

THE PRIMARY EDUCATION IMPROVEMENT PROJECT OF VANUATU: A MODEL FOR  
TEACHER DEVELOPMENT IN THE PACIFIC

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*The Ministry of Education in Vanuatu has recently completed the first phase of the Primary Education Improvement Project (PEIP), a PRIDE-funded sub-project aimed at developing a decentralised in-service training system for teachers in rural and remote schools. PEIP is 'Pacific grown' and presents a cascade model for capacity-building with 'essential elements' important for diffusion of new teaching practices in island communities. PEIP is the result of an extensive process of questioning and critical thinking that has been inclusive at all levels of the education community. The project utilises existing human resources and builds their capacity to deliver teacher professional development interventions and monitor programme quality and classroom practice. Preliminary findings reported here suggest that PEIP is making a significant and measurable impact on teaching practice and student learning. The PEIP model may be of particular interest to educators of Pacific Island countries looking for appropriate and relevant models of approach for teacher development.*

**Introduction**

The Melanesian archipelago of Vanuatu lies in the Southwest Pacific, southeast of Solomon Islands. Vanuatu has an extremely diverse cultural heritage that includes over one hundred extant vernacular language groups that are socially connected through Bislama, a form of Pidgin spoken throughout Melanesia (Tyron 1987). Entangled in this linguistic web is a struggling and under-resourced dual French-English education system—a colonial legacy that has persisted since Vanuatu's independence in 1980.

Vanuatu, along with many Pacific Island states, has embarked on a donor-funded Sector-wide Approach (SWAp) development project to improve the quality of education. SWAp development in the Pacific follows a wider trend in educational development that is underpinned by the adoption by most countries of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that have set poverty reduction targets to reduce poverty and improve human livelihoods in the least developed countries.

With the 'global consciousness' of poverty and development brought to the forefront by the MDGs have come donor-driven global policies on how best to approach poverty reduction issues. In the Education Sector, UNESCO's Education for All

(EFA) global policy framework is driving education SWAps worldwide, and is the standard litmus to measure the current state-of-play in education sectors. EFA provides a framework to improve quality, equity, and access to education, and is meant to guide countries towards meeting the MDG goals (UNESCO 2006). Most MDG signatory countries have used the EFA framework for identifying priorities for improvement. Some regions and countries have also looked inward for education sector improvement solutions, the Pacific being a good example with its re-thinking education initiatives (Pene 2002; Sanga, Niroa, Matai & Crowl 2004). This home grown discourse on educational development has allowed what Wegner (1998) refers to as “mutual engagement”—the opportunity for dialogue and reflection within a community context, facilitating the emergence of more socially and culturally relevant perspectives on reform. Vanuatu has made good strides at defining a Ni-Vanuatu perspective on education priorities through its re-thinking exercise and is now moving forward with the Vanuatu Education Sector Strategy (VESS) (Vanuatu 2006).

Whether developing countries use the EFA framework or more locally relevant thinking for reform, the question still remains: how do countries move forward? Donor funding is available for reform interventions, yet educators are struggling to make strides. In Solomon Islands, the number one key challenge and constraint for SWAp implementation is “lack of human capacity to implement the reform programme” (Solomon Islands 2005). In my view, the lack of human capacity in education systems is the number one impediment to quality improvement. How can the human capacity issue be solved?

In this paper, I report on a capacity-building intervention in Vanuatu that is making a positive impact on capacity, teaching practice and student learning outcomes. The Primary Education Improvement Project (PEIP) is a teacher in-service professional development pilot project that aims to build training capacity at the Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education (VITE), to deliver new teaching and learning innovations to rural and remote schools, and to monitor the quality and impact of these innovations on teaching practice and student outcomes. PEIP is ‘Pacific grown’, and founded on and implemented through Ni-Vanuatu thinking, including local grassroots participation. PEIP uses a cascade model of training to deliver an accredited upgrade programme for in-service primary teachers without them having to leave their communities. PEIP has emerged from a long process defined by the MoE that has been inclusive, participatory, and collaborative—from local to national level—and is now showing a promising impact on teachers and their students.

