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Formal education in Nauru: A Pacific development assistance story

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Abstract: *Formal education in Nauru can only be fully understood in the light of the external influences, mostly Australian in origin, acting upon it as a small island state in the Central Pacific. Australia's influence began in the early 1900s as a leading stakeholder in Nauru's lucrative phosphate reserves. In the last few decades Nauru's dramatic economic decline has meant it has come into the orbit of Australia's official development assistance (ODA) to the Pacific region. However, Australia has ties to Nauru that go beyond mere economic and development assistance, for example, the country is a crucial site in Australia's own immigration policy and the offshore processing of asylum seekers bound for Australia. Geopolitically, Nauru is also important to Australia as one of a decreasing number of Taiwan-loyal Pacific nations in the face of China's increasing assertiveness in the region. The nature of the relationship with Nauru has meant that for many decades Australia has provided an almost exclusive conduit of educational ideas, values, beliefs and practices flowing into the country to uniquely shape formal education provision. The purpose of this article is twofold. Firstly, via a synthesis of research literature and debate, it critiques the long-running, primarily, Australia-facing relationship Nauru has in terms of the educational assistance it receives, including the Nauru Education Program, a significant Australian development assistance initiative about to commence through to 2030. Secondly, with a basis in the advocacy literature of the Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative, the article highlights the possibility of a much more Pacific regionally facing Nauru over the next few decades as a result of relatively recent regional instrumentalities such as the Pacific Island Forum's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.*

Keywords: *Australia, development assistance, education, Nauru, Pacific*

Introduction

Nauruan education cannot be fully understood without first positioning it within its historical, mostly Australian, development assistance context as framed in a range of published sources documenting Australia's development assistance to the Pacific region and Nauru more specifically. The Australian government has long been a source of educational consultancy and assistance to Nauru, initially via AusAID, as a semi-autonomous body to government. Then since 2013 via the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), when Australia's development assistance programme became more closely aligned with its foreign policy (see Garrett and Wanner, 2017; Dobell, 2015; Ware, 2015 among many others). Not only did this shift, according to many observers result in a loss of development assistance expertise (Corbett and Dinnen, 2016), it also brought into greater focus the balancing act the Australian government engages in between national self-interest and humanitarian ideals in its relationship with neighbouring Pacific countries, such as Nauru (Day and Wells, 2021). Self-interest and humanitarianism sit uneasily side by side, particularly post-2013, with some DFAT rhetoric tending to conflate the two, that is, poverty alleviation among Pacific neighbours is not a separate competing set of aims but is directly in Australia's national self-interest (Garrett and Wanner, 2017; Wood *et al.*, 2017; Gilbert, 2023). In terms of Nauru, this has meant that any development assistance given cannot be separated from the fact the country has been

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since the early 2000s a key element in Australia's immigration policy, as a site of offshore asylum seeker detention and refugee processing, and more recently, as a loyal Taiwan-aligned Pacific Island Country (PIC) against a backdrop of an increasingly assertive Chinese presence in the Pacific region.

Australian official development assistance

Australia's official development assistance (ODA) budget has also fluctuated since the early 2000s, in part due to changes in government and more recently due to extraneous factors such as COVID-19 (Day and Wells, 2021). Since 2013 and successive conservative governments, there have been frequent cuts to ODA (Wood *et al*., 2017) to the point where in 2021, budgeted ODA represented an all-time low of 0.19% of gross national income (Howes, 2021). Also in 2021, Australia ranked 24 out of 30 OCED countries in terms of ODA generosity (Howes, 2021). While there is some optimism brought about by the new 2022 Labour government's rhetoric concerning Australia's relationship with the Pacific, actual increases in ODA are yet to occur (Nichols and Needham, 2023). It comes as no surprise that critics identify a decreasing effectiveness of assistance projects (Howes *et al*., 2023) and an increase in assistance as 'economic diplomacy' (Wood *et al*., 2017), since the 'golden consensus' period of ODA prior to 2013 (Day, 2016).

