The way forward for ECCE in Pacific Island countries

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Research has provided substantial evidence on the multiple socio-economic benefits that early childhood care and education (ECCE) have on a country. It seems, however, that these benefits are still not enough to convince government leaders to prioritise ECCE, despite the fact that Pacific Island countries (PICs) are well aware of the recent focus on ECCE in international conventions such as the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Millennium Development Goals, the UNESCO World Declaration on Education for All and the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

While some PICs have put in place mandatory laws and policies which articulate some strategic measures (e.g. banning of corporal punishment in Fiji, and child protection in Vanuatu, Fiji and Samoa), there remains much to do in terms of access to early childhood education for under-privileged or at risk children in squatter, disadvantaged and rural communities; providing equipment for centres; paying early childhood teachers’ salaries; and improving their work conditions.
These shortcomings show that ECCE is not given the priority it rightly deserves, bearing in mind that ‘[t]he satisfaction of these [basic learning] needs empowers individuals in any society and confers upon them a responsibility to respect and build upon their collective and cultural, linguistic and spiritual heritage to promote the education of others’ (EFA Jomtien Declaration Article 1, emphasis added).

Pacific Island leaders—traditional and government—need to develop a better understanding of leadership in ECCE. If we are the mandated parents (natural or surrogate); if we are the mandated government and leaders in our villages or communities; if we are the chosen ones to speak for as well as advocate for young children and their families, we are obliged to provide the best living conditions and environments for them, irrespective of their race, colour or creed. It is everyone’s responsibility; we do not have a choice. We are talking about our children, their future and their country’s future. We are talking about ‘Supporting learning from 0 – 8, Creating the future’ for PICs.

The Preamble of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child defines the family as the ‘fundamental group’ and the ‘natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children’. PIC governments are obliged to support and facilitate these care-giving environments. In Pacific Island societies, taking care of and providing education for some other children within one’s own immediate family clan, wider family unit and even tribe is acceptable and demonstrates love, respect and the reciprocity values which are part of our heritage. It can be appropriately said that we do prioritise our children in the Pacific islands; children have a special place in our cultures and this is evident in each Pacific Island’s celebration of children in unique ways from the birth of a first born, first birthdays, children’s Sundays and through to puberty. Culturally, children are already seen as special and they are our responsibility in terms of education.

I draw wisdom from my late father’s words, ‘E lakovata na qaravi itavi ki na vanna, lotu kei na matanitu’ meaning, you have a duty to serve the land, the church and the government equally. For me, this suggests that children are the responsibility of the vanna (family, tribe and community), the church (through the priest, talatala,
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pastor, church elders and congregation), and the government at the political level (laws, policies) if we ‘measure what we treasure, we treasure what we measure’—the young child in the Pacific islands. I also draw from Nelson Mandela’s wisdom: ‘It takes the whole village to raise a child’.

Sadly, we are neither listening nor learning to be proactive about ECCE issues in a challenging modern world. There needs to be greater commitment by all stakeholders as we cannot continue to depend on donors to meet our commitments. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory\textsuperscript{15} has long been in existence within our Pacific island communities. For instance a Pacific child grows up with conventions, traditional beliefs, values and a culture which define his/her ecology. Networking and support systems need to be put in place in light of this knowledge in order to maximise a child’s learning and development from the early years.

\textbf{Political will and commitment}

Given all the current data and research on the impact of early brain-wiring from 0 – 3 years, it is imperative that governments, within their resources and in partnership with NGOs, explore what this means for them as policy-makers, caregivers, practitioners, front-line workers, traditional leaders and so on. Considering the limited resources, there is a strong call for a cross-sectoral approach to pave the way for ECCE in the Pacific Islands.

