

Pacific Elementary School Teachers and Language Policy Critique: Context, Text and Consequences

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This article explores the issue of language policy analysis for elementary school teachers in the Oceania region, that is Polynesian nations in the southern and eastern, Melanesian nations in the western and Micronesian nations in the northern parts of the Pacific Ocean region. It is grounded in an understanding that education policy work of any kind is contested and political but nevertheless an exercise that elementary school teachers need to engage in. The ideas examined in the article are timely given recent 're-thinking' language policy work across the region initiated in early 2005 by the Institute of Education at the University of the South Pacific and the Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of [basic] Education (PRIDE), in Fiji. This article draws on a template for education policy analysis that enables teachers in particular to ask critical key questions around language policy context, text and consequences (Taylor et al., 1997). These questions offer teachers a language for examining language and language policy issues that concern them in their everyday work and thus a possible way of accessing and contributing to debates from which they are often excluded.

Key words: Pacific education, policy, English, Vernacular

Introduction

Being a professional educator means more than having a thorough understanding of curriculum content and an array of teaching strategies to draw upon. It also means seeing the connections teaching has with wider societal issues. The Pacific educational institutions, that is, the elementary schools in which teachers work, are part of a web of influences that impact on children's lives. Language and language teaching, whether it be a Vernacular language particular to a teacher or child's own Pacific national context or English, are intimately connected with both a

range of societal institutions as well as dominant sets of beliefs and values both within and beyond the Pacific education context. Major policy decisions, such as which language should be the language of instruction in schools and the stage at which a second language should be introduced to children, emerge from the more powerful institutions and their beliefs and values in each Pacific national context.

Recently, in 2005, the Institute of Education at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji and the Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of [basic] Education (PRIDE), also in Fiji, initiated a region-wide process for the reformulation of language policies for Pacific elementary schools [see PRIDE (2007) for a description of PRIDE's language policy work]. Very rarely do elementary teachers participate in language policy debates such as these. As professional educators it is crucial that elementary teachers understand language, policy and society connections, look

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upon them critically and more importantly participate in the process of policy formulation and critique.

This article argues that Pacific elementary school teachers need a set of critical skills with which to read language and language teaching policy, both formal in the sense of syllabus and other published policy statements as well as the many informal statements about language that teachers encounter in the communities in which they teach, particularly those statements generated outside of their immediate professional circles such as in the media. Teachers need to engage in policy critique given the wider linkages language and language teaching has with the social settings of Pacific communities and societies.

Policy – what is it?

Often the term is used to narrowly describe a set of officially published government documents. A deliberately broad approach to the notion of policy is taken in this discussion referring instead to a whole range of official and unofficial guidelines and statements about language generally. These include guidelines and statements about:

- the relative use and validity of various languages in a given Pacific society or community. An example here might be English classified as the language of ‘government’ whereas the vernacular is classified as the ‘national language’
- the relative emphases teachers need to place upon various languages in the teaching and learning process. An example here might be the use of a Pacific Vernacular as the medium of instruction up to certain elementary year level which then gives way to English as the medium of instruction.

Also included are any official statements about how language is to be taught, referred to usually as curriculum or more colloquially by many teachers across the Pacific region as the ‘prescription’.

Policy is a Process

According to Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, and Henry (1997, p. 24) policy formation is often popularly believed to be a

rather straightforward sequence of events starting with recognition of a problem followed by decisions about dealing with that problem, which will then lead to a desired set of goals. This is then written into documentation. Following the above authors it is suggested that this is a somewhat simplistic way of viewing policy formation. What happens in reality is far more complex than this. There is much more push and pull from the various interest groups involved. Deciding on what constitutes the problem is often a difficult process in itself. Courses of action to deal with the problem once it is formulated are also difficult to agree upon. Further consultation and feedback is required. Negotiation is crucial in policy formulation through each step. Implementing policy decisions, especially at the local level, is also not a straightforward process. Interpretation by others is sometimes varied. As a result there is a need to emphasise in any critique the *process of making policy* rather than just looking at the words on the page of any particular piece of policy.