Added to the uneasy mix of humanitarianism and self-interest in Australia's development assistance, is the actual delivery of Australian ODA by very large third-party contractor organisations. Liu (2022) notes the dominance of four large multi-national companies in Australian-funded ODA – ABT Associates, DT Global (recently bought out Cardno), Tetra Tech (recently bought out Coffey) and Palladium, all of which have Australian subsidiaries. The latter three of these multinationals have all had a role to play in current Australian education development assistance to Nauru. A massive 90% of all Australian ODA goes initially to organisations such as these. Interestingly, the University of New England from Australia and the work it has done in teacher education in Nauru since 2014, is an example of one of the much smaller contractors that comprise only 8.8% of the tender market. A miniscule 1.2% of ODA goes to contractors based in developing nations themselves. Contractors, such as those listed, compete for and win Australian government development assistance tenders and in turn recruit the necessary expertise to deliver that assistance, with what appears to be variable ongoing oversight from the Australian government (see recent commentary from an Australian former Foreign Minister cited in, Nichols and Needham, 2023). As will be discussed later, Tetra Tech, as of 2023, has won the tender for the 10-year Nauru Education Program (NEP) (Government of Australia, 2021) worth up to $40 million over that period.

In Nauru, and elsewhere in the region, the degree to which recipient governments also participate in recruitment of personnel and the overall direction of projects led by these companies is problematic, hindered often by 'reporting and planning requirements … actually resulting in a loss of sovereignty for small island developing states in the region' (Dornan and Pryke, 2017: 388). Overly bureaucratic development assistance to the Pacific is certainly not new. The Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative (RPEI), a collective of Pacific educators and researchers, have long pointed out the problematic nature of Pacific ownership and partnering in education development assistance relationships. The RPEI has, since its establishment in the early 2000s, strongly advocated for: the enablement and autonomy of Pacific educational expertise; the importance of leading the educational change process with shared Pacific values, pedagogies and epistemologies, all the while calling for a much more democratic partnering with external development assistance providers when needed (see, e.g., Puamau, 2005; Sanga and Taufe'ulungaki, 2005; Ruru, 2010; Nabobo-Baba, 2012; Victoria University, 2022 among others). As will be argued later, there are clear links between the advocacy of the RPEI over several decades and a gradual shift in Pacific regional education focus generally, with possible flow on effects to Nauru also. In contrast to most Australian development assistance, it is significant to note that the RPEI had its beginnings in an official New Zealand (NZ) government 'hands off approach' to educational ODA considered by

Pacific educators as 'best practice in donor behaviour' (Nabobo-Baba, 2012: 83).

There is even some belief that it is not only Pacific recipient need, voice and autonomy, that has been at risk due to an over-reliance on private aid contractors. Some critics argue that Australia's development assistance intentions, altruism and effectiveness to one side, are also at risk by third-party contractors, 'concerned chiefly with profit and the job at hand [and] are not responsible for Australia's self-interest, [its] influence and soft power' (Knaus, 2019). Altogether, tensions between Australian national self-interest and humanitarian ideals, contractor for-profit motivations, declining development assistance expertise and long-running Pacific concerns over lack of autonomy and voice in assistance partnerships has prompted some within the development sector to refer to Australian ODA as 'wasAID' (Dobell, 2015; Ware, 2015: 53).

The Nauru context post-1968

Nauru has had a long-running, sometimes fraught, relationship with Australia beginning as a UN Trust Territory administered by Australia after WW2, through to being a source of cheap phosphate for Australia's agriculture sector over several decades through to independence in 1968. From this time, when Nauru took over phosphate operations, there followed approximately two decades of extremely high earnings allowing its citizens a socially mobile lifestyle not experienced among Pacific Island neighbours. This was followed, however, by the sometimes referred to 'riches to rags' economic decline that started in the 1990s (see, e.g., Hughes, 2004). A range of unscrupulous, sometimes Australian, non-state actors feature prominently in the economic decline. Current dealings over the very little remaining phosphate have been subject to Australian Federal Police investigations with allegations made about an Australian mining company paying bribes to senior Nauruan figures for preferred access to extraction and sales (Davies and Doherty, 2018). With phosphate reserves close to exhausted by the late 1990s Nauru became the solution to Australia's own perceived border protection problems. Perhaps with very little choice, in 2000 as part of Australia's Pacific Solution to the problem of 'illegal' boat arrivals, and later in 2012 with bipartisan political support, Nauru became an offshore asylum seeker detention and refugee processing centre for Australia.

