Early childhood care and education in the Pacific: reflections of our past, our present and our future

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Introduction

This chapter begins with an overview of some historical landmarks in the history of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in the Pacific region over the last thirty years. It goes on to highlight some of the relatively recent international initiatives that have pushed ECCE to prominence on the global agenda and have led to many achievements in the Pacific region. Finally, this chapter raises some questions in relation to these achievements and presents some of the challenges facing ECCE practitioners in the Pacific region today.

First regional ECCE meeting: Suva 1980

Pre-schools, or early childhood education programmes—the more widely used term nowadays to refer to a variety of early education programmes for the 0 – 8 year-olds—have been in existence in the Pacific Islands since the 1960s (although
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Fiji recorded its first kindergartens as having started in the 1930s. Not much was known about these programmes until August 1980, when the first gathering of 30 pre-school/early childhood educators from the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Palau, Pohnpei, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Western Samoa, New Zealand and Australia was held in Suva, Fiji.

The purpose of the workshop was to bring together people active in ECCE to share their stories and aspirations, focus their attention on ECCE in their own and neighbouring countries, and identify issues of common interest and concern, as well as common problems.

The organisers of the meeting were aware of the long and painful struggle, the frustration and the isolation that many of the educators from these small island states were facing, and funds were sought to support this initial meeting. The workshop was co-ordinated by the YWCA’s South Pacific Area Office, and the University of the South Pacific’s (USP’s) Extension Services, Continuing Education and Institute of Education. Funding support came from the Nederlands Comite Voor Kinderpostzegels, a non-government agency in the Netherlands, and the Australian Council of Churches.

Why the 1980 workshop was important: cultural issues

The workshop was the first of its kind for Pacific Island people involved in pre-school education. It showed that Pacific early childhood educators were concerned about what was happening in pre-schools and were asking questions. The topics generated much enthusiasm and interest amongst the delegates, who spoke openly and passionately about their work, and at the same time learned much from one another. The discussions delved into issues such as the relevance of child developmental theories for Pacific Island people; the place of culture, values and traditions in pre-school education; how to deal with western as well as traditional practices; and the lack of studies and research on Pacific Island children, their families and situations and the challenges this lack posed for early childhood educators. The concerns raised are described in the sections that follow.
(a) Imported programmes in Pacific pre-schools

Participants remarked that most of their early childhood programmes were based on models mainly from Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, and noted the major influence that western child developmental theories were having on these pre-school programmes. Although the participants respected the knowledge and research on children derived from the developmental theories of Piaget, Eriksson, Montessori and others, little was known about how these theories related to the Pacific situation, to Pacific children’s development, and whether the programmes based on them were appropriate for Pacific children or were in harmony with the cultural and traditional values of the people whose children were attending the centres. Furthermore, participants observed that Pacific pre-schools would need to have different programmes in view of the different lifestyles and social contexts that their children represented.

(b) Traditional values and change

The participants identified a range of traditional cultural values and practices: family values and communal hierarchical values; the status of chiefs versus commoners, with some people in the community having more rights than others; the extended family and decision-making, with males holding the dominant role; and male and female roles in general. Religion was viewed as very important in almost all countries. Shaming children to discourage anti-social behaviour was a popular way of discipline.

The participants also discussed how all these were affected by emerging changes. While family solidarity and interdependence were highlighted as important, and children who lived in villages were members of extended families and were used to being part of a large social group, at the same time individuality was also emerging as a common trend. Clan membership was valued, while multiculturalism was also identified as respected among communities. Respect for elders, chiefs and parents, as well as for culture and language, was seen as highly important for Pacific people. Cooperation, sharing and encouraging self-reliance, and equal opportunities and rights were noted in some instances. Pre-school teachers were adopting many of
the new child development theories in their centres and mentioned that treating all children as equal was important for them, given the hierarchical chiefly structure that some children represented.

The participants agreed that traditional and cultural values differed greatly amongst people. However, it was vital that teachers learned about their own traditional patterns of child rearing and cultural values first, in order to be able to develop the most appropriate programmes for the children in their schools. As participants grappled with child psychology and cultural issues they came up with questions such as: ‘Are we putting enough emphasis on our own cultures and traditions, which emphasise sharing and group responsibility? Are we preparing our children for change by helping them to ask questions, speak in groups and work individually on a task? How can we deal with the tensions that arise between these two approaches?’ (USP Printing Unit, 1980).

