

## **Using Pacific Values to value our Education System**

*Fuapepe Rimoni*

**Victoria University of Wellington**

**Fuapepe.rimoni@vuw.ac.nz**

*Feliuliuakiga o te au mo he tumanaki i taonga o fanau*

Recognising the moving currents for the sustainable future of our children

I have been in education for over 20 years. I began my teaching career at a local Primary school in Lower Hutt and went on to become a lecturer with the Wellington college of Education in Karori as a Social Studies lecturer and from there the Wellington College of Education merged with Victoria University of Wellington and we became a school within the university.

I wish to thank Professor John O’Neill, who approached me to see If I was interested in presenting a paper on the theme of day - The Beeby/Fraser ideal: Is it time to abandon it? Here at the Education Policy SIG seminar. Over the last few months, my colleagues and I have been occupied with presenting keynote invitations and workshop invitations on our recent publication ‘Pacific educators speak’ Valuing our values. It is through this recent work, on Pacific values, that I have decided to provide a Talanoa (discussion) on how these Pacific values can contribute to a deeper understanding of what our education system could look like.

Many of you may not know of Beeby’s connection to the Pacific but he spent considerable time there and advised on policy from the 1940s onwards, and took an active interest in education in South Asia as well:

It had begun in 1945 when Fraser sent him to review educational arrangements in the Cook Islands, Niue, and Western Samoa. He led the New Zealand delegation to the first general conference of UNESCO in Paris in 1946 and played a leading role in its deliberations and in several later general conferences. The government granted him leave of absence in 1948–49 to be assistant director general of UNESCO with the task of devising its educational policies and working methods. (Te Ara biographies – see <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/5b17/beeby-clarence-edward>)

While Beeby embodied the cultural imperial values of the west at the time and arrived with an intention of ‘saving’ Western Samoa, Niue and the Cook Islands, he was also aware that one universal policy which worked in New Zealand was not necessarily going to work in the Pacific. His report in 1962 (Stages of growth of a primary school education system) (Beeby, 1962) showed some criticality in this regard:

This theory of direct transferability of experience is immediately attractive. If it be correct, the main task of those who are advising educators in emergent countries is to teach them to leapfrog the errors of educational theory and practice with which our own past is strewn, in much the same way that many of them have been ushered into the air-age without even knowing the noise and direct of a nineteenth century railway system. Unfortunately, there is evidence that the relationship between two education systems at different levels is not as simple as this. (Beeby, 1962, p. 2)

This type of thinking led Beeby to develop his thesis of stages which outlined the stage through which an education system moves – recognising the different pace and nature of this.

My talk today is one of these future stages that Beeby perhaps hoped for but couldn't see possible at the moment. In particular I will talk about how Pacific scholars themselves are now writing policies and philosophies of education that reflect the values of Pacific people – rather than those who arrive from other places, with the hope of ensuring every child can reach their potential.

### *Pacific learners*

Looking after Pacific children's needs is a daily challenge for Pacific educators. We (as Pacific educators) have had to be strong advocates for our Pacific children and families to ensure they know they belong in their educational setting. The reality is our cultural practices are often overlooked in curriculum and teaching; however, these are important for being ourselves and are vital in the communities we live in.

Each Pacific Island nation has its own distinctive ways of living beliefs, cultures, languages, and identities. Despite this diversity and complexity, the terms Pacific and Pasifika are used generically within education policy in New Zealand to encompass people who enjoy from one or more of many Pacific nations.

Over the recent years there has been an increase on supporting Pacific learners within our education system, there has been an increase responsiveness from policy makers to Pacific voice, giving hope that the education system can be developed in ways that align with the aspirations of Pacific people. The Pasifika Education plan 2013-2017 (PEP) (Ministry of Education, 2013) sets out the strategic vision for improving Pacific education outcomes through increasing responsibility and accountability for these and outlining aspirations for enhancing economic growth and social wellbeing. Following the PEP, The Action Plan for Pacific Education (2020-2030), (Ministry of Education, 2020)

describes the vision of ensuring “diverse Pacific learners and families are safe, valued and equipped to achieve their education aspirations” (p.4). All these policy documents plus supporting documents aim to the improvement of Pacific education for Pacific students.

In the past 10 years, Pacific student outcomes have improved. But there is still an achievement gap between Pacific learners and learners from other groups. Inequities in our education system are preventing Pacific student success.