## **Background**

PEIP is founded on a solid footing laid down by Pacific educators. The Re-thinking Vanuatu Education Together discourse helped bring to bear priorities for developing the education sector (Sanga 2004). When the Pacific Regional Initiatives for Delivery of basic Education (PRIDE) funding became available, planners made considerable effort to provide the opportunity for questioning and analytical thinking; as Nirua (2004) says, “We Ni-Vanuatu educators, planners, administrators, managers, policy formulators, and advisors, must always practice”. The mutual engagement of educators helped to identify priorities, and then engaged local communities to participate in the planning and implementation process—a strategy that Niroa (2002) says is important for ownership of education. PRIDE also played an important role in keeping the project Pacific by listening to Sanga’s (2003) call for a “hands off approach” to donor funding of educational projects.

The story of PEIP began in 2004 when the MoE chose distance education as a priority strategy for improving the education sector. The MoE subsequently began an open and distance learning (ODL) initiative, first by appointing an ODL task force from among education stakeholders to begin drafting an ODL policy, and then approaching PRIDE in 2005 to fund a technical advisor to support national consultations and regional study visits, and to help identify and plan for an ODL intervention. After extensive stakeholder consultations in Port Vila and in the provinces, the Policy for Open and Distance Learning was born. The Policy addresses each sub-sector of education, and has the over-arching mandate that planning and implementation is informed through wide consultation to ensure that national programmes meet local community needs and are ultimately sustainable in the long term.

The ODL Policy initiative provided a forum for stakeholders to identify and discuss areas of need for immediate attention. One area that consistently emerged during the discourse was the need to fulfill the VITE mandate to provide in-service training for teachers. To date, capacity and resource issues have constrained the teachers’ college, and few government teachers outside the urban centres have received any professional training beyond their initial pre-service experience. Planners recognised that teachers are a keystone component in education reform, and that developing a system of in-service training to improve the quality of teaching and learning should be a priority. Taking advantage of PRIDE funding for this purpose was timely, as it allowed for testing aspects of the ODL Policy through development and piloting of a decentralised

teacher in-service delivery system. Furthermore, the results of this intervention would help the MoE gauge its capacity to implement the full scale training anticipated through VESS. If successful, such a system could have a significant impact on the overall quality of education in communities through professional development for in-service government teachers and for the reported 33% un-trained community-recruited teachers currently teaching in Vanuatu primary schools (Vanuatu 2004). From the ODL Policy discourse emerged the PEIP concept with three main goals for the intervention: language harmonisation, government teacher upgrade, and certification for un-trained community teachers. Each goal is discussed briefly below.

### **Goal 1: Language harmonisation**

Vanuatu has two education systems: one French, and one English. Historically, the two systems have operated separately, including separate training programmes at the teachers' college. Harmonisation of the dual-language system is needed to achieve the VESS mandate of national standards for teaching and learning. Therefore, PEIP will: 1) include both Anglophone and Francophone teachers in all activities; 2) develop and use bi-lingual training materials; 3) conduct all training activities in Bislama; and 4) include both Francophone and Anglophone VITE lecturers as key informants on all activities.

### **Goal 2: Upgrade for in-service government teachers**

Currently, no MoE system or programme exists for teacher upgrade in Vanuatu. If teachers are fortunate enough to participate in one-off professional development activities, there is no system to account for their participation or provide target incentives for improving their practice and thus taking ownership of the education reform process. PEIP aims to provide a framework for teacher upgrade and to demonstrate a strategy for scaling such a system nationally.

### **Goal 3: Certification of untrained teachers**

The MoE reports that 33% of all primary teachers are untrained, community-recruited teachers. There are two possible reasons for this: 1) the rural population in Vanuatu is growing faster than the MoE has capacity to accommodate the need for teachers; and 2) teachers resist postings/transfers to rural and remote areas, unless these are to their community of origin. The latter highlights the importance of socio-cultural considerations in teacher placement. Nearly all community-appointed, untrained teachers reside in their village of origin, speak the local vernacular, and have completed secondary school. Communities view un-trained teachers as valuable

assets, yet if these teachers were to attend VITE in Port Vila, the community would lose this asset for two years with no guarantees she/he would return upon completing the programme. The MoE recognises the importance of un-trained teachers to the local community, and wished to target and certificate these teachers through PEIP.