Why the 1980 workshop was important: ECCE data

The 1980 workshop was important for another reason; it was the first time that data about ECCE in the Pacific was gathered and documented. The participants shared information about the ECCE situation in their own country and built up a regional picture. It was found that, in 1980, over 12,000 children were recorded as being enrolled in about 500 currently operating pre-school centres, with one third operating in towns or urban areas. Most programmes catered for three to five-year-olds, except in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea where they catered for three to seven-year-olds. (Primary schools in these two countries started at seven or eight years of age.)

Since the Pacific pre-school education programmes had been heavily influenced by western values and standards, they varied from highly organised, structured timetables to casual free play situations. Sessions were mostly of half-day duration and were held in village centres, churches, homes, health clinics or specially built facilities. The type of care/education also varied; there were kindergartens, play centres, child-minding facilities, prep classes, day-care centres, Head Start (United States of American territories), pre-schools and schools of nine (Fiji).
Most governments were seen as not taking enough interest in pre-schools. However, where they were involved, they generally licensed centres and provided some form of supervision. In the Cook Islands and Nauru, kindergartens and preparatory classes were integrated into the education systems and, in Micronesia, Head Start programmes operated under a US federal grant. Non-government organisations (e.g., the YWCA), religious bodies and parent committees were the backbone of the Pacific pre-school movement.

The use of local vernacular or mother tongue languages was common throughout. Little emphasis was placed on learning English in most of Polynesia and Micronesia, although English was occasionally introduced through songs and finger plays. In Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu, emphasis was placed on using English because of the many local languages spoken and the high proportion of children from English speaking families. Pacific teachers were very aware of the need to enhance traditional values, develop children's language abilities, and stimulate mental development, as well as encourage the involvement of parents and community elders in the pre-school centres.

Problems identified at the 1980 workshop

The following common problems were identified at the 1980 workshop, most of them relating to lack of finance:

• low wages for the teachers, or they worked as volunteers
• high cost of equipment, especially if not available locally
• difficulty in collecting fees from parents
• burdensome fund-raising activities to meet costs
• limited training opportunities for teachers in the islands.

Recommendations from the 1980 workshop

The findings from the workshop were used to formulate seven recommendations. These became the basis for discussions with development partners and spearheaded many regional initiatives and achievements, which are described below.
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It was recommended that:

- people who are active in pre-schools be brought together to share programmes, information and common problems
- the use of local, inexpensive materials be encouraged, and people involved in ECCE be trained in how to make teaching aids
- written materials for Pacific Island pre-school teachers be created and shared
- the writing of children’s books, using the writers’ own Pacific backgrounds and languages, be encouraged
- more learning about child development patterns in the South Pacific take place
- a Pacific Pre-school Teacher Training Course be established
- a regional Pre-school Council be established.

Achievements after the 1980 workshop

One of the first achievements after the 1980 workshop was the establishment of the Pacific Pre-school Council, which was tasked to follow up on the workshop recommendations and to actively support the member countries. The Council has met four times since its inception (1985 in Fiji, 1987 in Tonga, 1990 in Vanuatu and 1995 in Samoa). In each of the Council meetings members provided country updates as well as progress in areas of regional teacher training and their use of the ECCE resources they had developed. Since the UNICEF funding for the non-formal ECCE programme run by the Continuing Education section of USP ceased in 1997, Fiji has been the only country in the region to pay its registration fee to the Council. In 2000, the Council became an alliance member of the World Forum and since then has maintained its involvement and participation in World Forum initiatives.

Fulfilling another recommendation, the Pacific Pre-school Certificate Course at USP’s Continuing Education was developed in 1982, followed in 1997 by the USP Diploma Course in ECE and in 2006 by the BEd in ECE. The emphasis in these endeavours was on creating Pacific courses, tailored to the Pacific context of ECCE.
A non-formal ECCE project (1992 – 1997), funded by UNICEF, with USP’s Continuing Education Programme was developed to strengthen the national ECCE associations in the region in their organisational structure and advocacy through the production of materials, including a trainer’s manual, a toy-making handbook, brochures and posters, plays and videos for advocacy and training, newsletters and supporting Pacific regional and in-country training workshops.

Other major achievements were the Basic Education Life Skills (BELS) Regional Project (1993 – 2001), the Pacific Islands Forum Basic Education Action Plan (FBEAP) and the Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of Basic Education (PRIDE) Project – April 2004. These were all funded by international organisations and need to be seen against the backdrop of what was happening globally.

