

THE BASICS OF LEARNING: LITERACY AND NUMERACY IN THE PACIFIC

INTRODUCTION

A LITERATE AND NUMERATE SOCIETY

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A literate and numerate society with citizens well versed in the ins and outs of their indigenous/local cultures and languages, as well as the required life skills to function effectively at home, at school, in the community, nationally and in a rapidly globalising world—this is the ideal picture that Pacific governments and community leaders envisage for their people, for their society, for their country. And yet, sadly, the reality indicates that levels of literacy and numeracy are under threat in Pacific Island countries (PICs), contributing to significant numbers of Pacific students underachieving in English and mathematics.

Literacy and numeracy are contested terms. They mean different things in different contexts at different times. Traditionally, literacy was viewed as the ability to read (and write) although the term used then was ‘reading’, not ‘literacy’. Before the 1970s, the term literacy was used in relation to programmes of non-formal instruction, particularly in relation to adults who were deemed illiterate, and was never used as a ‘formal educational ideal’ (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003: 4). Today, however, literacy permeates formal educational discourse and has become central to educational planning, policy and practice, and also to curriculum development. Similarly, the term numeracy was synonymous with mathematical ability but now it is generally understood ‘as a competence in interpreting and using numbers in daily life, within the home, employment and society’ (Brown, 2005: ix).

Fashionable offshoots of literacy include multi-literacies, bi-literacy, critical literacy, cultural literacy, adult literacy, vernacular literacy, media literacy and information literacy. Vernacular literacy and information literacy are increasingly gaining prominence in the Pacific region, the former because of its socio-cultural significance and the latter for its economic and educational importance.

Pacific vision for education

As used in this book, the term ‘the Pacific region’ includes the fourteen politically independent countries that have membership in the Pacific Islands Forum (more commonly known as the Forum): Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia

(FSM), Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Tokelau is included as the fifteenth country—it is in the process of achieving self-government in free association with New Zealand.

The Forum Ministers for Education met in New Zealand in May 2001, as directed by Forum leaders of government at their meeting in Palau in November 1999, to consider issues of human resource development, particularly the delivery of basic education in the Pacific region. The *Forum Basic Education Action Plan (FBEAP)*, developed at this meeting, has the following as the vision and goals for education in the Pacific:

Vision

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.

Goals

To achieve universal and equitable educational participation and achievement. To ensure access and equity and improve quality and outcomes. (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2001: 1-2)

The Ministers for Education noted, amongst other things, that weaknesses in education systems include low basic literacy and numeracy achievements. While basic education means different things in different contexts, the Forum Ministers for Education have identified basic education as all educational provision: early

childhood education, primary education, secondary education, and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in both the formal and non-formal sectors—everything except tertiary and adult education.

Implicit in the vision and goals as articulated by Pacific Ministers for Education is the need to get the basics done properly—at all levels of schooling, but particularly in the early years of schooling. Literacy and numeracy are inextricably intertwined at all levels of school curricula. And it is important that children and youths are grounded well in the skills and knowledge that will enable them to succeed at each level, including the functional mastery of reading and writing, and competency in using numbers.

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 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 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 through the development of an online resource centre (see www.paddle.usp.ac.fj).

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 <http://www.usp.ac.fj/pride>

In relation to literacy and numeracy, the PRIDE Project Benchmarks (see www.usp.ac.fj/pride), a key document that contains 11 benchmarks used to review national education strategic plans, articulates benchmark 2 as 'skills for life and work locally, regionally, and globally'. The principle states:

The Plan contains strategies for the systematic teaching and learning of literacy, numeracy, ICT, vernacular and English languages, together with life and work preparation skills, within a balanced curriculum framework, to equip all students to take their place, with ease and confidence, in their local communities, regional context, and global world (The PRIDE Project, 2007:2).

Indicators include:

- Clear statements of curriculum outcomes in the teaching and learning of literacy, numeracy, and vernacular and English languages across all levels and integrated across all learning areas.
- Clear statement on strategies for the development of life and work preparation skills, including TVET programs.
- Clear statement of promotion and incorporation of information literacy across the curriculum and supported by properly equipped and resourced libraries and learning centres to ensure access to and use of quality information.
- Clear statement on the integration of ICT in teaching and learning. (The PRIDE Project, 2007: 2)

Many Pacific countries have placed an emphasis on a proper grounding in literacy (in both English and the vernacular) and numeracy (or mathematics) in their national education plans and/or curriculum frameworks. Two examples will suffice. In the Cook Islands, one of the ten strategic directions in the Cook Islands Ministry of Education five-year strategic plan (2002-2006) is 'strengthening literacy and numeracy, particularly at pre-school and primary level' by developing, testing, using and monitoring strategies for effective learning (Cook Islands Ministry of Education, 2002: 11). Similarly, in Palau, priority number one has been identified as: 'Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills' (Palau Ministry of Education, 2003: 12).

The fifth PRIDE regional workshop

To illustrate the importance placed on the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy the PRIDE Project Steering Committee, made up of directors or permanent secretaries of education from its 15 participating countries and representatives from donor agencies, the Forum Secretariat, the University of the South Pacific (USP) and NGOs, at its 2005 meeting endorsed literacy and numeracy as a regional workshop topic for the following year.

The 5th PRIDE Project regional workshop was held in Tonga in May 2006. It was attended by senior curriculum and teacher professional development officers responsible for curriculum development and delivery in the fields of literacy (both English and vernacular) and mathematics at the primary level from 15 Pacific countries.

The aim of the workshop was to engage participants in the process of reconceptualising the way literacy (both English and vernacular) and numeracy is thought about and practised in their own country, and in the region. Part of the process required reflecting on global developments in these areas and examining the implications for the Pacific. The notion of syncretising the best of the contemporary global with the best of the local was central to the workshop.

Specifically, the workshop:

- explored contemporary global thinking about literacy and numeracy
- examined the implications of these new ideas for the Pacific
- reconceptualised the way literacy and numeracy are thought about and practised in schools, especially from the perspective of local cultures, languages and epistemologies
- discussed literacy and numeracy issues facing curriculum developers and teachers and identified ways to deepen their awareness and understanding of contemporary theorising in these areas
- recommended strategies that will help to revitalise the development and delivery of literacy and numeracy programmes in each country.

References

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