

## Conference report

*Nuku'alofa, 24-25 September 2014*



The metaphor of the *vaka (waka)*, or ocean-going canoe, reflects the traditional strength of the Pacific peoples as they sailed out into Oceania. It is a powerful symbol for the future of Pacific education in a region where the realities are often far from the tropical paradises portrayed in tourist brochures. The hardship caused by geographical isolation and poor infrastructure in the Pacific is referred to as “poverty of opportunity”, and this impacts on education. Many children leave primary school without achieving basic levels of literacy or numeracy<sup>1</sup>.



*Banner on the University of the South Pacific fence for the International Day of Peace, 21 September.*

However, local cultures and traditions tend to be highly valued in the Pacific, and Christianity has been strongly interwoven with Pacific cultures since the arrival of missionaries in the 19th century. Literacy practices based on the Bible are

strong, as in the banners displayed around Tongatapu for the International Day of Peace in the week I visited.

Three directions for education - and teacher education – were being discussed by participants at the conference: local, regional, and international. In Tonga this is reflected in the different teacher education institutions: the local Tonga Institute of Education; the USP Institute of Education serving the region; and the Tupou Tertiary Institute accredited to the Bethlehem Tertiary Institute based in New Zealand. The courses at all of these institutions require strong bilingual ability in Tongan and English for graduates, since the Tongan language policy requires English medium at secondary teaching, English is the lingua franca in most of the Pacific region, and teachers graduating with New Zealand qualifications need to be able to teach in any school situation.



*Liku Rd, Tongatapu. Working in copra plantations is insufficient future employment for many children in Pacific schools.*

# President's Report

Tonga is home to a number of influential leaders in the field of Pacific education who spoke at the conference including Professor Konaiholeva Thaman, who is currently UNESCO Chair in Teacher Education and Culture at USP Suva. Konai has proposed the *Kakala* framework as a metaphor for curriculum development from the traditional weaving of fragrant flowers into garlands<sup>2</sup>. This is based on three concepts, each of which requires complex cultural knowledge (including its associated vocabulary): *toli*, the gathering of flowers for the garland; *tui*, the stringing of the garland; and *luva*, the giving away of the garland. The *Kakala* framework has been very influential in the development of local approaches and frameworks by teachers and researchers around the Pacific. Another leading Tongan educationalist is Dr 'Ana Taufe'ulungaki, currently Minister of Education and Training in Tonga. She has long been an advocate for the use of local languages in education. This is a particularly important issue in the Pacific, where some countries such as Tonga have only one main local language, but others such as Papua New Guinea have hundreds of languages. (The Melanesian Pacific is often stated to be the most linguistically diverse region in the world). 'Ana emphasises the interrelationships between the cultural and language practices described by Konai, and the implications for children who have to learn in school environments which are linguistically and culturally foreign<sup>3</sup>.

The challenges and tensions for English and local languages mean that the state of professional organisations for English language teachers varies across different Pacific countries. Nevertheless, I am hoping that the connections I was able to make or strengthen at the conference will form the basis of future conversations and collaborations.

This was the second Vaka Pasifiki Education Conference, and it brought together a number of Pacific teacher education initiatives. Proceedings from the first conference have been just published<sup>4</sup>, and the next Vaka Pasifiki Education Conference is planned for 2017 in the Solomon Islands.

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Hilary Smith started her career as an English teacher at Tupou High School, Tongatapu, where she taught students for the South Pacific Option of New Zealand School Certificate in 1981-1982.



Hilary with former Tupou High School colleague Ma'ata Havea.

## Notes

- 1 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (2013, August). *2013 Regional MDG Tracking Report*.  
[http://www.forumsec.org/resources/uploads/attachments/documents/2013\\_Pac\\_Regional\\_MDGs\\_Tracking\\_Report\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.forumsec.org/resources/uploads/attachments/documents/2013_Pac_Regional_MDGs_Tracking_Report_FINAL.pdf)
- 2 Thaman, K. H. (1993). Culture and curriculum in the South Pacific. *Comparative Education*, 29(3), 249-260.
- 3 Taufe'ulungaki, 'A. M. (2005). Language and culture in the Pacific region: Issues, practices, and alternatives. *Directions: Journal of Educational Studies*, 27(1), 12-42.  
<http://www.directions.usp.ac.fj/collect/direct/index/assoc/D1174329.dir/doc.pdf>
- 4 'Otunuku, M., Nabobo-Baba, U., & Johansson-Fua, S. (Eds.). (2014). *Of waves, winds and wonderful things: A decade of rethinking Pacific education*. Suva: University of the South Pacific Press