

BOOK REVIEW:

Leadership, community partnerships and schools in the Pacific islands: Implications for quality education

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BOOK REVIEW: J. Dorovolomo and G. I. Lingam (Eds.) (2020). *Leadership, community partnerships and schools in the Pacific Islands: Implications for quality education*. Springer. ISBN: 978-981-15-6482-6. 187pp.

This edited volume of 13 empirical studies undertaken by 12 Pacific scholars is valuable because it provides insights into critical issues of schooling from the often-neglected perspectives of Pacific island educators. Drawn from the Talanga Seminar series, facilitated by the School of Education at the University of the South Pacific (USP), the collection covers topics and themes of interest to anyone interested in knowing more about the practical day-to-day occurrences and challenges faced by educational administrators, school leaders and teachers in Pacific island countries.

In introducing the volume, the editors set out an all too commonly heard story of the dangers of uncritical “policy transfer” or “policy borrowing” across the Pacific and the need to ensure policies and practices are contextually relevant and appropriate. By bringing a sharp focus on the daily interactions of teachers, school leaders, and their communities, the collection reveals the nuances of what “contextually relevant and appropriate” looks like and involves. In so doing, the volume adds to and complements the growing body of empirical research produced by Pacific scholars for—and relevant to—Pacific educators and policymakers (see, for example, Benson et al., 2002; Dorovolomo et al., 2014; Otunuku et al., 2014; Otunuku et al., 2020).

The research shared in the book addresses critical issues of school leadership, school-community relationships, citizenship education, research, and approaches to improving literacy and numeracy. These issues are currently of great concern to Pacific educators and policymakers, as evidenced, for example, in the priority areas of the *Pacific Regional Framework for Education*.¹ A further important contribution of the volume is its inclusion of country contexts that are relatively neglected in existing literature,

¹ Pacific Regional Framework for Education. Retrieved from <https://pacref.org/>

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namely those of Niue, the Republic of Marshall Islands, and Solomon Islands, and Fiji, where the USP School of Education is located.

A focus on the beliefs and values of school leaders, teachers, and parents runs throughout the book. This responds to the challenge of contextualization by recognizing the central role that values and beliefs play in mediating the success of any educational policy reform or intervention. The collection includes research exploring Early Childhood Education leaders' beliefs about the importance of extending autonomy in their roles to include day-to-day school planning, leadership, and resource coordination (Chapter 12: Fito'o); Fijian secondary teachers' approaches to teaching maths using pure (absolutist) or applied (fallibilist) methods derived from their own past experiences or personal biases (Chapter 7: Dayal and Lingam); and Solomon Islands parents' views on positive relationship building and effective communications with teachers and school leaders to promote transparency in leadership and management of school resources (Chapter 4: Wairiu). These Chapters are examples of the rich insights into day-to-day schooling experiences, thus demonstrating the value of empirical, context-specific research.

School leadership is another focus in the volume. In Chapter 2, Lingam and Lingam explore teachers' perspectives on their school leaders in Niue, while in Chapter 3, Lingam, Dayal, and Lingam explore school improvement planning among Marshall Islands school leaders. Both chapters demonstrate the critical importance of school leaders in managing change.

A particular value of the volume is the inclusion of under-researched topics in the region. In Chapter 5, Fito'o and Dorovolomo discuss two practical studies on citizenship education and recommend strengthening the human rights, civic education, and social citizenship components within the national social science and humanities curriculum of Solomon Islands schools. Totaram, Raghuwaiya, Yee Chief, and Jokhan's chapter (Chapter 11) on the use of technology-enhanced learning for numeracy in Fijian primary schools provides a basis upon which further studies can build to develop a stronger evidence base for the efficacy of digital technologies in Pacific classrooms. In Chapter 9, Varani-Norton eloquently argues the need for Fijian schools to move away from teacher-centred classrooms and exam-oriented curriculums into more learner-centred classrooms and school environments. Dorovolomo's research (Chapter 8) on gender differences in play in primary school playgrounds in Fiji offers a particularly novel empirical exploration of children's interactions in schooling settings, complementing the focus on teachers and leaders.

As noted by the editors, the volume also offers value to students of education and research in the region by demonstrating a range of methodological approaches, which are explained in accessible ways. There were, however, several dimensions of the contributions that, if given greater attention, would have further enhanced the value of the collection. We noted the collection's relative absence of research using Pacific theorization and research methodologies (for a recent review of such, see Sanga & Reynolds, 2017) and, to a lesser extent, citations of existing Pacific scholarship. While commending the volume's embrace of the value of "learning across boundaries" of North and South (p. 182), it could have more fully engaged with Pacific theorizations and methodologies for empirical research on schooling going forward. As noted above,

the small-scale nature of these studies, many of which involved a sample of just one or several school settings, offers rich insights into specific contexts that are valuable in and of themselves, but there is an unnecessary attempt in several of the chapters to claim generalizable findings or to reference findings against those from other quite distinct country contexts. While we agree with the potential for larger-scale studies to broaden the evidence base offered by these studies, we encourage readers to celebrate the value of small-sample qualitative research as presented in this volume. Such small-scale studies bring to the fore the sometimes complex yet unique aspects of schooling and teaching in Pacific schools.

Finally, the collaborative nature of the development of this book is important to acknowledge—emerging as it did from a seminar series utilizing the Tongan methodology of *talanga*, or purposeful dialogue—to generate ongoing, collaborative, and respectful critical dialogue amongst staff and students of the School of Education. In this regard, the book contributes to a growing body of literature on centring Pacific oralities and dialogic methods as part of academic deliberation (Fa’avae & Fonua, 2021; Fonua, 2020; Sanga et al, 2021). It also offers a relatively unique example of how a method such as *talanga* can be used to develop, refine, and feed into academic publications. We look forward to future publications that might further explore this process and authors’ personal experiences and reflections on it. At a time when the international scholarly community is facing multiple demands that are limiting opportunities for open, collaborative engagement, there is much to be commended on committing time to this approach, and much to be learnt from the authors’ experiences that are of value to those in the region and beyond.

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