In a holistic ECCE approach, policies and programmes that safeguard a child’s right to health, nutrition, cognitive and psycho-social development and protection should be clearly articulated and aligned to mandatory government documents. A requirement of the holistic approach to ECCE is protecting and promoting women’s rights; it is the first step in securing gains for young

\textsuperscript{15} Bronfenbrenner (1979) posited that child development cannot be explained by a single concept, but rather by a complex system – the microsystem, the mesosystem, the ecosystem, the macrosystem, the chronosystem. His ecological model theorises that a child does not exist alone but in a given context represented by layers or systems. Bronfenbrenner, U. 1979. \textit{The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design}. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
children. This ought to be articulated in countries’ corporate and strategic plans and translation of funds into the annual budget of key government ministries and departments: health, education, social welfare, women and culture, information, the judiciary, regional development, the environment and local government.

**Visionary and dynamic leadership**

**Passion** and **power** are two concepts associated with the 2007 ECCE Honiara workshop and its theme of *Supporting learning from 0 – 8: creating the future*. In their wisdom, the organisers brought in participants representing governments and NGOs who have **passion** for young children and their families to share and explore best practices, and therefore are mandated or have the **power** to make some firm decisions, thus moving ECCE forward in their own countries. As critical friend to the workshop, my conceptual findings can be summed up in three Vs—voice, visibility and value-added. To move ECCE forward in Pacific Island countries, I strongly believe the workshop participants must speak up for young children (have a **voice** ) in all forums, be **visible**, and make a commitment to give value to young children’s lives and future (**value-added**).

**Inspiration for change**

The workshop partners and the Solomon Island secretariat gave ECCE advocates and practitioners the opportunity to exchange ideas and information and, as a result, the workshop was a source of inspiration on many fronts. It confirmed what the Solomon Islands Minister for Education, the Honourable Derek Sikua, said in his opening address: that this spirit of cooperation and support among the organisers of the workshop is a classical example of the Paris Declaration which calls for donor harmonisation.

Participants were made aware of PRIDE’s Resource Centre and Pacific Archive of Digital Data for Learning and Education (PADDLE), and the SPBEA web

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16. Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of basic Education

17. South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment
pages which are actively gathering and synthesising information from within the region in order to improve access to relevant data and documents. Furthermore, it was noted that the Pacific Island Forum Ministers for Education would meet in Auckland in late 2007 and the four recommendations from the workshop would be presented to them by PRIDE and SPBEA.

Global and regional perspectives

Globally, there has been steady progress towards achieving the goals in the Declaration on Education for All since 1990, especially towards universal primary education (UPE) and gender parity amongst the poorest countries, but the pace is too slow for the goals to be met in the remaining years to 2015.

Maki Hayashikawa (UNESCO, Bangkok) in her keynote address provided data from the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007 (see Chapter 5) and gave the workshop participants many insights into the position of ECCE at both the global and regional level. The scarcity of data for monitoring the childhood care component in the Pacific is of great concern as it limits its inclusion in global, regional and national policies and planning. Dr Visesio Pongi (UNESCO) in his presentation added that there needed to be greater utilisation of the research data that is available in ECCE policy decisions. Regular provision of data and information to international, regional and national fora is essential for moving ECCE forward, and child development research findings, which are often not widely disseminated, could be an immediate area for PICs to concentrate on. There is a lot of observational research that could be used effectively for a variety of purposes.

Strengthening documentation of ECCE practices and action research for Pacific Island countries ought to be a collaborative effort by stakeholders. Adi Davila Toganivalu in her address (see Chapter 3) emphasised the importance of knowing and documenting our ECCE history, our present and plans for our future as leaders, practitioners and caregivers so that we can continue to empower one another in determining our children’s future in the Pacific.

Establishing and building up a database for ECCE in-country is crucial for national planning purposes. However, the success of gathering authentic, reliable and
timely data for monitoring and evaluation hinges on a well-defined ECCE unit with resources. Support must be drawn from government and traditional leaders and a proactive stance could be taken by them to ensure this is in place.