**Global initiatives: 1979 to the present**

At the same time that the ECCE movement was gaining momentum in the Pacific, there were several global initiatives that influenced much of what was happening in this region. Some of the key global conventions and initiatives were:

- 1979: the International Year of the Child
- 1990: the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) (including the adoption of the *World Declaration on Education for All* which endorsed a ‘Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs’)
- 2000 – 2015: the Dakar Framework for Action Education For All

Highlighting the importance of children globally and ensuring commitments by governments to their survival and care, development and education, their protection and participation added a new impetus in how countries reassessed their responsibilities and support towards their own children. The right of the child to basic education became an important goal for all Pacific Island countries (PICs) and governments made concerted efforts to achieve that objective. However, while Pacific governments became signatories to these conventions and initiatives, progress was slow. The 1990 – 2000 Pacific country reports on EFA (which
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stresses the importance of the early years as a foundation for future learning and development) highlighted several major gaps and challenges in ECCE. These were the lack of accurate, disaggregated data and relevant information on ECCE in many of the countries; the lack of country/national action plans; and the need to address access to ECCE, especially for the vulnerable and disadvantaged. In other words, although the countries reported supporting ECCE programme activities, many did not have national strategic plans, policies, guidelines or indicators to follow, nor the commitment and resources to support national initiatives. This is where international organisations entered the arena and played a major role in advancing the development of ECCE and basic education in the region. The three major initiatives mentioned earlier are described below.

(a) The Basic Education Life Skills (BELS) Regional Project (1993 – 2001)

A multi-donor regional project for basic education, namely BELS, was set up to assist PICs strengthen their Education for All (EFA) commitments in areas such as literacy, assessment and community support. The BELS project was jointly sponsored by UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, AusAID and NZAID and was implemented by USP. During the BELS third phase (1998 – 2001), a component on ECCE was included within the Community Support area with a link to literacy education. This new focus on ECCE was in direct response to requests from the member countries. The BELS early childhood specialist worked with Pacific governments to develop national policies and curriculum guidelines for ECCE. The ECCE component aimed at enhancing children’s learning and development in their early years by ensuring that quality programmes were provided by capable teachers and empowered communities.

(b) The Pacific Islands Forum Basic Education Action Plan (FBEAP)

In May 2001, under the directive of the Pacific Islands Forum leaders, the Ministers of Education of the Pacific Islands met for the first time in Auckland, New Zealand and deliberated on issues concerning the delivery of basic education to the people of the Pacific islands. The ministers from 14 Forum Island countries (FICs) adopted the goals, framework and processes of the Dakar 2000 EFA at this
meeting. They also endorsed a Pacific vision for education for Forum members: to achieve universal and equitable educational participation and achievement, and to ensure access and equity and improve quality outcomes.

The ministers noted that actions were taken at the country level for the development of strategic plans on all facets of education, beginning with ECE through to primary, secondary and technical, vocational education and training (TVET). In reviewing elements affecting the quality of education, the ministers further agreed that, ‘while collaborating with providers of ECCE services, governments should address resource requirements for ECCE teacher training and assess how ECCE teachers can obtain appropriate status and conditions of employment’. They then formulated what became known as the Forum Basic Education Action Plan (FBEAP) and requested the Forum Secretariat to facilitate its implementation.

The Pacific FBEAP (2001) also decided to address the contentious issue of conditions of employment of ECCE teachers and their status through the collaborative efforts of governments with NGOs, church and community organisations in providing ECCE to pre-school-age children.

The 2002 review of ECCE and the Forum ministers’ guidelines

In 2002, two consultants, Dr Diana Guild (of New Zealand and USA citizenship) and Mrs Vasu Tuivaga (a Fiji citizen), were tasked to undertake the first comprehensive review of ECCE and to provide a status report of ECCE in FICs to the Pacific Forum ministers of education for their December 2002 meeting. Guild and Tuivaga found that accurate information about ECCE policies, enrolment of children, teachers’ qualifications and remuneration, curriculum, programme operations and development participation was difficult to obtain or unavailable. However, despite this major obstacle, information was collected from a variety of sources: regional programme documents; country reports; early childhood education/pre-school associations; international development partnership reports; and communications with those partners, including questionnaires sent to in-country ECCE personnel. Guild and Tuivaga provided this broad overview of ECCE to the FICs ministers of education for their deliberation.
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Overview of status of ECCE in 2002

