same values.

Also tied to the land issue is a caste system that plays a vital role in everyday life in the RMI. There are three main classes of social standing: *iroij* (landowner), *alap* (landlord), and *ri-jerbal* (laborer). The respect accorded members of the *iroij* class is paramount (Kabua 2004). In the classroom, as in Marshallese society, each student falls into one of these three categories, and rarely will a student of a lower class speak unless a student from the *iroij* has spoken first. This reluctance to participate based on cultural norms can easily frustrate the aims of western education; indeed, the notion of egalitarian education for all is still new, and it is unclear at this point how well it can be integrated into a culture still stratified by social rank.

Logistical difficulties also persist in the RMI. The country is spread out over 750,000 square miles of water in the central Pacific Ocean, and contains some of the most isolated islands and atolls in the world. A lack of transportation infrastructure means that there are only two methods of travel between atolls—by sea and by air—and only flying offers a truly viable option. But even this mode of transport is limited, as the national carrier, Air Marshall

Islands, is in possession of only two airplanes; this means that travel between district centres occurs twice a week, while flights to the more remote destinations occur twice a month, if at all. For the teacher trainer, this situation makes any type of regular visits to outer island schools practically impossible; in addition, logistical challenges eliminate any sort of observations, follow-ups, or accountability visits. Teacher training therefore necessarily takes place in Majuro, the centralised national capital. However, bringing in-service teachers to Majuro for training creates vacancies at the school on the home island, which, if filled at all, is usually done using high school graduates. Much of what happens in classrooms in the outer islands, then, might as well take place in the dark, as there is no feasible system of oversight.

### **The show cause must not go on**

One final pitfall for RMI education, and the one that poses the greatest threat to teacher training in the country, is the current status of the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI), the national teacher training college. In February 2003, CMI was placed on probation by its accrediting body, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). By July 2004, the situation had worsened and CMI was placed on ‘show cause’ status—essentially the last step prior to losing accreditation (Schmidt and Kendall 2004). What this possibility means for the future of education in the RMI is devastating; without accreditation, CMI loses all rights to US federal funds, including financial assistance for students (primarily in the form of Pell grants from the US Department of Education—\$4000 that does not require repayment allotted to low-income students). Since 95% of the student body—580 out of 611 students enrolled in Spring 2005—depends on such aid, CMI would in essence lose its student population, along with the \$2.3 million in Pell grants awarded to CMI students annually, and be forced to cease operations (Financial Aid Office 2005). As most teachers in the RMI earn an Associate of Science (AS) as their terminal degree, and considering that the vast majority of teachers attain that degree level by attending CMI, a void would exist in tertiary education. While there is a local University of the South Pacific (USP) Centre in Majuro, USP is an international institution that does not qualify students for US financial aid. USP exists in a limbo of sorts, offering a gateway for Marshallese to the rest of the Pacific community (where contextualising

education has met with much greater success) but unable to draw upon the financial resources offered by US college-style aid—to the tune of the current level of \$2 million in aid to CMI students. Subsequently, while the RMI is a member country of the USP consortium, the focus of higher education has been geared towards CMI due to the economic opportunities offered to most Marshallese by a US-accredited college, and the federal money tied to it. Therefore, unless USP or another institution fills the vacancy that would be left by the potential closure of CMI, along with comparable levels of financial aid for students, the terminal degree for the next generation of teachers could be a high school diploma.

### **How we can go where we need to**

#### **Building local capacity...**

What, then, are the solutions to not only contextualising education in the Marshall Islands, but in developing appropriate roles for teacher trainers? To begin with, the focus of teacher training must be to build local capacity, and train Marshallese to assume those positions in education currently occupied by North American expatriates. Credentialed Marshallese will in fact be culturally more qualified than their expatriate counterparts currently flooding RMI schools. There is also an implicit longevity associated with training local educators, as their investment is in their own community; expatriates, on the other hand, tend to arrive in the RMI, boost their resumes, and return to the west without having had any substantial impact on the local community.

