Weaving a new approach to improving student literacy outcomes: The Pacific Literacy and School Leadership Programme

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Introduction

The current catch-cry in education aid discourse is that developing country education systems are facing a crisis of quality. This crisis is typically positioned as the result of the preoccupation in recent decades with education access in lieu of education quality or getting students to learn. However, deeper analysis of the access-quality tension indicates that the crisis of quality is not simply a result of insufficient attention to learning, but insufficient attention to the complex and context-dependent nature of teaching and learning. Empirical research on teaching and learning in developing country contexts, overwhelmingly supports the view that context matters and that insufficient understanding of the local nature of pedagogy and professional learning is behind the failure of many international interventions to impact positively on student learning (Anderson and Mundy 2014; Barrett 2007; Riddell 2012; Schweisfurth 2011; Tabulawa 2013; Vavrus and Bartlett 2012).

A recognition of the need for more contextualised understandings of teaching and learning is visible within the discourse of Pacific developing country governments and educationalists, driven in part by a sense that adopting uncritically the 'best practice' solutions offered by international aid agencies has failed to deliver the desired education outcomes. The Pacific Literacy and School Leadership Programme (PLSLP) was initiated by the New Zealand Aid Programme, as a response to the desire expressed by several Pacific Ministries of Education to better understand the specific dynamics of their so-called 'literacy crisis' and to develop local solutions. This paper tells the story of PLSLP to date, using a pan-Pacific metaphor of weaving, known in Tongan as *heilaki lālanga*. The voices of two of the PLSLP team members are woven together, reflecting the collaboration of Oceanic educationalists and development practitioners involved in PLSLP and the importance of weaving international research with local context. The paper first provides an overview of the quality education 'crisis' and the way in which global educational and aid agendas influence the framing of and response to education quality issues in developing countries including those of the Pacific region. The paper then presents research on why the approaches to addressing quality and learning often promoted by global education aid actors are problematic. Using the Pacific metaphor of weaving, the paper then describes key elements of the PLSLP which together comprise a case study of a contextualised approach to researching and advancing the achievement of valued learning outcomes in Pacific classrooms.

The learning crisis—a failure of schools or of policy?

Issues of quality and learning outcomes have always been a focus of the global education agenda of the international development community, as demonstrated by the seminal 1990 Education for All (EFA) declaration, which stated:

> The focus of basic education must, therefore, be on actual learning acquisition and outcome, rather than exclusively upon enrolment, continued participation in organized programmes and completion of certification requirements (World Conference on Education for All 1990, quoted in Barrett et al. 2006:9).

Yet, for many developing countries these commitments have not translated into improved learning outcomes on the ground. Statistics provided by the UNESCO Global Monitoring Reports on EFA, and the Global Partnership for Education, indicate that while enrolment and completion rates have steadily increased over the two decades since EFA, some 130 million children, or one out of four children in school have not learned to read by year 4 (UNESCO 2013). Developing countries in the Pacific region show similar trends although enrolment and completion rates across the Pacific have been on a general upward trend, recent data show literacy and numeracy levels are poor and potentially declining. The 2012 Pacific Island Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (SPC 2012) undertaken across 14 countries in the Pacific found the 'literacy situation in the Pacific at a dire situation' with only three in every 10 students performing at expected levels in years 4 and 6 of primary school (ibid). These findings, and other similar evidence, have been effective in catalyzing greater attention on issues surrounding the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms in many Pacific countries. While this is a positive shift, the way in which it has been translated into policy and into government and donor-funded interventions has too often been based on a reductionist notion of quality, which limits the effectiveness of such policy (Alexander 2008; Wagner 2012).