- The status of ECCE components varied throughout the FICs.
- Components of ECCE were addressed in some fashion by most governments.
- Policies ~ 60% of FICs had some sort of policy guidelines, ranging from very brief statements to detailed and comprehensive documents.
- Curriculum Development and Implementation ~ Most FICs had used the BELS ECCE Curriculum Guidelines to develop their own curriculum guidelines. Some national curricula were very brief and general, others were detailed and articulate. A few countries used the Head Start Programme or Te Whaariki, a New Zealand early childhood education curriculum document. Samoa and Vanuatu had vernacular curricula.
- Six FICs had a person designated in the Ministry of Education for ECCE.
- Half of the FICs had ECCE/pre-school associations.
- Children’s enrolment ~ The percentage of the total age population in ECCE programmes varied greatly throughout the region. The typical age range was between 3 – 6 years, although some covered children aged 0 – 8 years.
- Teacher qualifications ~ Many teachers had little formal ECCE training. Education and/or requirements to be considered a qualified teacher varied throughout the region. Funding of teacher education and training also varied but it appeared that, in many FICs, governments took on a large portion of responsibility, with development partners and private citizens also contributing to the cost.
- Teacher remuneration ~ Although little information was available, teachers were generally poorly paid. The governments of six FICs took at least some responsibility for teacher remuneration, but typically remuneration was from a variety of sources. A few countries indicated that teachers regularly volunteered their services, or were remunerated in kind.
- Teacher:children ratios ~ The ratios varied widely, with teachers having responsibility for between ten to forty children. However, several countries’ statistics indicated an optimum ratio of one teacher for fifteen children (1:15).
- Programme operations ~ Most had programmes that operated between three to five days a week, for half a day (3 – 4 hour) sessions. The responsibility for maintenance of the facility and educational resources and materials was divided among governments, development partners, management committees and communities.
• Facilities ~ There were some purpose–built facilities throughout, especially in urban areas. However, not all children and teachers had access to working toilets and/or safe drinking water.

• Development partners ~ A wide variety of activities was occurring. Educational materials and equipment, facilities, curriculum development, and teacher training had all been addressed to some extent in many countries. However, the types of assistance received might not have been in response to coherent plans of actions for ECCE development. The countries generally had accepted assistance in any area in which it was available, rather than focusing assistance from a variety of development partners into one specific area.

• FIC governments could play an important role in the implementation of high quality ECCE programmes in financially realistic ways. For them to take full responsibility for ECCE is not necessary, neither is it desirable; ECCE programmes can be implemented in stages or phases. However, governments must be very clear about the areas of responsibility that they will accept and allocate the remaining responsibilities to other more capable groups. The identification of priorities for coherent ECCE development and clarification of government roles and responsibilities for ECCE are two of the most important things that governments can do at this time.

• Costs for ECCE programmes could be shared. As FIC governments clarify their policies and their own roles and responsibilities for ECCE, a coherent plan of support can be addressed. Financial commitments can be determined, and the roles and responsibilities of parents and teachers, communities, and development partners can be identified.

• Implementation of comprehensive, high quality ECCE programmes is still in the future of FICs.

2002 Pacific Islands Forum Ministers for Education meeting

The December 2002 Pacific Islands Forum Ministers for Education meeting recognised and acknowledged that high quality ECCE programmes had multiple benefits for children, as well as their countries, in a variety of ways. They endorsed the fact that ECCE promoted the intelligence of young children, increased the efficiency of primary education, contributed to future productivity and income, reduced costs of health and other public services, reduced gender inequities and increased female participation in the labour force.
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The ministers subsequently committed to undertake regular reviews of their country’s ECCE policies using the following proposed guidelines.

a) Clarifying government roles and responsibilities for ECCE programmes.
b) Undertaking a leading role in the coordination of development partnership assistance in order to create sustainable support and ensure follow-through of development plans.
c) Developing action plans on ECCE that identify the priorities and specific areas of development to include the following.

