

Preface: Putting Education in (its) Place

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This book, *Contextualizing Pacific Education*, aims to highlight, promote, and extend the understanding of education in “context” or “place.” The discussions about context-based education found here have developed in response to the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) initiatives or NCLB-like initiatives that have been driving educational reform in the state of Hawaii and the U.S.-affiliated Pacific: the three territories—American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI); and the Freely Associated States—the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM: Kosrae, Pohnpei, Chuuk, and Yap), and the Republic of Palau. This place we call the Pacific lies within Oceania, a richly and diversely unique geographical, cultural, and linguistic region of the world. The authors, all Pacific educators, write in response to NCLB from their sense of place.

NCLB intends to leave no child behind. This federal law is adamant about high expectations and measurable goals that give every child a chance to improve their educational outcomes. NCLB also insists on states using proven educational practices based on research that has met certain criteria, as determined by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and posted on their website, *What Works Clearinghouse* (<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>). The state of Hawaii and the territories are accountable to NCLB in different ways.

The U.S. Department of the Interior Office of Insular Affairs has joint oversight responsibilities for the Compact Agreements currently operating in the FSM and the RMI, and education is one of their mandates. A similar stance to NCLB education initiatives is taken in these Pacific entities with an emphasis on accountability and U.S. research-based practices.

More specifically, NCLB reform calls for standards-based instruction and assessment, accountability and continuous improvement in reading and academic achievement, and highly qualified teachers for all students. Its design is comprehensive and targets the reading and academic achievement of all students, especially English language learners (ELLs). In the Pacific region, ELLs make up a very large portion of the student population, but these students are also, and perhaps more importantly, bilingual learners. NCLB’s attention to ELLs is laudable, especially in its goal to close the achievement gap between ELLs and native speakers of English. However, it represents a major shift from a focus on bilingual education to a focus on learning (in) English. This puts much of the region in the tenuous position of adopting “best practices” that are designed for a context and desire very different from that of the indigenous Pacific. In response, we seek “to reclaim the validity and legitimacy of our own language, knowledge and culture; to position our own ways of knowing as being relevant and significant in the ‘elite’ knowledge production and reproduction ‘factories’” (Smith, 2003, p. 4).

While we do not argue with the intention of NCLB and NCLB-like initiatives, we do raise concerns about the “fit” of such

reforms based on mainland research for schools in the Pacific, our educational context or place. With this in mind, we question the impact of reforms that do not attend to the unique cultural ways of learning and knowing in the indigenous Pacific. We believe that to give every Pacific child the opportunity to improve their educational outcomes, we need to contextualize the education in which they participate. In other words, we want to put education in (its) place—we want Pacific ways of knowing and doing woven into our children’s education.

Historical retellings speak to much European, Asian, and American influence in education in the Pacific region (Hezel, 1984; Heine & Chutaro, 2003). Colonizing processes and introduced education systems, especially those funded by external aid, continually rejected the indigenous language and culture in favor of their own, as local languages and knowledge were thought to hold back the educational and social progress of Pacific islanders. This ideology lingers today, even from within. Local languages that hold knowledge systems and cultural practices that are integral to daily life in the islands were weakened, as a result of outside influence and interference. Schools and educational systems in this part of the Pacific are American by design and content, leaving little room for contextualizing or localizing education. Pacific schools are struggling, and students are being left behind. Contextualizing education in the Pacific may just have the potential needed to change this situation.

While Pacific Islanders have been marginalized through legislation and educational practices over time, many are

implicated in their own hegemonic positioning. They send their children to English medium schools to enhance their knowledge base, insisting that “our children need to learn English for their future” (Low, Penland, & Heine, 2005, p. 5), believing the local language and all the knowledge it holds should not be the language of formal schooling. However, there are other Pacific Islanders who have not always been compliant or passive recipients of these English medium policies and practices.