Reframing quality

Quality education, and subsequently learning, tends to be talked about in terms of things that governments and donors can see and to a greater extent control—teacher qualifications, teacher-pupil ratios, number of books in schools. These perspectives conflate education (or learning), with schooling (the mechanics of service delivery), and quality with efficiency (Barrett et al. 2006; Fuller and Clarke 1994; Riddell 2008). The global education agenda is fundamentally

shaped by a belief in 'best practice' solutions that can 'be applied to perceived regional and national education problems regardless of contextual difference' (Coxon and Munce 2008:147; Crossley 2010; Pritchett and Sandefur 2013). This has given rise to a series of remarkably similar programs implemented across the globe, including in the Pacific region, such as school-based management, teacher training and standards setting, child-friendly schools, standardised assessment programs and so on (ibid). While not discounting the importance of the issues claimed to be addressed by these programs, the reviews of actual design and implementation are generally highly critical or inconclusive at best about their impact on student learning (Pritchett and Sandefur 2013; Riddell 2008).

The political appeal of tangible inputs/outputs often supports such approaches in favour of having to sell interventions that require addressing the less tangible and more variable dynamics that shape the teaching and learning process inside classrooms. This reflects wider challenges of the international development system which in general 'emphasizes universal over contextual knowledge, a knowledge system that is deductive and oriented to general predictive models, and that constantly organizes attention away from the contingencies of practice and the plurality of perspectives' (Mosse 2011:87). It also reflects a well-known historical tendency within education policy to treat pedagogy as an input that can be controlled, rather than a dynamic and variable process that is shaped by the specific context of each classroom (Alexander 2008). The same criticism applies to the way in which teacher training and the introduction of curriculum or pedagogical reforms have often been approached. As empirical research has shown, the expectations teachers have of their students and the beliefs they hold about the learning and teaching process interact with teachers' engagement with new ways of teaching (Barrett 2007; McNaughton 2007; Vavrus and Bartlett 2012). These beliefs vary not only from country to country but school to school, and class to class. Teachers weave their students learning using the resources they have to hand, intertwined with their own beliefs and knowledge about learning and shaped by their colleagues, context and history. Failing to engage with teachers as weavers of learning and with the recognition that learning is a socially and culturally bound process hampers our ability to lift learning outcomes (McNaughton and Lai 2009; Vavrus and Bartlett 2012).

Weaving our way to improved learning: The Pacific Literacy and School Leadership Programme

PLSLP was initiated in 2014 by the New Zealand Aid Programme in response to calls from several Pacific governments for assistance in understanding and responding to the evidence of lower than expected levels of literacy at primary level. PLSLP is a collaboration between the University of Auckland's Faculty of Education, the Institute of Education of the University of the South Pacific, and the relevant Ministries of Education. It has woven together research knowledge and practice from a team of NZ and Pacific educationalists, development practitioners and researchers with a shared aim of improving literacy learning in primary schools in Cook Islands, Solomon Islands and Tonga.

Drawing on the metaphor of weaving, the paper will now describe the key principles of the design of PLSLP and the research-evidence that sits behind these principles. Weaving is one of the oldest art forms in many of our Pacific islands, its origins steeped in whispers of long sea journeys by mythical-like women with amazing skills; a romantic tale passed down through the generations, fascinating us to this day. Weaving is best understood and appreciated not only when it is seen up close but also when one hears the stories around it. Weaving can be a solitary or communal activity but is most often, these days, done collectively, involving experts and novices in the process.

Even before beginning to weave a mat, often the purpose for which the mat is woven is known; for example, for a special celebration of life or achievement, preparation for a major event, or even death. The purpose of the mat shapes decisions about the kind of pandanus to use, the width to which it will be woven, and any other adornments that will be made. Only then can the design of the mat be determined along with decisions about what specific materials to use, and who to involve in the weaving process.

In the weaving of PLSLP, our purpose is supporting the literacy learning of students and thus the literacy teaching capabilities of our teachers. Time was therefore taken to understand the wider cultural context in which literacy and language is situated and the expectations that schools and communities have for their students.

