

# The Time Is Now...

## Communities Must Reclaim the Education Process

By Hilda C. Heine, EdD

Often, we get used to doing things a certain way and begin to take things for granted, such as “schooling is about sitting in classrooms within the typical brick and mortar building,” or “teaching writing is dictating what children should write about,” or “learning math is about memorizing multiplication tables.” Life goes on despite limited student success across our school systems.

“That is how it has always been done,” is a phrase we hear when educators are questioned about content and strategies being used in classrooms. The underlying philosophies for how we educate our children are often explained away similarly. Finding meaning in what is being done is often ignored.

Rethinking education is about reexamining the knowledge and processes of education for the purpose of shaping successful future generations. Whose knowledge is taught and why? How do we prioritize and who should prioritize what is taught in schools? This is particularly important in the Pacific where technology, cultures, languages, and systems of knowledge create a diverse landscape.

The added technological feature of our world further complicates how and what children should be taught. Yet, we often create educational systems that are alike because “that is how it has always been.” The uniform educational systems that exist across the communities in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific are largely Western-oriented. This is a legacy of years of colonization. Does education have to remain that way? Educators grappled with that issue in the first Rethinking Education in Micronesia (REIM) conference held in the Republic of the Marshall Islands in 2004. The rethinking process has begun.

The involvement of people in communities across the Pacific in determining and prioritizing the knowledge to pass on to their children, as well as processes by which classroom dynamics are carried out, is often ignored or rendered useless. Moreover, as Pacific people, we shamefully and regretfully shun our own knowledge for the more “advanced” and attractive Western ways that currently make up our curricula. There seems to be an unstated consensus that our knowledge and skills can be successfully passed on to the younger generation through informal means, without being part of the formal school curriculum. The time is now to rethink that assumption.

For many years, educational priority has focused on improving the overall quality of education, access to schooling, and equity of outcomes. Those priorities are just as important today. However, the focus on creating ownership and making education and the education process an integral part of families and communities cannot be overlooked in Pacific communities. That ownership starts with schools and teachers building on the knowledge learners bring from home, honoring the language they bring to school, and connecting learning to contexts familiar to them. Schools must not continue to be left to the “experts.” We must rethink the ownership of schools. Families and communities must rethink school ownership and reclaim the education process. The time is now.

Across the region, schools are experiencing high student absenteeism and high drop out rates. Students seem to be disconnected from the schooling process. The value of relationships, which has such an important place in the livelihood of Pacific people, is ignored in school. Schools must rethink how they are creating personal connections for students. Indeed it is that one personal connection, a relationship with someone in school, that can make a difference in whether a student drops out of school or stays in. There is merit in rethinking our Pacific values and bringing them into the mainstream school processes. The time is now.

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