### **PEIP approach and structure**

The PEIP Project Document was the result of extensive discourse and consultation that began in 2004. Based on the document, PRIDE agreed to fund a pilot to test the vision of establishing a rural and remote teacher training system. The funding covers three broad areas: 1) a technical advisor for materials development and initial groundwork for implementation; 2) establishment of the Project Implementation Unit (PIU) with two new staff positions, and 3) teacher recruitment, workshops, and monitoring visits to schools. Supervision of the project was assigned to a Senior Education Officer with oversight from the Acting Director of Secondary, Technical, and Further Education.

The approach and structure of PEIP is dynamic. PRIDE's flexible funding structure allowed the PIU to take an action research approach to PEIP—adjusting activities and programme content based on participant feedback and on-the-ground experience. This flexibility allowed a “much more holistic and integrated way of thinking and knowing” for activities (Teasdale 2005). Though PEIP planners see teachers as pivotal change agents for success or failure of the project, the “near-peers” will often heavily influence the adopting of new innovations (Rogers 1995). Contextual (and fiscal) flexibility is crucial for teacher and community buy-in. For example, if one community sees PEIP-related changes in student behaviour as negative, flexibility allows for further support and awareness-raising to help mitigate the issue. If PEIP were static, grassroots issues may not be resolved, and the adoption of new teaching and learning practices would be threatened.

In addition to flexibility, PEIP planners felt that participating teachers must have *apparent* altruistic motivation and a willingness to take action to see the project through. I have termed this psychosocial behaviour ‘active willingness’. Planners agreed that teacher active willingness would greatly improve the chances that teachers would persevere with project requirements long enough to be comfortable with new teaching practices and see the impact on students’ behaviour.

In light of flexibility and active willingness, planners identified seven essential elements of the project—essential components of the project structure and training system, without which the project would most likely fail. Each essential element is discussed briefly below.

### **Element 1: Cascade model for decentralised capacity development**

To build training capacity, PEIP uses a cascade model of training and support. The cascade model, like a waterfall, begins high up—at the national level—and flows down to provincial, to island, and finally to school level.

The national level begins at the teachers' college with the input of one new professional development training module. The PIU facilitates the national workshop with three aims: 1) to train the lecturers on the module; 2) to review the materials for any editing; and 3) to recruit lecturers to facilitate the provincial level workshop.

The provincial level begins the upgrade programme and VITE lectures facilitate the workshop with help from the PIU. Participants at this level are 30 teachers—one trained and one untrained teacher from each of 15 schools geographically distributed across the *province*.

At the island level, provincial level participants facilitate the same workshop with help from lecturers and the PIU. Participants at this level are 30 teachers from 15 schools distributed across the *island*.

At the school level, provincial and island level participants facilitate the workshops and training in their school and in nearby schools not yet trained. Following workshops at each level, teachers return to their schools to carry out programme requirements.

The cascade model creates a training ground for teacher trainers. Quality is maintained through continued support and monitoring of practice. A new cycle begins with the input of new training materials.

### **Element 2: Training modules support VESS and the cascade model**

At the core of PEIP are four sequential training modules. Each module covers teacher development in four competency areas identified through VESS: learner-centred instruction (LCI), assessment and LCI, literacy, and numeracy. Module activities are participatory and contain notes to facilitators to support the cascade delivery. Each

module provides a framework to support the local context and builds on concepts learned in the previous module. Modules are bilingual, collaboratively developed (PIU, VITE, and technical advisors), and use Ni-Vanuatu examples and reference throughout. Modules are tested and revised at the national level workshops before being deployed to the provincial level.