### ***So why focus on Pacific values?***

Understanding Pacific values and integrating these into teaching and learning environments is critically important for Pacific learners’ learning and wellbeing (Rimoni et al., 2022). Pacific values are fundamental to our education policy which demands improvements in education opportunities for Pacific heritage learners. It is important to note Pacific Island people are voicing their demands to more from education, both in terms of opportunity and in terms of offerings that reflect their own experiences.

The population of Pacific people has continued to grow in Aotearoa and their contribution to the economic development of Aotearoa has also been evident

Education policy refers to nine Pacific values (belonging, family, love, service, spirituality, reciprocity, respect, leadership, and inclusion. In New Zealand, education policy highlights the centrality for Pacific learners of a collection of Pacific values (Ministry of Education, 2013, 2018). For example, Tapasā: Cultural competencies framework for teachers of Pacific learners (Ministry of Education, 2018) describes that educational success for Pacific learners is achieved when teachers recognise and build on what Pacific learners, their parents, families, and communities already understand, value and what they know; and integrate those understandings, values and knowledge into their planning and teaching practices. (p. 3) While the idea of generic values being put forward as important across New Zealand’s Pacific groups may be debated, understanding the breadth of significance and interpretation of the values presented in policy documents is important to inform implementation and further policy development.

In 2003, Steve Maharey was invited on behalf of Trevor Mallard who was Minister of Education at the time, to share his thoughts on the The Beeby/Fraser idea. Maharey stated that “The Government's objective, broadly expressed, is that all persons, whatever their ability, rich or poor, whether they live in town or country, have a right as citizens to a free education of the kind for which they are best fitted and to the fullest extent of their powers”.

This broadly expressed objective by the government in early 2000 holds on to the vision formulated by Beeby during his time where his vision formally commits the state to enabling every child, each citizen, to reach their potential. Stated simply, it was about, "making the education system responsive to the needs of the individual kid but has the New Zealand education system been responsive to the needs of all individual kids? And which individual kids are we talking about?

By many international metrics, the performance of New Zealand's schools has been declining for two decades, with the most disadvantaged of our young people being the most acutely affected. As identified by Johnston (2020), New Zealand must establish a true partnership in which differences between western and Māori worldviews are understood and honoured, enabling their interaction so they can enrich one another. To do this well, we need curricula that elucidate the structure and content of the knowledge of each culture in enough detail to give teachers, who cannot themselves be experts on everything, sufficient guidance to impart that knowledge to young people. Johnston continues to say; "If we succeed in this, we will truly and quite literally "have the best of both worlds" and we will be able to turn around the shameful gap that has emerged between our educational 'haves' and 'have-nots,' with all too many young Māori and Pasifika people numbered among the latter (Johnston, M. 2020).

It is therefore important that I ask the question if we are to move forward to a new and improved education system why consider Pacific values within our education system? The Fraser-Beeby statement is still in motion, the government continues to lead an education system that follows the vision set up during the Fraser-Beeby time, however this discussion paper has provided key ideas that this has not been the case for Pacific learners. Therefore, the question asked earlier of "making the education system responsive to the needs of the individual kid but has the New Zealand education system been responsive to the needs of all individual kids? Which kids are we talking about? it has not been Pacific kids. To ask whether this visionary thinking from the Fraser-Beeby era can it still serve as an aspirational and inspirational call to action? My response is No – because if it did, we would not have this discussion paper on the amount of effort Pacific people have had to work to strengthen their ways of learning and aligning Pacific values into everyday learning.

The vision by Fraser-Beeby at that time formally commits the state to enabling every child, each citizen, to reach their potential. The vision sounds right but actioned in a manner that only suited certain children to reach their potential. At the time of Fraser-Beeby, the make of New Zealand had small numbers of immigrants especially from the Pacific nations. However, the diverse population has changed and the mixed cultures from around the world have now made New Zealand home. The education system needs to find ways on how these values

can be embedded within practice in our Eurocentric education system, and as highlighted by Johnston (2020) one that places strong emphasis on responsiveness to Te Tiriti o Waitangi within education in New Zealand and share understanding of the learning of Pacific heritage people within this context (Rimoni et al., 2022).

*We need to understand the currents well and know how to manoeuvre using these to help power our voyage. Pacific people are descendants of explorers, discoveries and innovators who used their knowledge to traverse distant horizons using the currents, winds and stars.*

*(Rimoni et al., 2022)*

## References

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