Essentially, a good mat achieves a straight line or runs (called *hala* meaning 'road') and the tension in the weft and warp is neither too tight nor too loose. The weaving is a process of interlacing strips of pandanus to create a mat of between 10–30 ft long x 8ft wide. Weavers use different kinds of pandanus of varying width, length, colour, and texture with innovative decorative plaiting and edging using both traditional and introduced materials. The PLSLP mat currently being woven uses wefts from New Zealand, the Solomon Islands, the Cook Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. A collection of educational institutions and individuals who have individual and collective skills in literacy and school leadership, who are passionate about children achieving great results and who are committed to seeing some real results in their schools. In each of our smaller contexts too, we are weaving our own mats that can be used as a mantle to be placed on the bigger mat that we are weaving together.

The inception phase

The weaving of PLSLP began in 2014, with the careful selection of the different kinds of pandanus—of varying width and length and strength—for this mat. The first run/ line/ road *(hala)* was started *(fatu)*. Skilled weavers picked the strongest and most durable *(fe'unu)* of pandanus to start the weaving because it ensures that the rest of the mat will be strong. It also gives confidence to the weavers that there is a firm foundation to start from, rather than focusing on what they do not know. This reflects the 'strengths-based'

approach adopted by PLSLP, in which the existing strengths of students and teachers were taken as the starting point from which to extend capabilities in literacy. These strengths were identified through a robust process of class-room observation and analysis of available student achieve-ment data. These data highlighted where students and teachers' strengths were, where there was room to improve. Importantly, also, they provided insights on what aspects of both teaching and learning are most valued by school communities, and therefore what should frame the intro-duction of any changes in practice. This stage is difficult because the weave itself is intricate and slightly different from the runs that will follow. It is often thicker and elaborate as the *fe'unu* have to sit right and straight and they basically hold the mat together. Likewise, when the mat is finished, the same intricate weaving will be made to 'end' (*fakangata*) the mat.

The sense making phase

After the initial run, the second run *(hala fakama'ufatu)* was the 'sense-making' stage of PLSLP where all the strands (data about student learning and teaching practice) were brought together and collaboratively 'made sense of' with researchers, teachers, school leaders and Ministry staff across Tonga, Cook Islands and Solomon Islands. This second run in weaving translates literally as 'the route (*hala*) that binds/secures': a securing of warp and weft, a closer binding of all the islands and peoples working on this program. The process of sense-making is designed to reach shared understanding of the most important challenges to address in order to improve students' literacy learning, based on the school-specific data collected, and how we will work together to achieve that. The collective aspect of this sense-making process is critical to the quality of the weaving. Teachers' knowledge about what sits behind the data is essential to weave into the analysis alongside 'outsider' researchers' interpretations.

When the weaving of a mat begins, while the purpose of the mat is known and weavers and 'spectators' alike may visualise the finished product, the final mat may end up nothing like the original design and look. PLSLP incur-porates cycles of data collection and 'sense-making' to iteratively test interventions and design as we go, based on what the evidence is telling us (schools, Ministries and researchers) is working. Such an approach means there are opportunities to 'strengthen strands' on a number of levels as the program progresses, something good weavers are watchful for and mindful of.

The implementation phase

After the second run (the implementation phase of PLSLP), weavers will continue the weaving on the width of the mat in order to get the desired length. When a strand of pandanus nears the end of its length, the weaver selects another strand (*fe'unu*) of equal strength and width and length as the one almost finished, and she places this replacement strand on top of the one almost finished so that the mat continues to be woven almost seamlessly and the

mat does not sag or droop or become crooked. And so it continues until the mat is completed.

The importance of *talanoa* in weaving

Although there are times when quiet is needed, weaving is not meant to be a silent activity and in the accompanying stories (*talanoa*/gossip), songs and dance, giggles, tears and quiet, the weavers 'weave themselves' into the mat the strands (*fe'unu*) carry their stories, their laughter and sadness, their music, their aspirations and dreams. Thus, all who have touched the mat and have made their runs, know that this mat carries with it their accumulated experience and expertise, knowledge, ideas and values. It is a great opportunity for learning, even for skilled weavers and there is always the new innovation, the new curl or tuck or plait or design, that one did not know or expect. It is the chal-lenge of trying out something new, of weaving beyond the bounds. The opportunities for learning and extending the knowledge and capability of both skilled and novice weavers has been a special feature of this program. To date, there has been a significant learning curve for all involved and we know this will continue.

