

# COMMUNITY VOICES

## Cultural Connectivity and Educational Standards

By Juanita Rilometo

**D**r. Konai Thaman's poem (p.12) should strike a deep cord in us and prompt recollection and reflection as we rethink education in the Pacific. As educators, what are we doing, or what can we do, to help our young people obtain a global education without losing connections with their roots—their lands, cultures, and traditional values and skills?

There are many important questions. What is the vision and purpose of the formal K–12 educational system? Are we preparing our young people to have the knowledge and skills to be able to live well in their own rural communities, as well as in advanced global communities? What role do educational standards play as we rethink education in our region? Where are the voices and needs of the people in our communities in this process? What are their views on education, and what do they want for their children? So many questions, yet there are no easy answers.

With this article, I will endeavor to put forth my own thoughts and represent the feelings of people I encounter in the course of my work with both remote communities and urban centers. My hope is to shed some light on the unending questions surrounding education and developing schools that will better meet the needs of all children in the Pacific.

At the Rethinking Education in Micronesia Conference (October 2004), it was pointed out repeatedly that some of the dilemmas our present educational systems face are the result of a lack of clear vision, little sense of ownership in the community, and young people's loss of cultural connectivity. Educators and concerned community members have raised these same concerns on numerous occasions in the past.

Community members observe the changes taking place in their children and wonder what is happening. Parents send their children to school, trusting educators to provide them with a sound education to prepare them to become self-suffi-



▷ Student learns the art of weaving fronds while at school.

Photo: Nancy Lane

cient and contribute to the security and well being of their families and communities. In some instances, especially when children are sent to urban centers to further their education, the young people that return home—and many do not—are confused about their cultural identities, unskilled in any specific field, and unable to fully contribute to their communities. Moreover, this time away often contributes to the erosion of their knowledge and respect for the wisdom and skills found within their culture. On the other hand, many young people in the urban centers drop out of school, become social misfits, and become burdens on society. Is it any wonder that our communities are beginning to question the value and importance of the school systems? Children need to have a firm self-identity rooted in their own cultural and traditional values to perform well in school. Communities want their children to receive a formal education, but at the same time, they want their children to remain connected with traditional values and skills. Is our current educational system guilty of playing a role in separating the younger generation from their home and cultural expectations? Do we need to restructure our educational system to help bridge this disconnectedness? Can we teach our young to walk in both worlds—to honor and embrace the best of our traditional culture and values, while understanding the culture and values of others and gaining their knowledge?

In the Pacific, it is necessary for cultures to exist simultaneously, so we must find an answer to these questions. At a recent principal's institute, I raised two questions: *What do you want your children to learn in science, and how should they go about learning these things?* Unanimously, the principals responded that children must first understand their own environments and the traditional values and skills related to them. They believed this could be accomplished through inquiry and research—using both community and global resources and information—and through restructuring local curriculum frameworks.

Following in the footsteps of the United States and other Western nations, the northern Pacific islands have become involved in implementing content and performance curriculum standards. The purpose of standards is to give our young people an opportunity to reach high and perform to their greatest potential. This effort is praiseworthy, but problems arise when we fail to integrate our indigenous knowledge, skills, and values into the standards.

Traditional Pacific island societies' ways of teaching and learning are integrated within family and community life. Youngsters learn through listening to words from the mouths of their elders—observing, imitating, and engaging actively. Through active engagement, we learn and internalize. The Pohnpeian word *lolokongkihla* best describes the end result of this process. It means internalizing knowledge, skills, and values so deeply that they become part of us and remain with us to provide guidance wherever we are. Thus, a child having firm cultural connectivity has a good self-concept and the confidence needed to perform well in school and in life, no matter where he or she goes.

Lolokongkihla is in fact also the desired outcome of a standards-based education. The University of the South Pacific Institute of Education's *Colloquium on Rethinking Pacific Education Report* (2002) pointed out the need to rethink and

restructure our educational system so that "education . . . is firmly rooted in the cultures of Pacific societies . . . . The main purpose of education in the Pacific is the survival, transformation and sustainability of Pacific peoples and societies, with its outcomes measured in terms of performance and appropriate behavior in the multiple context in which they have to live" (p. 2). The challenge is *how* do we do this?

Curriculum standards can play a vital role in meeting the challenge. Content and performance standards, drafted thoughtfully and with community involvement, give clear guidelines for student expectations. Standards should define the essential learning occurring in schools so that—along with the knowledge and skills embedded in the cultures, communities, and environments of our islands—our young people are prepared to take their place as productive members of their society at local, regional, and global levels.

We can achieve this if we include local elders, storytellers, historians, and other community members in our collaboration on standards-based learning. Modern technology is a valuable tool to enhance learning, carryout research, and learn more about change and development in cultures across the globe, but we cannot be successful without including the rich knowledge found within our communities. Collectively, we can prepare students to be critical and creative thinkers, who are able and willing to participate fully in democratic processes.

Also, we have to rethink and restructure the types of assessment strategies we utilize to gather evidence of student learning. If we expect our students and young people to engage in learning activities firmly rooted in our cultural identity and knowledge, we need to use assessment strategies to compliment such learning. Assessment for learning where teachers engage in ongoing reflective planning should take precedence over the traditional forms of paper and pencil unit tests. Teachers must recognize the importance of using learning outcomes firmly rooted in cultural identity and local knowledge, while realizing that Pacific cultures are in the process of redefining themselves. We need to utilize multiple assessment strategies that will give our students opportunities to demonstrate their deeper learning. To embrace this vision, we must encourage our families and community members to be active in creating a shared ownership of schools.

It is not too late to rethink and restructure our educational system. The vital ingredient is community involvement. All sectors should participate fully in the process of education; this was once a common practice among Pacific communities. We do not lack a vision for educating our youth; however, we do need a path to bring our vision to light and guide us forward. The visions we hold dear are evident in our island constitutions; in our national anthems; in our songs, stories, and poems; and in the realities of our daily lives. If we are to pull these visions together, they will all point toward a vision of education—one firmly rooted in our lands and cultures, while integrating the best of the modern, global cultures. A firm conviction and willingness to move forward is greatly needed. As Mr. Henry Falan, former chair of the PREL Board of Directors has said, "Vision without action is useless." Let's get the canoe sailing with our new destination in mind.

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