Australian government money flowing into Nauru linked to refugee processing, while not classified as development assistance, has given the country a significant economic boost with benefits including: the re-establishment of banking services; higher levels of employment; rents paid to land owners; growth in the national airline; an increase in material goods owned by families; and overseas travel for many once again possible (see Howes and Surandiran, 2021 and a 'return to riches'). Recently, however, even this money has been linked to allegations of corruption, with a number of leading Nauruan political figures facing allegations of misappropriating money to their own companies seemingly with Australian government knowledge (see Bachelard and McKenzie, 2023). The otherwise human cost of this initiative, on both refugees and many who have worked in Nauru have been well documented (see, e.g., McAdam, 2014; Triggs, 2014; Gleeson, 2016 among many others). The experiences of children from asylum seeking and refugee families attending mainstream schools on Nauru since being granted access in 2014 have been mixed, with claims of harassment and poor-quality education (Longbottom, 2015). In 2023 the last of the refugees remaining on Nauru were removed to Australia, leaving some considerable infrastructure idle that has been in place since 2012. However, Australian funding for the processing centre, continues at high levels (Karp and Shepherd, 2023) as part of an 'enduring offshore capability' memorandum of understanding between the two countries, should the facilities be needed once again (Andrews and Aingimea, 2021).

In 2023 the Nauru Government, in conjunction with a Canadian mining company has established Nauru Ocean Resources Incorporated (NORI), an agency set up to pursue seabed mining. In the face of much opposition internationally and also from Pacific neighbours calling for a moratorium, the Nauru government considers seabed mining a viable income source into the immediate future. NORI, is also

at the local community interface actively lobbying Nauruans for support via educational opportunity and other enticements such as overseas tertiary education scholarships, including teacher education; and funding for community group initiatives such as parent workshops to support their children in learning to read (see Nauru Ocean Resources Inc., 2023).

The post-1968 phosphate mining, with its longer history deep into the colonial decades prior to independence; the reliance on Australian dollars in return for the processing and accommodating of asylum seekers and refugees; and now plans to mine the seabed are all indicative of Nauru's long-running 'extractive' economy – phosphate, humans, seabed minerals – all commodities for valuable foreign exchange (Morris, 2019). Although as Morris (2019) points out, Nauru's autonomy over its own future has been fraught from the beginning. She argues the country has long been unavoidably caught up in 'a deep industrial complex and colonial dependency, which makes it difficult to move out of ethically dubious terrain as the handmaiden of a much larger neighbour [Australia]' (p. 1130). What role then should education play in Nauru, set as it is against a backdrop of Australian dominance, on-going dependency and a history of extraction and trade in commodities, that leave behind a degraded physical and human landscape? With educational assistance seemingly forever tied to Australian financial and human resource assistance, and closely linked to Australian national self-interest what are the possibilities for educative purpose outside of these influences?

Nauruan education

The article now turns to formal education systems and practice in Nauru, drawing again on a range of published sources as well as the collective in-country observations and experience of the authors. Nauru has a population of just over 12 000 people, mostly Nauruan nationals, meaning that formal education is on one level a straightforward affair – four infants schools, one junior primary, one upper primary and one secondary school, in addition a Catholic school that takes in infants through to upper primary and one school for children with special needs. There are a small range of competitively sponsored post-secondary education and training possibilities through the University of the South Pacific (USP), the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) and other regional providers as well as Nauru Technical and Vocational Education (TVET). This relatively small education system is supported by a government Department of Education consisting of administrators and senior educators. The basic structure remains little changed from pre-independence times when the system was established. However, its small size and remoteness, among a mix of other complex factors – economic, cultural and social, has created a number of challenges running like red threads through the Nauruan education system over several decades. These include: poor student attendance; inadequate teacher in-service teacher education; inadequate resourcing for quality teaching and learning and a heavy reliance on non-Nauruan teachers initially recruited from Australia and now from Fiji and some other PICs. Changes of government over many consecutive periods, especially since the mid-1990s have also had a deleterious effect, with each incoming government attempting a different approach to solving key challenges, in most cases with a different set of short-term 'outside experts' (Gaiyabu, 2007). Accordingly, Gaiyabu (2007)[1] notes, in the only formal large scale educational research into school reform in Nauru, 'continual change leav[ing] teachers confused, resentful and sceptical of change' (p. 256).