- Appoint a national ECCE coordinator and area advisors to provide advisory services, monitor development of ECCE programmes, and liaise between communities, pre-school associations and governments.
- Prioritise curriculum development and implementation in their national education development plans.
- Undertake an analysis of teacher remuneration costs in order to inform governments’ future discussions for the financial assistance of teachers’ salaries.
- Prioritise the clarification of roles and responsibilities of providing teacher education and training in ECCE policy guidelines.
- Conduct an analysis of trained and untrained teacher needs in order to inform teacher education plans.
- Develop a consistent, ongoing programme of professional education utilising national and/or regional tertiary institutions.
- Initiate the collection of data in order to monitor ECCE programme operations and inform future plans for upgrading of ECCE services.
- Develop policies on facilities, toilets, safe drinking water, and educational materials and resources for licensing and monitoring.

The FIC Education Ministers met five times between 2002 and 2006. In their review of the FBEAP in 2005, they found that ECCE and special education required further attention. ECCE stakeholders in FICs need to keep the ECCE momentum alive and progressing well at the country level, in view of the competing demands of the other educational areas of focus: primary and secondary education, TVET, and formal and non-formal education.
The third major initiative was a regional project on basic education, namely PRIDE. This project was designed by the Pacific Ministers of Education to implement the FBEAP and to support the reform of education in all forms and at all levels: early childhood, primary, secondary, TVET, formal and non-formal education. The PRIDE Project, which was up and running by April 2004, is implemented by the Institute of Education at USP and is jointly funded by the European Union and NZAID.

Second Regional Meeting: June 2004

After the 1980 regional workshop, 24 years passed before another regional ECCE conference was held. This conference, held in June 2004 in Suva, was jointly sponsored by UNICEF and USP’s Distance and Flexible Learning Support Centre. The meeting aimed at bringing Pacific ECCE people together to raise awareness of the critical importance of the first eight years of life with an emphasis on the care of young children from birth to three years of age. The first three years of life are seen as the most crucial period for brain development and directly affect the development of cognitive, language, social, motor and emotional skills of the child. It is also a time when young children face the greatest risks to their survival, health, and emotional and physical growth.

It became apparent during the conference that PICs were catering mainly for preschool programmes for children from three to five or six years; there was very little evidence of activities for children below three years of age, except in the few countries that had day care, playgroup, or play centre programmes. Other topics covered included country updates, parents as teachers, case studies, capacity building of ECCE personnel and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The sessions were both enriching and challenging, as delegates learned about the importance of growth and development in the first three years of a child’s life, and how innovative approaches could enhance the overall development of young children in the home, prior to coming to a centre-based early childhood
Early childhood care and education in the Pacific programme. Parents, families and other care-givers could benefit greatly if they are supported in their child-rearing and care-giving responsibilities to promote a positive environment for the sound early growth and development of infants and young children. Children need to be nurtured in a loving and caring environment, to be physically healthy, mentally alert, socially stimulated and intellectually able to learn and develop to their full potential.

Participants were made further aware that implementing any programmes for the 0 – 3 age group requires an integrated, multi-sectoral approach. Addressing the needs of very young children involves bringing in expertise from civil society, local government, donors, families and communities to be responsible for health, social welfare, rural development, finance and planning, and education. An outcome of the conference was action plans for 0 – 3 year-olds developed by the countries represented.

Third regional meeting on ECCE: March 2007

The third Pacific regional workshop was held in Honiara in March 2007, almost thirty years after the first in 1980, and three years after the second in 2004. It brought together representatives from government and non-government stakeholders to focus on the theme: Supporting learning from 0 – 8: creating the future. It also brought together many new key players in the region, as well as some who were initial players thirty years ago.

The objectives of the workshop were: reconfirming the importance of the 0 – 8 year age range; developing vision, policy, curriculum guidelines and appropriate learning environments and facilities for 0 – 8 year-olds; strengthening national and regional networking of stakeholders; and sharing assessment techniques used for 0 – 8 year-old children.

Given the agenda of this workshop in Honiara, it can be surmised that ECCE in the Pacific region has indeed come a long way, and it is currently grappling with many of the important issues and challenges that will determine the future directions that the individual countries will choose to take them forward.
Issues and challenges for Pacific Island countries

Since 1980, much progress has been made, as this review of the history of ECCE in the Pacific shows, and many PICs have developed innovative programmes for their children. Many challenges remain, however, which need to be addressed. These are discussed below.