In 2001, a colloquium on rethinking Pacific education, sponsored by the New Zealand government, was held at the University of the South Pacific (USP). Attended by indigenous educators from Pacific countries north and south of the equator, a dialogic exchange began that drew attention to

a process of interrogating the values, assumptions, and beliefs underlying formal education and development. The colloquium began with the assumption that over 30 years of extensive reforms in Pacific education and significant investment by the national government and donor agencies have largely failed to provide the quality human resources needed to achieve the development goal. (Heine, 2001)

This spurred an ongoing exchange, as Pacific educators continued to take more ownership of the formal education process in their islands. The forming of organizations (e.g., the Commission on Education in Micronesia) and hosting of

conferences around "rethinking Pacific education" themes in Micronesia, viewed as necessary and vital aspects of the education conversation in the Pacific, are taking hold. Slowly and steadily, new educational pathways are being founded on Pacific values, knowledge, and languages in the Pacific region—pathways that are working towards locally determined visions and goals within their own Pacific education systems. It is a momentum nurtured by the belief that indigenous peoples can and should reclaim and revalue their languages and cultures—their ways of *knowing*, *doing*, and *saying*—within the formal education system that educates their children.

Overview

In 2007–2008, Pacific Resources for Education and Learning's (PREL's) Pacific Comprehensive Center (PCC) hosted a key outreach activity—the NCLB Forum and the Pacific Webinar Series. A network *for* Pacific educators *by* Pacific educators, the webinars provided an opportunity for dialogue and exchange that worked to establish culturally relevant pathways for contextualized responses to NCLB initiatives, one step at a time. The NCLB Forum and the Pacific webinars aimed to: (a) raise awareness of the issues and challenges facing education in the US-affiliated Pacific, and (b) explore best practices supported by NCLB from a local perspective. At the heart of this discussion was, and continues to be, the belief that learning must be meaningful and relevant to those involved in the educational process.

Through the webinar exchanges, state educational agencies (SEAs) were encouraged to rethink their responses to NCLB

imperatives and include more of the unique values, attitudes, ways of learning, and skills of the various communities in which Pacific children are educated. The PCC webinar series' Expert Panel of the Pacific (EPP) are the authors of the chapters of this book. They include Dr. Salusalumalo Hunkin-Finau of American Samoa; Ms. Joann Sebastian Morris, formerly of Hawaii and now in Washington, D.C.; Ms. Evelyn Joseph of the Republic of Marshall Islands; Dr. Elizabeth Rechebei of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands; and Mr. Masa-Aki Emesiochl of the Republic of Palau. All have long been advocates for Pacific children and their right to learn relevant content in culturally appropriate ways. Each author has chosen a specific topic to explore "global" educational best practices and how they can be redesigned for "local" systems and schools, in support of sustainable and meaningful learning for all children. The dialogic exchange among Pacific educators over the last 15 months is collected here.

Salu Hunkin-Finau, a long-time advocate of a place for the Samoan language and culture in education, begins the book with a critical questioning and contesting of wider oppressive structures in Pacific education and uses the fragile ecosystem of the *taufusi* as a metaphor for education in American Samoa, claiming education has become unbalanced. The heavy "demands and pressures" of western ideas and values resulting from primarily learning English and learning in English, are disrupting an equilibrium of learning (and what is learned) in the bilingual context of American Samoa. She asks what the cost is and who benefits from this imbalance. Writing with a sense of urgency, she calls for a change in the language policy

in education in American Samoa as a reclaiming and revaluing of all that is Samoan—a calling for the education system to be put in its place. Without place and the community involvement inherent within, she argues that education and schools will continue to yield to external pressures and conform to the dominant educational culture (that is western), leaving important cultural values, knowledge, and language outside of the very education system that prepares Pacific children and their societies for their future.

Joann Morris and Evelyn Joseph remind us that NCLB urges increased parental/stakeholder participation in education. Joann Morris draws on her work with the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Office of Insular Affairs in the FSM and RMI. She begins with a discussion about accountability via test scores, as this has been a major criticism of NCLB and NCLB-like initiatives. Elaborating on this, she reminds us that although NCLB’s insistence of the use of data may represent a foreign system of accountability, Pacific jurisdictions are improving in this approach. She then goes on to discuss the notion of accountability via community education and offers a view of accountability that highlights the societal aspects of education that may be more aligned with the Pacific context. She offers several examples of where community engagement with and ownership of the education that takes place in Micronesian schools is viewed as a way of enhancing the community’s and society’s future. In these examples, there is strong leadership, both within the school and from the community. She contends that the capacity of schools to excel is directly linked to capacity building initiatives with parents, the general public, and political leaders at all levels. She maintains that

communities are underutilized assets whose interest in their children’s education can be enlivened. Involving them in ways that honor local culture, traditions, and values, she concludes, will increase their participation and ultimately benefit the education of their children.