The flow of educational ideas and practices by Australian consultancy and advising to Nauru has been broad ranging, in recent years including: curriculum development; school leadership support; teacher pre-service and in-service education; and policy and strategic planning support and infrastructure development. Advisor and consultancy teams from Australia, or very occasionally those sourced from elsewhere, have not always had experience with the nuance of Pacific, let alone, Nauruan social and cultural ways of knowing and doing. This lack of Pacific familiarity is not particular to Nauru, nor is it recent. Sanga and Taufe'ulungaki (2005), from a RPEI perspective, have long argued the decades of incongruence between the aspirations of outsider educational

aid providers and Pacific recipients, often despite partnering and consultation rhetoric to the contrary. The following serve as particular Nauruan educational examples.

The current NEP, seemingly based on local Nauru consultation, strongly advocates for a shift away from what it perceives to be behaviourist approaches to teaching in Nauruan classrooms to approaches more learner-centred, based on the assumption that such approaches to teaching and learning are universally effective but also will address problems of student attendance and retention. Comparative and international education research and debate that suggests such pedagogies are simply based on liberal Western democratic ideals are seemingly ignored (see, e.g., Tabulawa, 2003; Carter, 2010; Schweisfurth, 2013 among others). Tabulawa (2003) and Carter (2010) go even further to suggest that providers of educational assistance like Australia, strategically advocate learner centred pedagogies in educational consultancy and assistance for the way it socialises Indigenous peoples into neoliberal ways of knowing and being, in turn dismantling Indigenous knowledges, social and cultural values and ways of doing. Specifically in terms of Nauru, Gaiyabu (2007) argues that an overall learner centredness shift in Nauruan pedagogy stands in contrast to the ways in which relationships are enacted between Nauruan adults and young people. She issues at least a cautious approach be adopted as follows:

> A core Nauruan belief is that, with maturity, young people learn and that individualism is submerged by the need to respect those in authority. In a 'Western' view this inhibits children's capacity to take responsibility for their own learning. If individual responsibility for one's learning is considered a valid direction in which to move in Nauru, change will need to be a slower process which respects these cultural traditions but tries to move forward in smaller pragmatic steps with support from 'critical friendship' offered by those who have a deep knowledge of the culture and understand the incremental nature of change. (p. 258)

A further curriculum-related example of 'what works in Australia must work in Nauru' can be found in the current Language Syllabus (Government of Nauru, 2013a) which emphasises what Luke (2017) terms a 'sociocultural/interactional' approach (p. 3) at the almost total exclusion of an otherwise 'pluralistic model of literacy and education' (p. 3). At the time of the Australian led curriculum writing consultancy in 2013 a sociocultural or 'genre' approach to teaching literacy was widespread in many Australian schools. However, in 2023, the approach has been singled out by the current Nauru Department of Education curriculum leadership as a contributing factor to why Nauruan Year 4 and Year 6 students have done increasingly worse in Reading over two consecutive rounds of Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) testing (2018 and 2021). The new leadership of the Curriculum Support Unit (CSU) argues that Nauruan children since at least 2013 have simply not been exposed to a balanced language curriculum that also includes phonemic awareness and basic decoding skills needed to read unfamiliar words (pers. comm., Director CASE Unit, 10 October 2022). Steps have now been taken to work with lower primary school teachers to incorporate the teaching of phonemic awareness skills into their daily classroom routines in an effort towards a more overall pluralistic model (Luke, 2017: 3).