Policy Involves Politics

Both defining the problem and what needs to be done about the problem, hinge largely on the beliefs and values of the various interests groups involved. What is also crucial is the level of access interest groups have to positions of power in society. Policy formulation is easily dominated by groups and individuals that are more socially mobile, such as big business interests and government. The following example from Kiribati (Burnett, 2005) in the 1930s and 40s serves to illustrate these sorts of linkages between language, language policy, government and power. Teachers are urged to reflect on the desires that exist presently for different languages in their particular context in the region, particularly from those who desire a re-emphasis on the teaching of vernacular.

The British Colonial government, in the decades leading up to World War II, imposed a school language policy that meant the vast majority of students in the colony’s schools needed to be taught in the vernacular. English language was deliberately withheld. This of course, on the surface at least, appears to be very culturally sensitive. The official rationale for such a policy was the preservation of Kiribati culture and identity. However, it can

be shown that the colonial government did have other motives for implementing such a policy. Vernacular was considered the best means of colonial control of peoples lives. Colonial officials up until the 1950s were long serving in the group and in most cases had become fluent in Kiribati language. English on the other hand was reserved as the language of governance, the language used in all decision making. Should English language have been spread too widely across the population then greater were the chances of local resistance to the colonial presence in Kiribati. The colonial administration recognised this and out of a fear of possible loss of control passed on English language skills to only a small number of mostly male students who were needed to help run the colony, but only then in minor civil service positions. By way of illustration consider the following statements below from two consecutive Resident Commissioners, who together led the colonial administration in Kiribati from 1920 through to the early post-World War II years. Each statement can be read as thinly veiled colonial anxiety concerning language and political stability in the colony:

When the pupil leaves school he becomes exposed to influences over which little or no control can be exercised, and it is his reaction to such fortuitous influences which will determine his ultimate value as a citizen. Herein seems to lie the chief danger of bringing the native into intimate contact with a literature which is not his own, and with visitors whose political views can find no healthy application in his islands (Grimble, 1930, p. 2).

Harry Maude who served as Resident Commissioner after Grimble put it like this:

My experience is that a native with a knowledge of English seldom develops a taste for reading good literature and those few who do are not assisted to become contented members of the native society to which they belong (Maude, 1936, p. 9).

Certainly after World War II when language policy changed there was a greater spread of English language in schools, linked to ideas of liberalism and modernisation, and thus English language became a tool of colonial dominance. However, often contrary to popular beliefs, before World War II, vernacular languages were often used as an

instrument of control in much of the colonial Pacific. Alastair Pennycook (1998, p. 84) terms the use of vernaculars to facilitate British colonial control in this way as “pragmatic vernacularism”. The point to make is that any language, either a Pacific vernacular or English, can be used through formal schooling to facilitate governance and are thus political in nature.

Policy Rarely Ever Involves Consensus

Views concerning language policy will be influenced greatly by the beliefs teachers have about how Pacific societies function. Teachers might consider whether the various groups and institutions in society basically work in harmony and contribute to the on-going stability of society. This is often called a structural-functionalist view of society (Bulbeck, 1998). Simply it means that all parts function together for the collective good of all. Advocates often use the different parts of the human body to illustrate how a functionalist view works. Certainly this is a perspective that many people hold when it comes to looking at Pacific societies, for example, in the emphases placed on ‘consensus’ and ‘collaboration’ in decision making when explaining how Pacific communities work. Alternatively, teachers might consider society consisting of competing institutions and groups all having different values and varying access to power. This particular view of Pacific society might seem the more realistic given the rising socio-economic divide, the calls for better, more transparent governance to root out corruption and some of the social and political upheavals experienced in several countries in the region in the last few decades. This view is often called the conflict view of society (Bulbeck, 1998).

If teachers adopt a general functionalist view of society then policy making and implementation is largely a trouble free process based as it is on consensus and agreement. If teachers see society from a conflict point of view then policy making and implementation is marked by struggle and compromise. It is strongly suggested that all societies, including Pacific ones, are marked by varying degrees of conflict *and* consensus. Recent and on-going contestations in many Pacific Island countries such as those over democratic governance in Tonga (Campbell, 2006), ethnic tensions in Solomon Islands (Moore, 2004), and the role of

the military in Fiji (Lal & Pretes, 2001), would seem persuasive evidence.

Why Analyse It?

There are increasing calls in many Pacific rim countries, for example, Australia, New Zealand and the USA for a greater involvement by teachers in educational decision making (Smyth, 2001; Down, 2006) and a corresponding resistance to technicist discourses in education that construct teachers in merely functionalist ways (Gore, 2001). Somewhat related, in the Pacific region Velayutham (1996) has noted a gradual move away from centralised educational administration toward greater degrees of school based decision making. These trends, both within and outside the Pacific region point to a future increase in teacher involvement in educational policy making and policy analysis in Pacific education systems.