Completing the mat

When the mat has reached the desired length and width, the remaining *fe'unu* are tucked back into the mat and the weaving then is similar to the *fatu* when the mat was started. The stragglers are then cut to achieve a neat finish. What has been cut is rolled up and put away because it will be used again to make repairs to this mat at a later date or in another weaving. When the mat is completed, it is laid out for the weavers to look over with a critical eye; they might decide on adding other decorations and adornments or not. These decorations may include elaborate flower and tradi-tional designs created using a technique akin to embroidery (*hulu*). They may use another pandanus in a lighter or even darker (dyed black) pandanus or they may decide to use colourful knitting wool. They may decorate the border with the colourful wool or with the (soaked in seawater and dried) bark of the hibiscus plant (*fakapao*). Again, the purpose for which this mat was woven may determine what other additional/decorations will be put on. By establishing cycles of formative assessment and abilities to adopt teaching practice to respond to student need, PLSLP is supporting schools to expand and adapt their mat to enable continuous learning improvement and better meet needs of students.

Presenting the mat

The mat is then presented to the person/ people for whom it was woven. When it is accepted, it becomes part of that person's personal/ family treasure (*koloa*). Most heart-warming for the weaver(s) is if and when they see their mat being used at the occasion they had woven the mat for. The person or people/ family who received the mat are then free to use that mat for whatever purpose they think is most fitting. As with many other Pacific Island cultures, I

imagine these mats 'make the rounds' to other celebrations and functions and the mat's importance and value grows as more and more people can enjoy the mat. In this sense, PLSLP is weaving a mat of literacy learning that we hope can be shared with other schools, not currently involved in PLSLP. The value of a mat is determined as much by how it is used and by whom, as by properties of the mat itself. In this weaving journey that we are on, we hope to weave and plait a versatile and durable mat. We guard our mats fiercely and if, for some reason, it has holes when a strand (*fe'unu*) breaks or unravels, that is fine because it had been woven in the first place (*papata pē ka na'e lalanga*) and we have the strands to make our mat strong again.

Conclusion: Weaving together research and practice, local and global

PLSLP as understood through the metaphor of weaving provides an example of the potential for learning improvement initiatives that focus on process, embrace adaptation and variability, and integrate international research with local contextualisation. While it is still too early to claim results in learning outcomes from PLSLP (evidence on student progress from classroom based assessments will be available by end 2016), indications from uptake and engagement by teachers, and observable differences in teacher practice in classrooms, are positive. Many will argue that such an intensive, collaborative approach operating at the school level is unaffordable for resource-constrained systems, calling instead for what are perceived as more cost-efficient approaches (e.g. nation-wide training courses, providing prescriptive teacher guides). However, by embedding capabilities within the system and working within the available resources of schools approaches such as PLSLP can meet efficiency demands if assessed against specific measures of student learning outcomes at the school level (McNaughton and Lai 2009).

Through this paper we have sought to challenge conceptions about what counts as evidence and what evidence counts in relation to quality education and efforts to improve student learning outcomes. We have also sought to highlight that what matters for teachers is evidence on their classrooms and their students that they can use to inform their practice, not evidence that enables blueprint standardised approaches that satisfy internal efficiency demands but too often fail to achieve learning. Weaving is a collective process in which teacher beliefs and judgements have a key role to play—and that needs to be the focus of our attention, not the just inputs that we can easily control and direct. This paper has also sought to weave together the voices of Oceania-based educationalists and development practitioners working across cultural, geographical and disciplinary spaces. In doing this, we hope to have demonstrated the benefits of interventions being not just 'responsive to' but 'of' the specific context which they seek to influence; to be 'woven' <u>with</u>, rather than <u>for,</u> school communities; and for beginning with existing strengths and experiences.

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