Historically, the extent to which Gaiyabu's (2007) 'slower process', 'respect for cultural traditions', 'critical friendship' and 'deep knowledge of the culture' has occurred in educational assistance and consultancy is doubtful. Certainly, these features can only be minimal in the very common 'short term' advising and 'fly in fly out' approaches taken by aid contractors over recent years. Just how much time is required for non-Nauruan, non-Pacific, Australian led consultancy to have a 'deep knowledge of the culture'? The contractors mentioned previously draw expertise from a very large pool, often beyond the Pacific. It is a common sense that the relationships of the sort that Gaiyabu (2007) sees as necessary can only develop over time. Not all Australian ODA-supported consultancy and assistance allows that time.

One consultancy in Nauru that has allowed for relationship building with greater degrees of local ownership over the direction and intent of the project has been that led by Australia's University of New England – relatively small and new to DFAT's tender process. To date this

project has run over 10 years preparing Nauruan teachers on-island to offset the otherwise heavy reliance on expatriate teachers. Although considered expensive for the return on money spent (Government of Australia, 2021) the project's longevity and its unbroken on-island presence over that time has led to some positive outcomes, that shorter term, fly-in-fly-out, consultancies and projects have not been able to achieve (Burnett, 2018). The project has always made relationship building a priority (Sullivan *et al*., 2017), extending beyond lecturer and student to include a 'weddings, funerals, everything' approach to family, community and departmental involvement (Burnett, 2018: 10). The range of administrative supports necessary for everyday project efficiencies have also been managed in-house by the University, unlike the 'cottage industries' that have grown up around the operations of the big four, who have a very large administrative workforce spread across Asia and the Pacific, all of which presumably draw on the funds obtained for the direct in-country assistance project delivery. For example, DT Global who have just completed 12 months of preliminary NEP work in Nauru, have in their employ personnel in Indonesia, Philippines, Samoa, Australia and Fiji, all at least partly involved in the administration of Nauru on-island consultant activity. In addition to this, the same project sub-contracted to Palladium and its personnel to provide accommodation, utilities and car services to the on-island consultants, again presumably from the original DFAT assistance project funds. These trends are consistent with the criticisms directed at aid contractors by Dornan and Pryke (2017), Knaus (2019), Nichols and Needham (2023) and others mentioned earlier.

Further Australian influence

The Australian imprint on Nauruan education in terms of the NEP and teacher education represents only part of a much wider and longer running set of influences. These influences include ties to Australia's Queensland state government's senior secondary school curriculum and the Queensland Certificate of Education as a school leaving qualification in Nauru. Additionally, 20 Year 8 students annually are given scholarships (Government of Nauru, 2016), via a competitive national Nauruan selection exam, to complete the remainder of their secondary education in mostly Brisbane, Queensland secondary schools. This scholarship scheme, is sometimes questioned as it consumes an enormous portion of annual education budgeting that could be otherwise spent elsewhere in education. However, the scheme, is merely a contemporary continuation of initiatives dating back to the 1960s and 1970s when significant numbers of Nauruan primary school leavers were sent each year to elite non-government secondary schools in Australia, such as Geelong Grammar in Victoria, the New England Girls School and Kinross-Wolaroi in NSW and many others. The delivery of TVET in Nauru is also heavily influenced and supported by TAFE Queensland who provide 'train-the-trainer' education and accreditation for courses of study in Nauru (see Tamakin, 2020). Only in the last decade have the number of Fijian teachers surpassed the number of Australian teachers employed in Nauruan schools generally. From the 1960s through to the early 1990s large numbers of Australian teachers, including one of the authors of this article, were recruited by the Nauruan government to complete two-year teaching contracts with the Department of Education. These, combined with a broad set of long-running Australian-oriented economic, political, social and sporting ties, have contributed to a strong Australia-facing Nauru, that goes far beyond the relational ties other PICs have with Australia. Alternative influence from within the Pacific region, potentially available through Nauru's membership of Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific agencies (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, n.d.) such as: the Pacific Islands Forum's Conference of Pacific Education Ministers; the Pacific Community's Educational Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP) which includes the South Pacific Form Seven Certificate; and the USP's primary and secondary teacher education programmes until now have been minimal in comparison.