Taylor et al. (1997, pp. 363-373) argue that effective analysis must recognise the political nature of the policy and ask the hard questions of , ‘In whose interests?’ and ‘Who are the winners and losers?’. They suggest analyses must explore the ‘values and assumptions which underlie policies and the related issues of power’. Teachers need to have a heart for transformation and change in order to carry out what they suggest is a form of critical policy analysis. By critical it means more than going over policy with an eye for detail. In the broad Freirian tradition (see Freire, 1971) teachers need to have a sense of social justice in mind as well. They need to ask if there are any groups or individuals in their communities that might be less advantaged by a particular education or language policy than others?

In terms of literacy levels globally, rural groups, boys, and children from socio-economically poor urban backgrounds often fall behind (see Bellamy, 2004). Some of the large national examinations that are carried out in the Pacific education systems also indicate similar disparities, for example, Narsey’s (2004) analysis of the two annual Fijian elementary school literacy examinations referred to later in this article. In taking a critical approach there is a need to ask current language policy what limitations have caused such disparities and to think of policy solutions that might improve literacy levels among these groups. Of course in doing such analysis there is a need to be sensitive

to personal values and beliefs which are brought to bear on identifying particular literacy problems and working out solutions.

If policy is considered as a process involving problem identification and the ‘push and pull’ of interest groups, then policy needs to be analysed in a broad way, moving away from a simple reading of the words of any particular document. Accordingly, Taylor et al. (1997) suggest three areas that need to be looked at in relation to policy, these being context, text and consequences. The following three sections will discuss the meaning of each of these areas.

Policy - context

Context refers to the range of factors leading to the formulation of the policy. Teachers need to have an understanding of these factors and in any sort of policy work highlight them. Taylor et al. (1997, p. 45) suggest that highlighting these underlying factors in any policy work helps to answer the ‘why’ and ‘why now’ questions that are important in critical policy analysis. The range of important factors in relation to policy might consist of several or all of the following: economic, social, political and historical factors. Integral to each of these are the individuals and groups involved.

Social/Political Events and Pressures

Teachers need to take a look at the social conditions in which they live and work and make links where possible with language policy and events, ideas, beliefs and pressures. An example of links between recent language policy and social life from the Fiji context, namely the *Ministry of Education Strategic Plan 2003-2005* (Fiji Government, 2002) helps illustrate the importance of understanding context in relation to policy analysis. Curiously the plan contains very few statements about language and language teaching but does however include a reference to conversational language use (See Table 1).

Given the date of publication the statements would appear to be a response by policy makers to the social and political upheavals in Fiji of 2000 that were explained by many, including the perpetrators of those events as being ethnic in nature. From a policy perspective ethnic conflict, it

Table 1
Conversational Language Use

Strategic Activity	Performance Indicators	Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen teaching and learning of conversational languages (Fijian/Hindi) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevant curriculum materials and resources developed • Conversational languages extended to secondary level • Monitoring mechanism strengthened • Tolerance and goodwill promoted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All students have knowledge and understanding of a language and a culture apart from their own and are able to communicate in two or more languages • All students understand themselves, others and the world and develop the skills and values that enable them to learn, work and live together

Note. The Ministry of Education Strategic Plan 2003-2005 (Fiji Government, 2002, p. 11)

is assumed, can be minimised if those of different ethnicities, have a degree of competence in each other’s language. There is an indication in these statements that ‘conversational languages’ will result in more harmonious relations between Indigenous and Indian ethnicities in Fiji.

Of course there are many commentators who argue the year 2000 upheavals in Fiji were motivated by factors other than ethnic ones [see Lal & Pretes (2001) for a range of views]. Some suggest political tensions between groups of Fijians as the cause, others explain the events in terms of class conflict and business interests. It is not the purpose of this article to make value judgments about the different explanations offered for the year 2000 tensions in Fiji but merely to point out that the strategic plan’s statements about language do seemed linked to what some would call the ‘ethnic problem’ in Fiji and that the way languages are dealt with in schools is seen as a partial solution to that problem. Highlighting possible links between context and policy, such as this, helps teachers make a judgment about the worth and effectiveness of language policy making.