The cultural context

Over the years there has been wide acknowledgement of the importance of the social and cultural worlds in which children live and learn. Children develop their sense of identity and learn their cultural skills from their families and those around them. As they grow and mature they further gain knowledge of human relationships and develop interpersonal skills while gradually learning about the rules and values of their culture and society. Among the rules they learn are how to show respect, how to interact with people they know well compared to those they have just met, how to organise time, how to dress, what and when to eat, how to respond to major life transitions or celebrations, and how to worship.

Early childhood programmes exist in contexts which are influenced by many factors. Among them are the parents’ or family’s preferences, community values, societal expectations, the demands of institutions at the next level of education, and broadly-defined values of a specific culture. When we talk about culture, we mean a way of life of a discrete group, which includes a body of accumulated knowledge, skills, beliefs and values. In the Pacific, we use the terms faka-Tonga, fa’a Samoa, vaka Viti and so on. When children at four or five years of age come to pre-school, they already know who they are and what culture they belong to. They already have cultural skills such as the use of a first language or mother tongue. Children who have a good command of the mother tongue will rapidly and easily acquire a second language as they need it, and children who hear their language validated at school will have greater confidence in their culture and in themselves as mother tongue speakers.

Therefore, in planning an appropriate learning environment which will promote children’s learning, we need to listen to children to determine what they actually know and understand, rather than assume what they do not know.
Innovative learning environments

The city of Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy places great importance on the creation of learning environments for its early childhood schools. It affirms that ‘the environments we provide make a public statement about the importance we give to young children and their education, and the choices society makes in its provisions for children indicate the recognition and value society gives to children’ (Millikan et al. 2003: 66, 69). The Reggio Emilia project commenced in 1963, ‘with the awareness across Italy that children needed to be prepared for life in a democracy, that society needed to respond to the uniqueness in every child and there needed to be meaningful communication with both the child and the family’ (Millikan 2003: 2).

Early childhood educators who have visited this centre and have become familiar with its methodology and practices believe that we can all learn a lot from Reggio Emilia’s philosophy and work. The important point is how to create our own settings based on our culture, beliefs and local environment. Pacific early childhood practitioners must be bold in creating pre-schools or early childhood education centres that characterise who we are as a people—not just poor replicas of models copied from other countries or places. Our long history of ECCE development and rich experience should prepare us well to forge ahead and find the right mix of the old and new and to enable us to choose the way forward. Let us be imaginative by becoming architects and designers of children’s learning environments that will enhance their learning and development. PIC centres for ECCE ought to be places where children are understood, and treated with respect and dignity; where Pacific languages, stories, music, dance, art and crafts are promoted; and where beliefs, values, customs and traditions are evident and respected. When people come to these centres they must see and feel that they are in a Pacific centre for ECCE.

Reinforcing developmentally appropriate curriculum

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), a highly respected authority on ECCE in the USA, believes that a high quality ECCE programme provides a safe and nurturing environment that promotes the physical,
social, emotional and cognitive development of young children, while responding to the need of the families. Although the quality of an early childhood programme may be affected by many factors, a major determining factor of programme quality is the extent to which knowledge of child development is applied in programme practices and the degree to which the programme is developmentally appropriate. NAEYC (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) specifically highlights the three dimensions of the concept of ‘developmental appropriateness’ as being based on:

- what is known about child development and learning. This criterion refers specifically to the child’s age-related stages of development;
- what is known about the strengths, interests and needs of each individual, based on a belief in the uniqueness of the child;
- knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live to ensure that learning experiences are meaningful and relevant for the participating children and their families.

Given the 30 years of progress and development of ECCE in the Pacific, a question that needs to be asked is: Where are we with regard to developmentally appropriate programmes?

**Formal instruction versus play in ECCE**

ECCE programmes have changed in response to social, economic and political demands. In addition, the number of programmes has increased in response to the growing demand for out of home care and education during the early years, and in response also to the need for extended hours of care for children of employed parents. Children are now enrolled in programmes at a younger age, many from infancy. However, the changes have not always taken into account the basic developmental needs of young children, which have remained constant. In recent years, a trend towards formal instruction in academic skills of literacy and numeracy has emerged in ECCE programmes, and the Pacific countries are not immune to this strong pressure, which emanates from primary school teachers and parents. This is not to say that pre-reading and pre-numeracy activities cannot take place; they should take place—in an informal way. However, this should not be extended to any kind of formal instruction. This push toward formal academic
instruction for younger children is based on misconceptions about early learning. There is no evidence to support the idea that children learn any better in primary school if they have academic instruction in the early years. Early childhood educators believe that children learn most effectively through a hands-on, play-oriented approach. Children are naturally curious and playful and they learn best when they:

- explore and play
- involve all of their senses
- manipulate real objects in the environment
- work or play with adults and other children
- make meaningful plans and decisions
- build upon what they already know.

