

Editorial: Strengthening Educational Relationships in Oceania and Beyond

Eve Coxon

University of Auckland: e.coxon@auckland.ac.nz

In 1983 the Australia New Zealand Comparative and International Education Society (ANZCIES) became the second “regional member” of the World Congress of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES), the only member society of WCCES’s fifth, and by far least populated, region of Oceania. As defined by United Nations agencies and many other international and regional bodies, the region of Oceania includes the ‘developed’ states of Australia and New Zealand, the relatively large ‘developing’ state of Papua New Guinea, and the many small ‘developing’ island states (SIDS) and territories located across the Pacific basin. These 22 Pacific Island Countries (PICs) represent a large proportion of the world’s smallest states most of which are categorised according to various indexes such as ‘least developed’, ‘fragile’, ‘vulnerable’ etcetera. Per capita, PNG and the PICS make up the world’s most aid-dependent (sub) region.

Late in 2014, ANZCIES members voted strongly in favour of a name change for their regional society, to one more representative of the region within which the society exists, and more inclusive of educationists from throughout Oceania, particularly those from PICs. Thus ANZCIES became OCIES, reflecting the wish of many members to revitalise their society by encompassing the diversity of contexts, issues, interests and perspectives represented in Oceania. A particular concern was to both widen participation in and add depth to debates and dialogue about how Comparative and International Education (CIE), a research area within which many educationists identify as ‘academic-practitioners’, can contribute theoretically and practically to education for sustainable development in the post-2015 era. The north/south relationship between Australia/New Zealand and PNG/PICs, particularly as exemplified through educational aid, was a key focus. Another aim was to explore the means of developing CIE’s potential to enhance educational transformation in the region while contributing to a new Oceanic regionalism.

The title of this Special Issue, *Strengthening Educational Relationships in Oceania and Beyond*, is underpinned by the regional vision offered by the late Tongan anthropologist, Dr Epeli Hau’ofa, as an alternative to the prevalent regional perspective at the time, “the economic and geographic determinist view” (1993:6) which he saw as maintaining the power relations of colonial times between Pacific Rim ‘developed’ countries and the small island ‘developing’ states and territories within the Pacific Basin. Hau’ofa’s “New Oceania” focused on the Pacific Ocean as a shared post-colonial space for both the revitalisation of the pre-colonial interconnectedness of Pacific peoples and the development of extensive and expansive new connections with Pacific Rim countries, particularly Australia and New Zealand, of “a vibrant and much enlarged world of social networks that criss-cross the ocean ...” (1998:391).

The five articles in this special issue draw on papers presented –as keynote addresses or as panel contributions - at the OCIES 2015 (November 3-6) conference held in the small Pacific state of Vanuatu, the first regional CIE conference to be held in a location other than Australia or New Zealand. They also informed a further exposure for most authors by way of a panel presentation at the 2016 World Congress of Comparative Education Societies in Beijing (July

21-26) which aligned with the general theme of the conference, *Dialectics of Education: Comparative Perspectives*, in addressing the need to explore the dialectics through which CIE can strengthen its work in Oceania. The decision to do so through the thematic strand *Modernity and Tradition* was because of the extent to which Pacific cultures are shaped by traditions that effectively predate colonisation. Although increasingly influenced by processes of globalisation, including global development agendas, ‘traditional’ political and economic structures, embedded within ethics of redistribution, reciprocity and inclusiveness, to varying degrees still characterise Pacific cultures. The extent to which these articulate with ‘modern’ institutions such as education cannot be ignored in the pursuit of sustainable education development.

Hau’ofa’s ocean-centric approach attributed the development and survival of the complexity of societies which make up the most culturally and ecologically diverse region in the world to the Pacific Ocean which he saw as a unifying mechanism for the establishment, maintenance and expansion of social relationships across historical time and regional space. Thus his spatial-temporal analysis in which the natural environment and society condition and shape each other, presented Oceania as a *relational space*. It is this broad theme, of how we can more effectively engage in dialogue and collaborative research and all other educational relationships, that informs this collection.

Writing directly to the broad theme, Kabini Sanga explores possible opportunities for renewed neighbourliness in aid relationships. His focus on educational aid relationships is concerned particularly with the *forms* of aid. He argues that, in the existing literature, forms of aid giving and receiving remain largely theoretical and heavily reliant on donor views. He offers an alternative perspective premised on the belief that it is people who give life to form; thus it focuses on form at the people level. He adopts a storytelling approach as a genre that enables the complexities of form at the people level to be understood. Sanga’s article calls for a new Oceania *wantok* system—an animation of neighbourliness which involves living beyond private interests, positions, and passions. He poses challenges for such an Oceanic education aid community maintaining that, if aid relationships are to achieve renewed neighbourliness, our aid must involve aid givers entering into and making full effort to understand the cultures they are seeking to reach; that “... our aid and life need to be open to that which is outside. Our relationships within Oceania must draw us to unfamiliar, uncomfortable places”.