What Has Gone Before?

In addition, it is not just events in the present that can result in particular policy statements. Often the past needs to be looked at as well. Current policy is often a result of past policy failure and shortcomings. A useful example can be found in the calls to re-emphasise Pacific Vernaculars in elementary school curriculum (see, for example, Taufe’ ulungaki, 2003). While this re-emphasis does not appear

much in formal school language policy in many regional countries there is certainly much lobbying for greater inclusion of Vernaculars. The Institute of Education at University of the South Pacific is a strong advocate for the re-instating Pacific Vernaculars in formal schooling. So too the more recently formed Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative (RPEI) (see Pene, Taufe’ ulungaki & Benson, 2002; Thaman, 2003). For the purposes of illustration, the main place in school curriculum across the region has for a long time been given to English language. Vernacular language policy advocates argue that English language origins in school curriculum are linked to colonial governance in the Pacific and the interests of ‘Westerners’ in the region generally.

Several decades of English language, according to some, has led to Pacific cultural and identity loss and more recently poor learning outcomes across the curriculum (Puamau, 2002, pp.67-68; Puamau, 2005). As a result of these perceived negative trends it is argued that re-emphasising Pacific vernaculars has great potential to reverse cultural and identity loss and boost learning outcomes. It is logical that if a child is learning in their home language they will be far more advantaged in schooling than if they are being forced to operate in a second language.

The Key Players?

The values and beliefs of key groups and individuals will often take language policy debates in particular

directions. Taylor et al. (1997) illustrate this with an example from the Australian context in the late 1980s. A broad ranging gender policy entitled *The National Policy for the Education of Girls in Schools* (NPEG) was formulated by the Schools Commission at a time when it was headed by a feminist and the government minister for education was also a feminist. The inclusion of these two key players in the formulation of the NPEG ensured a degree of access and equity for girls in schooling that might not have occurred otherwise. It is also important to look for policies in other areas of social life that complement education and language policy specifically. The authors point out how the NPEG was strengthened by policy work in the general area of women's rights in Australia at that time.

In Kiribati, the Kiribati Protestant Church (KPC) is a key player in many of the vernacular debates in that country, desiring to standardise a particular form of written Kiribati language. As in many other countries in the region, there is an ever increasing number of Christian churches in Kiribati, however, it is only the KPC that has roots back to the first Christian missionary who gave Kiribati language a written form. The KPC has a lot invested in terms of status and in maintaining a degree of vernacular 'purity'.

Policy – text

Text refers to the words on the page, the actual wording of the policy documentation. Its meaning also extends to the formatting, style and even colour of the documentation. In analysing text teachers need to 'read against the grain', which means reading at the level of connotation, taking nothing in the text at its face value. Another common English expression is 'reading between the lines'. Reading policy in such a way involves engaging in a form of critical literacy. Consider the following brief summary of critical literacy practices below based on Campbell and Green (2000, p. 207). These same principles can be applied to our own reading of policy:

- language is a social practice
- texts and teaching are always political because the ways in which texts are used always represent someone's view of the world
- there are many different ways of being literate and many different literacies

- learning any of these literacies is more effective when learning takes place in a meaningful context where the purposes for the learning are made explicit to the learners

The word 'prescription', used widely in the region, particularly Fiji, to refer to curriculum or syllabus, is a useful piece of 'text' to illustrate the kind of critical reading being called for here. It appears formally on the front page of some curriculum material, including the Fiji elementary schools language syllabus document and is often used informally by teachers in their talk about curriculum and the role of the Curriculum Development Unit. A critical reading of that piece of text would suggest teachers as merely followers of curriculum orders and at the same time the writers of the 'prescription' as authoritative and 'knowing' when it comes to what is to be taught. It also tends to paint a very undemocratic picture of curriculum development and a picture of teaching as technicist rather than professional. Some caution needs to be exercised, however, as policy 'text' and the realities of teaching can be very different things. Nevertheless, Taylor et al. (1997, pp.48-50) suggest that in analysing policy text a number of 'linguistic strategies' need to be looked at. These require a much fuller explanation and are only listed here to give an indication:

- word choice ... are there lots of 'shoulds' or are there 'possibly's'?
- the 'tone' of the text ... does it 'look down upon' teachers or does it make them out to be partners?
- the way teachers are addressed in the text ... are they professionals or technicians?
- the ways in which others, such as CDU, MOE, parents, and employers are addressed?
- the way particular language issues are addressed ... are bilingualism, culture, identity, gender to name but a few, issues dealt with within the policy?
- the way language itself is dealt with ... is 'language' considered merely a code to be learned or a tool used to achieve socio-cultural purposes?