Of course, building local capacity is not a new concept, even in the RMI. As far back as 1875, Marshallese preachers took over the role of educators in the American mission schools, and were more successful at local capacity-building there than in the other Micronesian islands (Hezel 1984). Beginning in 1951, Robert Gibson became the Director of Education for the TTPI and set about training local Micronesians to become skilled teachers. Gibson also recognized the need to limit the number of Americans working in the region (and, by extension, their cultural influence), and utilised educators from the US specifically as teacher trainers. However, Gibson's attempts at local

capacity-building came to an abrupt halt after the publication of a US government survey mission report commissioned by President Kennedy in 1963 (later known as the Solomon Report), and schools which had primarily operated under a mantle of local and regional control were “looked at in light of new policy decisions from Washington” (Solomon 1963: 130). The Solomon Report advocated an aggressive shift in the relationship with the TTPI from a strategic military perspective, resulting in more influence from the US—including more Americans in the Trust Territory’s education system. According to Peacock (1990: 140), Gibson had managed to limit the number of US personnel in TTPI education between a low of 30 in 1954/1955 to a high of 46 in 1962/1963; in the year after the Solomon Report, however, that number jumped to 105. Likewise, the amount of money pumped into the TTPI increased dramatically. In 1962, the Department of Education budget was \$775,700. The following year it jumped to \$1.23 million, and by 1965 it had reached \$4.74 million (Peacock 1990: 143). It was clear that local capacity-building was on hold, as the US made its presence known in Micronesia. More recently, though, a report issued in 2000 by the World Education Forum called for strengthening teacher-training programmes to increase local capacity, much in the same vein as Gibson a half-century earlier. And despite the fact that the report’s conclusion that “the Ministry of Education will strengthen its commitment to ensure that an efficient teacher-training programme is established” (Taafaki & Langmoir 2000, para. 10) has yet to materialise, it is clear that foreign influence, and especially that of the USA, has done little to improve the education situation in the RMI. The only viable alternative for teacher training programmes, then, is to focus on building local capacity.

### **...or building foreign capacity?**

While deliberate local capacity-building has yet to be taken seriously enough to make it into policy, that does not mean that there are not opportunities for teacher trainers. In 2003 the Ministry of Education and College of the Marshall Islands were jointly awarded a Teacher Quality Enhancement Grant from the US Department of Education. As the title of the grant implies, the purpose is to build the local pool of qualified teachers so that the minimum degree of every teacher in the RMI is at the Associate’s level. Currently there are

approximately 240 teachers (representing 40% of the RMI's teachers) whose highest level of education is high school (Ministry of Education 2003: 9). As a part of the grant, there are four teacher mentor positions that are intended to provide professional support to the outer islands in an attempt to lessen the distance between Majuro and outer island schools. However, while one would assume that such positions would best be suited for Marshallese, considering knowledge of the culture and a willingness to adapt to possibly extended periods in the outer atolls, and while the hiring of Marshallese for these positions has been the position of members on the Teacher Quality Enhancement Board representing CMI, the focus of the Ministry of Education has in fact swung in the opposite direction. Of the four positions, all are slated to be filled by North Americans (to date, only one position has been filled—by a Canadian—and the top contenders for the remaining three positions are all Americans) (Teacher Quality Enhancement Board 2004). In addition, the Ministry has requested that these teacher mentors be “CMI enhanced,” or trained by the teacher trainers at the College of the Marshall Islands (Teacher Quality Enhancement Board 2005). In an apparent return to the days immediately following the Solomon report, the notion of building local capacity has been all but forgotten while a US Department of Education grant is once again being used to train and fund the salaries of expatriates.

What is more, since the departure of the Peace Corps in 1995, two programmes have emerged, aimed at bringing American teachers and teacher trainees to the RMI to serve ten-week to one-year stints in Marshallese classrooms. Dartmouth University has a programme to allow undergraduates to teach for ten weeks during the spring semester, and another programme that places graduates in a classroom in the RMI for one school year. According to the Dartmouth website (“Marshall Islands teaching internships” n.d.), “the eventual aim of this programme is not for the United States to become a stronger presence in the country but for the Marshallese citizenry to become enabled to wean itself from dependency on the US and international community” (para. 2). It is difficult to see, however, how an increase in the number of American teachers and trainees, some who stay for less than 3 months at a time, can contribute to legitimate capacity-building among the Marshallese. Likewise, the WorldTeach programme, affiliated with Harvard University, gives North Americans the sense that they are, in fact, contributing