Evelyn Joseph draws on her field-based experiences to describe a system of support that has resulted in effective, values-based parent/teacher partnerships and a strong collaborative school/community leadership that utilizes local cultural practices to empower change. Communal ways of making agreements—the coming together, taking on issues as a group, and making agreements on what to do collectively and collaboratively—is making a difference with parental involvement in schools. She embeds the cultural practice of “Koba Marog” —the collective sharing of skills, expertise, and experience—into the Cluster Model structure as a way to plan and problem-solve. It’s working, not only within grade clusters and but also at the school level, because it honors a valued cultural practice to get the work done. This is one of a number of contextualized practices that is making a difference in the education of RMI children.

Elizabeth Rechebei provides a critical perspective on NCLB notions of accountability and assessment. She calls for a rethinking of these ideas for the Pacific, making them more meaningful, relevant, and useful for those who take account of, and are held accountable for, creating the conditions for learning in which every Pacific child can succeed. She presents the reader with an historic account that reminds us to think carefully about the choices we make in education and to heed

the tendency to accept external monies and programs tied to someone else's agenda that may not reflect the educational priorities of remote island communities. In her chapter, she argues,

NCLB-like initiatives must be contextualized to reflect the realities, needs, priorities and values of indigenous peoples, while taking into account the changing dynamics of the global community. A buy-in on the importance of accountability and appropriate and fair assessment of student achievement and how it gets done, and all its accompanying requirements by our leaders and the whole community, is critical.

She offers a number of possible contextualized approaches to accountability and assessment—approaches that are place-based, valuing the languages, cultures, and ways of being Pacific. While supporting the need to be accountable through assessment, she asks us to rethink what that could look like in our Pacific communities. Engaged in that rethinking, we begin to see the possibilities of approaches that are relevant, meaningful, and sustainable. This, she claims, is what is needed in the Pacific.

Masa-Aki Emesiochl invites further discussion on “issues of context and how to contextualize best practices related to school leadership development,” exploring ways to make leadership more relevant and culturally appropriate in the Pacific. The challenging issue is how effective school

leadership can be defined in the context of contemporary Pacific island society with the influx of diversity of values and beliefs that is impacting the traditional core values and beliefs of school and community leaders. He argues that it is critical to identify promising practices that support principals in their roles as managers and instructional leaders for teachers of Pacific island students still struggling to succeed in school within the context where learning takes place.

Putting Pacific Education in (its) Place

In fall 2007, the EPP raised issues and challenges for Pacific educators. In spring 2008, they explored how SEAs can benefit from NCLB directives while ensuring they address the values and ways of Pacific cultures. The webinar series has become a vital network for Pacific educators to share and learn together how to create sustainable and meaningful education systems in which all Pacific children have the potential to succeed. The 2007–2008 webinar series led to the collection of papers in this book by the authors who have enriched and been enriched by such a dialogic exchange.

All the contributors to this book are personally concerned with, and committed to, *putting education in (its) place*—giving relevance and meaning to where education occurs. Moreover, all the contributors argue that context-based initiatives are essential if we are to provide Pacific children the opportunities they deserve to improve their educational outcomes. Many have supported us throughout this journey. A number of respondents to our work have offered us much to reflect on and

encouraged us with an *esprit de corps* that continues to build momentum. They include Maori scholar, Dr. Graham Smith; the RMI Secretary of Education, Ms. Biram Stege; the National FSM Chief of Basic Education and Accreditation, Mr. Burnis Danis; and, a number of parents and principals in the FSM who thought carefully about our ideas and offered their insight and anticipated challenges. We are also grateful for all of those who joined our conversations via the forum and webinars. It will take all of us working together to change the way things are. In fact, we challenge every Pacific educator to come together and *put education in (its) place*.

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