An analysis also needs to be made of what the policy does not state. Taylor et al. (1997, p. 49) call these policy 'silences'. Sometimes policy is silent on an issue because the writers make an assumption that everyone agrees on the issue, therefore it does not merit mention. At other times

there is a silence because the writers feel it is an unimportant or irrelevant issue. Perhaps even, an issue has been deliberately written out of the policy. The *Ministry of Education Strategic Plan 2003-2005* (Fiji Government, 2002), referred to above, leaves a silence around languages other than English, Fijian and Hindi. Given the many references to Fiji's "multicultural" [as opposed to bicultural] population in the same document (see p. 4, 6, 11), it is worth reflecting on why the languages of Fiji's significant Muslim and Chinese communities, to name but two, have not been included. One might also question the silence in the plan around the various dialects of Fijian and Hindi that are spoken by significant numbers of people within these two main ethnicities.

Policy – consequences

Policy consequences mean outcomes for those effected by the policy. Given the political nature of policy discussed in the previous two sections there is great potential for a very uneven spread of policy benefits across communities. Some groups may be more advantaged than others. The tables below, from Narsey (2004), showing English language scores in Fiji's FIE (*Fiji Intermediate Examination*) and

FEYE (*Fiji Eighth Year Examination*) examinations in 1999, demonstrate English language competence disparities by ethnicity, gender and location. Clearly, some groups in the community are benefiting more than others from current English language policy and its ensuing practice.

Other analyses elsewhere include social class as an important influence in literacy outcomes (Scalmer, 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Children from socio-economically disadvantaged home backgrounds often achieve at a lower level compared to children from middle class backgrounds (Thomson, 2002). If policy planners have social justice high on their agenda then policy should attempt to address these differences in outcomes.

Caution needs to be exercised when it comes to making judgments about what is socially just policy. There are many perspectives on social justice and schooling and these are often hotly contested by different sections of society. An example was the Fiji government's *Blueprint for Fiji Education* (Fiji Government, 2000). As policy it attempted to address Indigenous Fijian students underperformance at school through affirmative action, that is, the deliberate favouring of Indigenous Fijian students over and above students of other ethnicities in terms of educational resourcing. Affirmative action policies are very common ways of attempting to produce 'level playing fields' in

Table 2

Mean Marks of FEYE in 1999

Subject	Urban	Rural	Remote	Very Remote
English	73.2	65.1	61	60.1

Table 3

FIE English and Maths Means in 1999 by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	English	Maths
Fijian	84.7	78.8
Indo-Fijian	85.1	86.9

Table 4

FIE English Means in 1999 by Gender

Ethnicity	Female	Male
Fijian	87.9	81.4
Indo-Fijian	87.2	83

Note. Academic outcomes and resources for basic education in Fiji. (Narsey, 2004, p. 13)

social life in many societies. Critics, however, argue that affirmative action reduces opportunity for others based on merit. It is not the article's purpose to deal comprehensively with the notion of social justice, except to say that it too is a contested set of beliefs and teachers need to proceed sensitively. Gale and Densmore (2000) suggest three different frameworks for enacting schooling justly, namely; distributive, retributive and recognitive. Each differs according to degrees of resourcing (distributive), merit (retributive) and 'voice' (recognitive) apportioned to marginalised groups and individuals.

Conclusion

This article has examined briefly the concepts of language policy and policy analysis and applied the 'critical' policy analysis ideas of Taylor et al. (1997) to thinking about language policy in the context of Pacific education. Elementary teachers of language need to engage in policy debates, either in their formulation or at the very least in their interpretation to a far greater degree than they already do. There is a recognition that for many Pacific teachers there are profound systemic changes that need to be made before language policy and indeed educational policy formulation becomes more democratic. Nevertheless teachers are encouraged to be aware of some of the critical principles examined in this article such as: the contested and political nature of language policy; the importance of policy process over product; and envisaging policy as more than just text on the page to statements of intent that have a different set of consequences for different people across Pacific communities.

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