Alex McCormick, author of our second article, provides a rigorously researched and richly contextualised account of education policy processes in Vanuatu. In mapping the multi-level roles that education and development policy actors have been playing in relation to the ‘post-2015’ agendas and processes that contributed to creating the sustainable development goals, she explores the intersections between global and local. The relevance and implications of globalised processes for education and development futures are interrogated through lenses of decolonising histories, language use, and dynamic geo-political regional power relations. McCormick argues that the decolonising discourses of self-reliance that gained traction in national independence movements have maintained emphasis in Vanuatu civil society and government approaches to national education and development policy. This contention is supported by her recognition of dynamic, indigenous *kastom* beliefs and practices being central to most aspects of life for most ni-Vanuatu people, and the foundation for the revitalisation of the ‘traditional economy’ and ‘alternative’ visions of development. Her investigation of multiple, inter-relating actors and contexts for education policy formation processes builds on methodological and conceptual approaches of critical discourse analysis, multi-level policy exchange and transfer, and post-colonial theoretical approaches.

In our next article, Seu’ula Johansson-Fua sets out to address the relative absence of Pacific researcher voices within the field of comparative and international education, internationally,

and regionally. She picks up on one of the key themes of our first OCIES conference and of this special issue—that of developing CIE’s potential to enhance educational transformation in Oceania—and explores the various spaces and possibilities for Oceanic education researchers, both Pacific and non-Pacific, to engage in collaborative research. Drawing on Hau’ofa’s Oceanic philosophy, Johansson-Fua maintains that the role of the Oceanic researcher is to define relevant research approaches, methodologies, and ethical protocols so that they may confidently translate, contextualise and make sense of both ‘the ocean within us’—Pacific cultures, traditional knowledge systems and trusted traditional processes, and ‘the ocean around us’—the global agendas for education development. She draws on Bhabha’s theory of hybridity to suggest a third space, *Motutapu*, a pan-Pacific term referring to “a place of rejuvenation, a sanctuary; a place to launch new journeys”. Johansson-Fua concludes by positing the hybrid *Motutapu* as a space in which Oceanic researchers can explore the dialogical and relational aspects of comparative and international education within our regional context.

Although Rebecca Spratt’s article examines the same focus of aid relationships within the context of Solomon Islands as our first article by Sanga, hers follows a very different path. Motivated by her own experience as an aid worker, the primary aim of the research she undertook was to explore the ways in which professional subjectivity is influenced by, and influences, aid relationships in Solomon Islands, the wider context of which is positioned as an integral part of the research process itself. Spratt’s investigation of the professional subjectivities of a group of public servants working for the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development, employed ethnographic interviews to explore how the research participants interpreted the roles and labels that aid discourse ascribed to them, and how they perceived and experienced relationships within the heavily aid-ed context of Solomon Islands. The research findings demonstrate the complex, dynamic and multi-faceted nature of aid relationships and subjectivities, and that context and history not only matter but are created and re-created in and through discourse and relationships. Spratt concludes, rightly, that her findings offer a potential means for strengthening education aid relationships across Oceania and beyond.

Our fifth article, by Christine Fox, poses challenges for comparative and international education that take us well beyond our own region. Asserting that many of today’s education systems reflect socially and economically divisive ideologies, hostile to equitable change, she argues that comparative and international education theorists and practitioners can play a crucial role in critiquing, through the lens of critical postcolonial awareness, such socio-political constructions of society and education. Bringing it back to Oceania, a region containing both large economies such as Australia and small Pacific island states, she asks Oceanic educators how they can research actively and engage in a dialogue that draws upon the strengths of current innovation, of increased access to global communication, and the strengths of scholarly theoretical deliberation? She then sets out a most persuasive argument for re-imagining our neighbourhood and ‘unleashing our global postcolonial consciousness’. Drawing on postcolonial theories and ways of viewing our world, Fox makes the conceptual connections required to build a framework through which educationists can effect change within an intercultural, ethical, and actionable space. As she concludes, “There is today a move from critiquing to raising a storm of awareness, to unleashing a force for social change based on a firm consciousness of postcolonial ways of knowing”.

The five articles making up this Special Issue respond to OCIES’s vision, thus reflecting the wish of members to revitalise their society by encompassing the diversity of contexts, issues, interests and perspectives represented in Oceania. They also uphold, explicitly or implicitly, many aspects of CIE which have long been highlighted as demonstrating its effectiveness as a research area. Collectively the issue reflects the broadly defined notion of ‘comparison’, the

Editorial

interdisciplinarity and theoretical-methodological eclecticism promoted in much of the CIE literature. As stated earlier in this editorial, the rationale for moving from ANZCIES to OCIES identified such features as enabling the openness to innovative CIE research approaches and new collaborative research relationships, required to strengthen educational interconnectedness within the relational space of Oceania. Also addressed are the long espoused CIE concerns for culture and context, of equity and social justice.

Finally and most importantly, we again offer our deep appreciation to those at the University of the South Pacific's Emalus Campus in Port Vila and Vanuatu's Ministry of Education and Training, and all others who contributed to the 2015 OCIES conference at which the ideas and thoughts expressed in this issue were first aired. Tagiu tumas!

REFERENCES

- Hau'ofa, Epeli. (1993). Our sea of islands. In Waddell, E., Naidu, V., & Hau'ofa, E. (Eds). *A new Oceania: Rediscovering our sea of islands*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, pp.1-15.
- Hau'ofa, Epeli. (1998). The Ocean in us. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 10(2), pp.391-410.