to the long-term development of RMI education. The programme is entirely paid for by the RMI Ministry of Education, and has been sending 30 teachers per year to the RMI since 2002 (“Year programme,” n.d.). Rather than build local capacity, what these programmes do is build foreign capacity and create a revolving door of generally unqualified teachers who contribute little, if anything, to the development of education in the RMI. While learning English from native speakers is encouraged, neither the Dartmouth nor WorldTeach programmes should be considered a permanent solution to the shortage of qualified Marshallese teachers. Rather than continue to siphon funding away from training Marshallese educators, what is needed is a plan to phase these programmes out while bolstering the local training programme, and train Marshallese educators to take the place of Dartmouth and WorldTeach teachers and teacher trainees. It is in no-one’s interest in the RMI to continue funding the foreign capacity building of American teachers at the expense of training potentially qualified Marshallese instructors.

### **Hybridising teacher education**

It is clear that the role of teacher trainers at the CMI should be to continue graduating qualified Marshallese teachers. In light of the multitude of pitfalls, however, it is equally apparent that much more needs to be done in order to contextualise such training, so that it is applicable to the needs of students in the RMI. Huffer and Qalo (2004: 108) remind us “of the need for a genuine and far-reaching contextualisation—acknowledging the relevance and applicability of indigenous cultural values in contemporary settings”. Indeed, this is one area where expatriate teacher trainers must understand that, until Marshallese teacher trainers emerge, there is only so far that outsiders can push for contextualisation in a meaningful sense. It would serve Marshall Islanders to look at the situation in Vanuatu as an example. In 2002 a number of local educators and leaders held a series of colloquia, asking the people of Vanuatu a number of questions about the role and purpose of education. The effect of such conversations is that “useful relevant contextual knowledge is likely to be generated. As a result, future policy can then be informed by local contextual insights as well” (Sanga and Niroa 2004: 14). What is sorely needed is a similar set of conversations in the RMI, with the dual objectives of finally giving voice to Marshallese perspectives on education and supporting indigenous ownership of the education system.

Until such time, though, teacher training in the RMI can and should become hybridised; that is, balancing the immediate needs of the country and its reliance on foreign (primarily American) assistance with the longer term goal of training Marshallese to not only qualify for jobs presently held by non-Marshallese, but to take possession of the process of education as well. It is necessary for the current teacher trainers to look for those opportunities that will foster contextualising education.

One prospective avenue is to use the Teacher Quality Enhancement Grant to further develop the teacher-training programme by visiting the outer island high schools, in order to bridge the gap between both the outer islands and Majuro and between the high schools and CMI. Establishing such relationships goes a long way towards breaking the isolation inherent in such disparate locations.

Another chance for contextualising teacher training lies in the creation of Marshallese language resources. By promoting the indigenous language through the development of materials for elementary school students, teacher trainers can guide prospective educators in the process of crafting culturally appropriate resources in order to promote literacy in Marshallese. Finally, it is offering a place to begin the conversation that will ultimately redefine *jelalokjen* that will likely have the greatest impact. Teacher trainers need to ask their students what the role and purpose of education is for the RMI; whether or not outer island and central island education should have the same goals; and if it is possible to develop a Marshallese paradigm of education that takes into account the needs of Marshallese culture and contextualisation while recognising that the political ties to the United States need not be a permanent barrier to educational success.

### **Conclusion**

There are a number of factors working against the concept of *jelalokjen* and Marshall Islands education in general, as well as against the contextualization of its teacher training programmes specifically. Some of these factors are historical; others are cultural; and still others stem from a lack of faith in the Marshallese people to rise to the challenge of owning their own system of

education. The role of contextualise and meaningful teacher training, then, is to help develop the process of building local capacity and identifying those Marshallese who will accept the responsibility of creating an educational system that works for the Marshall Islands. Sooner, rather than later, outsiders, and specifically Americans, must defer to the cultural imperatives of the Marshallese and encourage them to contextualise education for the benefit of the RMI.

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