**Pacific voices**

Adi Davila Toganivalu spoke about the Pacific Pre-school Council (PPC) and its functions. The workshop participants were in favour of reactivating it; it has not met since 1995. Being an affiliate to the World Forum Foundations, the PPC currently enjoys privileges such as sending fully or partially sponsored participants to international workshops and conferences. Fiji has been an active participant and has carried the voice of the Pacific, but needs vary from country to country. Common sense tells us that we should make use of the existing PPC set-up, rather than re-invent the wheel, in order to address local or regional issues and present a united ‘voice’ for children. Countries could use this machinery to organise themselves and learn from one another. The *malua* fever, the waiting or delaying attitude, must be shelved if we intend to move ECCE forward.

**Figure 1** Aid ($) per capita, developing countries only, 2002-3 average

![Figure 1](image)

Source: OECD & World Bank Indicators

As Dr Visesio Pongi pointed out in his presentation at the workshop, statistically, the Pacific is the biggest recipient of donor funds in the world (see Figure 1). However, some of this assistance proved to be of little use because the donor projects were not ‘owned’ by the people who they were intended to assist. We
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need to learn from this and ensure stakeholders have a voice in the decision-making process in all phases of a project: the design phase, the implementation, the monitoring and the evaluation phase.

Assessment

The assessment of 0 – 3 years old is carried out by health authorities in most PICs. They monitor growth and development with a focus on appropriate care and health practices. Current brain research has revealed the importance of early stimulation, balanced nutrition and appropriate care for 0 – 3 year-olds as vital for intelligence and a springboard for later learning and development. Unaisi Vasu Tuivaga, in her summing up of the panel discussion on this topic, made it clear that practitioners need more training and guidance in order to improve assessment of this age-group—yet another challenge. Added to this is the growing focus on monitoring and evaluation that goes with the recent shift to outcomes-based assessment. How do practitioners, caregivers and families grapple with pedagogies that centre on local and global transmission of ECCE knowledge, skills and attitudes in a rapidly growing world?

A curriculum for the future

The fact that we are creating a future for 0 – 8 year olds means that ECCE curriculum guidelines need to provide a framework that will be relevant in the future. This requires reconceptualising childhood for Pacific Island countries. Factors that need to be considered are our Pacific values and what we want our children to know and be able to do. The guidelines must be culturally relevant and also be based on child development principles and early learning development standards. Glen Palmer (Chapter 9) in her description of Fiji’s example, explains the process of simultaneously developing the curriculum guidelines and early learning standards. How and where they merge is a decision for the stakeholders but what is important is that both are widely disseminated for consultation and validation with the users and beneficiaries.

Being involved in the decision-making process concerning children’s care and education is a new direction for many practitioners, parents and caregivers. For this reason, any curriculum must give clear directions to policy/decision-makers,
parents, families, practitioners and caregivers. In other words, it must be user-friendly and readable at all levels, so that the essential process of draft → review → draft → review is successful.

**Strategies for stakeholders to consider for moving ECCE forward in the Pacific**

1. Make a clear overarching policy covering ECCE in general as well as operational policies covering implementation.
2. Make a commitment to reactivate the Pacific Pre-school Council and renew membership as this is an ideal forum for the Pacific voice for young children. UNESCO could be approached to support its activities.
3. Revisit EFA, CRC and MDG goals as a focal point for effective policy and programming decisions.
4. Strengthen ECCE issues in teacher training for pre-service and in-service programmes. These issues include special needs, inclusivity, children's rights, gender balance and social cohesion, culture-based and evidence-based practices.
5. Establish and strengthen ECCE data bases in countries to support policy making and programme development.
6. Establish cross-sectoral partnerships with key government ministries and NGOs that work with young children and their families so there is a holistic approach to care and education, thus utilising maximum benefit from the resources available.
7. Strengthen the use of the mother-tongue as a spring board for acquiring a second language.
8. Establish a regional networking system via email for sharing of information.
9. Encourage the use of local materials and resources.

The publication of this book is a landmark in the history of ECCE, gathering as it does the status quo of ECCE in the Pacific; the global, regional and local perspectives; modern knowledge and thinking regarding many ECCE issues; and the thoughts and recommendations of experts in the field. It can be thought of as the voice of the ECCE community in the Pacific, our contribution to the effort to push ECCE forward so that it gets the priority it rightfully deserves.