### **Element 3: Professional development upgrade programme**

PEIP tests a two-year decentralised professional development upgrade programme for experienced government and untrained in-service teachers in Anglophone and Francophone primary schools. Successful government teachers will earn a new teacher trainer classification. Successful untrained teachers will earn government certification. Programme requirements include: workshop participation, lesson plan development, classroom observations, a daily journal of activities, awareness-raising and mentoring. Observation and monitoring visits (see below) confirm quality assurance and the fulfillment of programme requirements.

### **Element 4: Specific criteria for school selection**

Prior to teacher recruitment, the PIU conducted comprehensive mapping and data collection exercises for all 64 schools in the pilot province (see below). Provincial level schools were preliminarily screened based on three main criteria: 1) geographic centrality, 2) language of instruction, and 3) presence of untrained teachers. The PIU limited the provincial level cohort to 30 participants from 15 schools, geographically and linguistically representative of the province.

### **Element 5: Direct recruitment of participating teachers**

A small PIU team visited schools, interviewed all teachers, and selected one trained and one untrained teacher from each of 15 schools. Direct recruitment by the PIU aimed to ensure selection of teachers exhibiting active willingness and motivation towards positive education reform. School visits for recruitment also allowed the team to confirm school data and build a more accurate profile of each school.

### **Element 6: Incentives for participants and community**

Support incentives for participants and the local community are a part of PEIP. Participants receive an allowance plus expenses for attending workshops. Provincial and island workshops compensate secondary schools for their services, including food, accommodation, venue and transport. PEIP makes a priority of supporting local enterprise in and around the workshop venue. Nearby residents are invited to

provide dinner for purchase and make available a small market at the workshop venue that participants can take advantage of, using their allowance. Local crafts, such as pandanas baskets, are purchased from the communities as tokens to participants. Incentives, both at the community and teacher level, foster cohesive involvement for the project and positive regard towards the MoE.

#### **Element 7: Mentorship and awareness-raising**

Mentorship and awareness-raising are an important part of PEIP. The trained and untrained teacher team must mentor and support one another in all activities. Mentoring activities include reviewing lesson plans, classroom observations, and working together to raise project awareness in the community.

#### **Element 8: Observation and monitoring visits**

According to Rogers, “observability of an innovation, as perceived by members of a social system, is positively related to its rate of adoption” (Rogers 1995). Observation and monitoring visits to schools are seen as essential for teachers to adopt programme innovations. The visits are also an important support and awareness-raising mechanism. Following the provincial workshop, PIU and VITE staff visit each participating school to formally observe teachers teaching, to monitor their progress, and to raise school and community awareness of the project. Project and programme impact indicators are also monitored during the visits. School inspectors and zone curriculum advisors (ZCAs) are included in all training activities for awareness, expanding their skills for supporting monitoring, and maintaining programme quality.

#### **Pilot province selection**

Penama Province was chosen as the pilot province for a number of reasons. First, its three islands—Ambae, Maewo and Pentecost—are representative of non-urban islands in Vanuatu. All three islands are quite large and rugged. Roads are generally poor, and ground and boat transport is infrequent and expensive. Many communities are accessible only on foot, and some children walk more than five kilometres to school. Inter-island air service is available, but expensive and limited. Inter-island cargo steamers provide reliable service to some areas. Telephone communication is sparse, and mobile service is available only in East Ambae. Most communities have phone service within walking distance, but the lines can be unreliable, calls expensive, and maintenance slow. Internet service is available to the public in East Ambae, but was not working when we visited. Provincial offices in East Ambae reportedly have slow and unreliable email service.



The second reason for choosing Penama was the availability of training support from a separate MoE education project that places teacher trainer Peace Corps volunteers in Penama. Though the project targets Anglophone schools and literacy, the MoE and PEIP planners felt the volunteers could integrate some PEIP activities into their duties, helping to support teachers as they began practising new teaching and learning methods. An agreement was subsequently reached between the MoE and the Peace Corps to support this idea, and volunteers are now helping PEIP in local schools.