Shifting the gaze: The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent

The following section considers the possibilities for education in Nauru given the intent of the

very recent 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent (2050 Strategy) (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022). The 2050 Strategy maps out a Pacific regional basis for PICs turning to themselves as a regional collective to face development challenges. In the words of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (2022) who authored the strategy, 'our long-term approach [is] working together as a region, and as countries and territories, communities, and people of the Pacific' (p. 3). The 2050 Strategy is underpinned by a decidedly Pacific set of values, the first of which states: 'We recognise regional cooperation and our shared commitment to work together, as an important platform for achieving the greatest benefits for our people' (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022: 7). The strategy is based on distinct Pacific cultures, identities, knowledges and values. This not only stands in stark contrast with the status quo of influence, it represents a challenge to Nauru and its education system, after decades of Australian influence. Even though the 2050 Strategy does not directly refer to the RPEI, the dimensions of the Strategy are certainly consistent with its original ideals outlined earlier in the article. The RPEI has always been an education-specific response to decades of externally led development assistance to the Pacific region where as the 2050 Strategy is much broader in its scope. It would prove interesting to trace the genealogy of the 2050 Strategy and its intentions to Pacific self-determining and autonomous futures beyond just education, for example, in economic, social, and cultural aspects of Pacific life, expressed by a fuller range of Pacific regional institutions such as the Forum, the Pacific Community, the USP and other Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific agencies.

There are signs that Nauruan education has commenced a shift in its gaze regionally, with some recent EQAP-led curriculum and assessment reforms potentially starting; EQAP technical assistance provided for its educational management information systems; and increased numbers of early childhood teachers graduating from USP and APTC (Government of Nauru, 2023a). It is also significant to note, the latest five-year Strategic Plan for Nauruan Education (draft) is partly grounded in the 2050 Strategy (Government of Nauru, 2023b). The specific goals of the 2050 Strategy concern: governance, leadership, security, economic development, climate, the environment and technology. There is, however, an 'education, research and technology' strategic pathway (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022: 12) that positions education systems integral to PIC development towards the goals listed. This particular pathway emphasises 'the best of our traditions and cultural practices' (p. 13). A useful example of this is the current Social Science Curriculum (Government of Nauru, 2013b) which draws explicitly on Nauruan worldviews, values and cultural practices in the teaching of this particular curriculum area. It is significant to note that the Nauru Social Science Curriculum writing was led by a NZ consultant from a Samoan background. Possibly consistent with NZ's earlier Pacific sensitivity in its support for the RPEI, it is the only curriculum document, and indeed educational policy document generally, that utilises Nauruan social and cultural concepts and values as part of its foundation (see, e.g., *egade* [culture], *aña ijegen* [identity], *Ōw eijoeō* [belonging], *Amen bwio* [relationships], *Eōrit eōrin* [diversity] and so on) (p. 4). The other Australian-led curriculum and policy writing projects do not include any culturally enshrined values expressed in Nauruan language at all. However, the new draft education strategic plan (Government of Nauru, 2023b) tentatively entitled as *Ijetenida*, which loosely translates as 'transformation', does contain a number of key performance indicators (KPIs) towards this end. Nauruan education will now be discussed according to the selected dimensions of the 2050 Strategy – leadership commitments, thematic areas and guiding principles. These selected dimensions are certainly not an exhaustive list but merely indicate where practice is beginning to cohere around the 2050 Strategy. Further analysis over time may reveal further alignments between Nauruan educational change and the 2050 Strategy.

Leadership commitments

The strategy contains a number of regional leaders' commitments, of which the following are particular to education in Nauru: well-

being; children's futures; and connectedness across the region. Within each of the three commitments there are specific elements that Nauruan education already does well but also elements that will need to be addressed, if the 2050 Strategy is to be foundational to educational futures in Nauru.

Securing the well-being of our people

In terms of enhanced provision of education (p. 10), Nauru is currently taking significant steps in this direction. The current 2022–2023 domestic Education budget represents an increase on previous years, quite apart from the annual Australian Direct Financial Aid (DFA) to education in Nauru. The current revision of the Education Strategic Plan for the next five years in itself also indicates 'enhanced' education provision, as a result of widespread local community consultation led by sensitive external consultancy input alongside strong Department of Education leadership. The new strategic plan is a leaner and more readily understood set of aims and intentions with its KPIs considerably reduced in number from the previous 150 (Government of Nauru, 2016). Other evidence includes a change in focus for the CSU from one of monitoring and compliance to primarily, as the name suggests, one of support for teachers and schools. The strategic plan also signals major curriculum reform with Pacific regional EQAP support (pers. comm., Secretary of Education, 7 June 2023).