**Teaching resources**

Children learn when there are objects and materials to manipulate and people and children to interact with. Yet many pre-schools still lack adequate supplies of suitable play materials, including teaching resources, books and toys. Some of these can be made easily with local materials. Although commercial toys are attractive and widely available nowadays, they are costly and need to be carefully selected, as some are easily broken. At the same time, indoor and outdoor equipment require careful choosing or making, as well as regular maintenance to ensure the safety of children. (See Chapter 8.)

**Teacher training**

The decision made by FICs Ministers of Education in 2001 to review the conditions of work and status of ECCE teachers in their various countries is highly commendable, for teachers are the backbone of ECCE. For too long, teachers in early childhood education have worked under extremely difficult circumstances with poor pay and low status. If teachers are to provide a high quality service, they require not only appropriate specialist training to prepare them adequately for this major task and responsibility, but also the pay they merit and the recognition they deserve.
It is vital that teachers and early educators fully understand what they are supposed to be doing and this is where training is crucial. All early childhood educators need a belief or philosophy of ECCE principles, which form the framework for all their work with children. In order for teachers to make sound decisions about how to teach young children, they must know something about how children grow, develop and learn and the interaction between these. Teachers must also be aware of individual differences among children, affirming the child’s uniqueness, and they must also support a positive sense of identity in each child. Teachers must know about individual learning styles, interests and preferences, personality and temperament, skills and talents, challenges and difficulties. All these are aspects of quality teaching and they need to underpin any teacher training programme.

**Making ECCE more visible**

Despite ECCE’s long existence in the Pacific, it remains weak and relatively invisible, and people’s knowledge about it in ministries of education, in other sectors of government and in our Pacific communities is vague and limited. ECCE practitioners have to learn to speak about it with confidence and conviction. They have to be advocates who promote ECCE, using the work place, community and media, at all levels—national, provincial, district and community. They have to speak with one voice, work together as a cohesive whole, rather than as fragmented parts, guarding their own individual territory and shutting out those who may be able to contribute or add value to their work. Collaboration implies a willingness to listen, let go a little and learn from others, at the same time building bridges with partners and colleagues to strengthen partnerships and links which are necessary and highly desirable in working in ECCE.

**Articulation of the three stages of early childhood**

In 1999, UNICEF came up with some essential strategies that focus on the development of children during the first eight years of life. The early childhood period is divided into three stages: before birth to age three, from three to six years and from six to eight years. A brief revisit to these strategies will provide some food for thought for ECCE practitioners if they are struggling to find suitable approaches to apply to any of these three stages.
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The quality of the critical early years in the child’s life and the experiences to which the child is exposed from birth set the stage for lifelong health and learning. Children from 0 – 8 years old are the responsibility of ECCE practitioners, but within this age group there are differences.

The 0 – 3 age range is when the child’s brain development is most intense. This age group is still an area which needs more attention from PICs. The major task is to help families and care-givers provide optimal care for their young children. The challenge is to blend basic child development knowledge with an understanding of culture and country-specific child-rearing practices that support the child’s healthy and holistic development. Emphasis needs to be placed on interventions designed to reach children, and their care-givers, from before birth through the first three years of life. Children in this age range benefit most from integrated health, nutrition and developmental services.

The next stage, 3 – 6 years, is when socialisation and the foundation for learning are laid. Although this stage is familiar to Pacific ECCE workers because most programmes cater for children in this category, we can learn still more from what others have been doing. UNICEF (1999) proposes a strategy of informal, community-based programmes that support the capacity of families and communities to provide enriched learning environments for these children and enhance their overall development. It involves establishing parent and child organisations and centres, creating integrated educational activities and promoting integrated community child development programmes.