### **Project management and implementation**

The implementation and management strategy for PEIP consists of four parts: 1) appoint one MoE officer to directly oversee the project PIU; 2) engage a technical advisor as team leader to provide leadership in planning, awareness-raising, initial project management and training; 3) hire a post-graduate-qualified and experienced Ni-Vanuatu *educator* as project manager to counterpart with the TA to ensure continued focus on teaching and learning; and 4) gain full advantage of the MoE thinking by initially housing the PIU at the Department of Education at the onset of the project, and then physically move the PIU to VITE once the focus of the project shifted from policy and planning to activities and monitoring. The move would signal the establishment of the VITE In-service Unit, taking advantage of the staff's educational expertise.

### **Programme content**

PEIP delivers a two-year distance education programme. The general requirements for participants are: 1) four face-to-face workshops; 2) practicum observations; 3) training and mentorship; and 4) keeping a portfolio of work including lesson plans, teaching records, awareness-raising reports, observation reports, and a process journal. Apart from travelling to workshops, teachers complete the programme at their schools.

VESS articulation of teacher competencies informed the respective workshop modules content: Learner-centred instruction (LCI), assessment and LCI, literacy, and numeracy. The technical advisor, in collaboration with VITE lecturers, prepared the LCI and assessment modules. At the time of writing, VITE lecturers are leading the development of the latter modules. (PEIP is providing stipends for this work.) Each module prepares participants to return to their schools and practise new methods and prepare for practicum observations. Each participant must have four observations,

three informal and one formal, per module. During the observation and monitoring visits, teachers are observed teaching, and portfolio content and quality are assessed. Staff also meet with the school committee and community members for awareness-raising and feedback.

### **Preliminary findings and impact**

The PEIP Pilot will conclude in August 2009. At the time of writing, Cycle 1—national, provincial, island, local and school—of the cascade had been completed, as well as the national and provincial levels Cycle 2. Cycle 1 observations and monitoring visits to all provincial level schools had also been completed. Findings reported here are from Cycle 2 provincial workshop evaluations, participant interviews, participant process journal entries, observation and monitoring visit reports, and community member testimonials.

The PEIP project structure is working well. All project rollout activities to date have been carried out successfully and on time (Vanuatu MoE 2007a). PEIP is making a significant positive impact on classroom practice, training capacity, and community regard for MoE activities (Vanuatu MoE 2007b.) Most teachers at the provincial level are practising LCI regularly and improving their LCI-related skills. Most trained teachers have facilitated island level workshops. Many trained and untrained teachers have conducted school level training and conducted community awareness-raising activities. PEIP is making a positive impact on students, with teachers reporting better academic performance and improved gender-related social behaviour.

### **Sustainability and scaling**

Readers may have questions regarding sustainability and scaling of the in-service system piloted by PEIP. I see the PEIP process as a long-term process and, during the MDG years (and potentially beyond), donor support will be needed but will diminish as training and accountability capacity in the islands improves. Scaling the project will be relatively straightforward, as the current pilot is building training and quality assurance capacity in the PIU, VITE, ZCAs, inspectors, and in the island teachers who will be used to deliver training and monitor the programme in other provinces. Furthermore, the cycle system of the cascade model provides easy identification of costs, resource input points, and work plan timing—helping to streamline national expansion.

I anticipate that donor funding will be needed for the long term for teacher professional development in the islands. However, the cascade model system will ultimately reduce costs as the PEIP system builds capacity, becomes more integrated in MoE systems, and quality assurance mechanisms are in place and working. The development and availability of information and communication technology capacity will also reduce costs. The PEIP system, if the essential elements are maintained, will identify and build skills in competent and reliable trainers who reside in the islands. As new content arises through VESS, mobilisation of trainers will require fewer resources, and the burden on VITE to deliver teacher training will be reduced.

## Conclusion

This paper reports on the Primary Education Improvement Project underway in Vanuatu. PEIP is Pacific grown, flexible, and promotes questioning and critical thinking through dialogue and discourse at all levels of the education sector. The project provides a cascade model and essential elements for capacity-building and quality assurance that have important implications for planning and implementing education SWApS. PEIP is showing a positive impact on teaching and learning and community regard for MoE activities. The MoE has adopted PEIP, and has secured EU funding to expand to all provinces (personal communication). It will be interesting to follow the project over the next few years.

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