For the 6 – 8 year-olds, the transition from the early years to primary school is an important phase of their development. It is a transition to formal schooling and regular, independent interaction outside the immediate family. Children need to be ready for school and schools ready for children. Transition is most effective when viewed as an ongoing process that begins before school entry, continues to the point of entry and into the first two years of schooling. Transition programmes that will introduce children and their parents to some of the activities, skills and themes the children will experience in class one are needed in order to strengthen teachers’ and parents’ support of children.
The first year of school can be traumatic for many young children. Some of the changes children encounter as they move into a new learning environment include the change from:

- informal learning to formal learning
- an oral culture to a written culture
- relative freedom of movement to adherence to strict rules
- patterns of a minority culture to expectations of the dominant culture
- mother tongue to competence in a new language without prior instruction
- a family group to a larger group of peers.

Without adequate preparation, a child is likely to under-perform, ends up repeating grades, becomes uninterested in learning, develops a sense of failure and low self-esteem and ultimately drops out.

**Parent partnership awareness**

There are many different ways in which parent participation in ECCE programmes can be achieved; the challenge is to select what is appropriate in the specific context. This is a very important partnership and needs to be seriously nurtured and respected to allow it to strengthen. Children are happy when their families are part of their ECCE environment and, overall, parents want the best for their children. One way to proceed is for teachers to find out what parents expect of their children’s pre-school and what types of involvement parents can provide; they can be a great resource to the centre. Increasing the involvement of fathers will also be a positive move. Programmes can be designed in collaboration with parents, who will be an integral part of implementation in order to assure sustainability.

**Leadership in ECCE**

Governments, through their relevant ministries—a ministry of education in most cases—have several responsibilities: formulating ECCE policies within the context of national education plans; mobilising political and popular support; and promoting flexible, adaptable programmes for young children that are appropriate to their age. In PICs, there is a tendency to equate ECCE with formal programmes, i.e. pre-schools, instead of valuing and encouraging the non-formal family and
community-based, community-owned initiatives. Governments must ensure that a flexible range of support is available to families and communities that will strengthen their ability to support their children’s overall development. Governments need to adopt a holistic policy and planning framework when expanding their national ECCE. The first step is to assess the present situation and then to look at ways to strengthen and supplement existing programmes. Moreover, **there needs to be a strong, central coordinating body to assist the government in overseeing all aspects of national ECCE issues and development.** These include: developing a curriculum framework or guidelines, targeting provision for the disadvantaged and vulnerable populations, encouraging flexible implementation, recognising sector realities, fostering approaches which build on strengths, working in genuine partnerships, making advocacy more effective, providing local evidence to support research, and monitoring and assessment of ECCE programmes.

PIC governments have done a fair amount for ECCE in their various countries, but there is still much to be done and they cannot do it alone. The governments need to take a leading role and work with both local and international stakeholders to develop national visions, goals and strategic plans to establish a framework for the holistic development of the child. This requires inputs from the various sectors of government, NGOs, donors, the private sector, local municipalities, teacher training institutions, teacher associations, parents and community groups.

**Emerging issues and challenges**

Although many of the old issues such as inadequate finance, lack of teacher training and lack of resources continue to pose major challenges for ECCE, emerging issues are impacting ECCE today, and educators need to be prepared to deal with them. Some examples are the HIV and AIDS epidemic, violence and abuse against children and women, substance and drug abuse, poverty, and the effects of television and technology. ECCE has a major role to play in championing children’s issues and raising awareness on their behalf, as they and their families do not have a voice.
Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the development of ECCE in the Pacific region since 1980, highlights some of the major global conventions and initiatives that have had an impact on the current focus of attention, describes some of the major ECCE achievements in the Pacific, and raises what are deemed to be critical issues and challenges for Pacific Island countries to consider in pursuing their own way forward. Governments could play an important role in the implementation of high quality ECCE programmes in financially realistic ways. It is not necessary, nor is it desirable, for one player alone to shoulder the full responsibility for ECCE; programmes can be implemented by other players in phases or stages. However, governments must be very clear about the areas of responsibility that they will accept, and allocate remaining responsibilities to capable groups. The identification of priorities for coherent ECCE development and clarification of government roles and responsibilities for ECCE are two of the most important actions that government can undertake at this time. Costs for ECCE programmes could be shared. As governments clarify their policies and their own roles and responsibilities to ECCE, a coherent plan of support can be addressed. Financial commitments can be determined, and the roles and responsibilities of parents and teachers, communities and development partners can be identified. The critical role of communities and the great contribution Pacific communities have made need to be recognised, and they need to be supported and strengthened so that they can continue their sterling work.

It is only by addressing these critical issues that an equitable, affordable and high quality ECCE programmes can be achieved for the children of the Pacific.

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