In terms of traditional knowledge (p. 10), the ongoing work of the Director of Nauruan Language and the intention to formalise traditional Nauruan knowledge in the school curriculum is a key education priority and a positive step towards this commitment. Despite language intentions, there is a recognised need for national consensus around a written form of the language. There is in Nauru a long running set of tensions within the Nauruan community around a singular orthography that date back to earliest missionary times when orthography was first being established. Agreement over a common Nauruan orthography needs to be achieved before the commitment can satisfactorily be addressed (see Barker, 2012 for a comprehensive discussion of Nauruan language and its uneasy relationship with English in Nauruan social life). The NEP, to its credit recognises the role that Nauruan language needs to play in educational futures but falls short in terms of traditional or Indigenous knowledge, particularly that which concerns teaching and learning, calling instead for an un-nuanced learner centredness at all levels of education in Nauru.

In terms of gender equality (p. 10) there is a strong sense that girls out-perform boys in literacy and numeracy in the Primary school years but at the same time, girls are less likely to continue to senior secondary school levels or complete other qualifications (see EQAP's PILNA 2018 and 2021 results). However, overall, the degree of gender in/equality present within the education system is anecdotal and in need of a more solid evidence base. The NEP makes gender equality a strong aim over the next 10 years, both as a cross cutting focus across all of the NEP's activities and, to its credit, degrees of sensitivity reflected in the conduct of prior rigorous Nauruan research as a basis for any future change. Nevertheless, leadership in this area is designed to come from external consultancy, with the role of the peak local body, the Department of Women's and Social Development Affairs' role unclear.

In terms of *empowerment of all people* (p. 10) the current Social Science Curriculum (Government of Nauru, 2013b) has as one of its key underlying principles the teaching of: '*Eoaio (empowerment)* – the ability to *deliberate* and *express oneself*, knowing that you *will be heard* because, as a child, you have a place in today's world' (p. 4). The new literacy teaching initiatives mentioned earlier to boost the consistently low literacy rates will also facilitate degrees of greater empowerment. A general pedagogical shift away from behaviourist approaches to teaching towards approaches that are more socially constructivist or learner centred in nature will also facilitate *eoaio*, albeit in response to Gaiyabu's (2007) caveats of: 'pragmatic change'; 'critical friends'; and 'deep knowledge of the culture' (p. 258). With this in mind the CSU have begun to reinforce a *scaffolded* learner centredness via an adaption, in the short term, of the Gradual Release of Responsibility model (Fisher, n.d.), termed *Aña, Ata, Auwe* (I, We, You).

Guaranteeing the future of our children

Current school curriculum does not directly address the *causes and impacts of climate change and sea level* rise (p. 10) as a major factor in the future quality of life in Nauru. The current Science Curriculum (Government of Nauru, 2013c), for example, has only a few outcomes devoted to greenhouse gas emissions and sea level rise. The inclusion of climate change and sea level rise impacts in other curriculum learning areas is virtually non-existent. There are, however, numerous community-wide initiatives such as the long-term Higher Ground Initiative where sections of the community will re-locate permanently to the island's central plateau. However, the involvement of schools in these initiatives is minimal. The education system in Nauru generally has considerable work to do to in responding to the impacts of climate change and sea level rise. The new draft strategic plan has a number of specific KPIs concerning climate change impacts and resilience, largely in response to UNESCO's SDG 4.7, that ensures learners acquire knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development.

Thematic areas

In terms of the overall structure of the 2050 Strategy, the following thematic areas – local political leadership and people centred development can be identified as impacting current and future Nauruan education practice.

Political leadership and regionalism

The 2050 Strategy considers *traditional knowledge* as a necessity to *enhance leadership* (p. 17). As mentioned previously, Nauruan traditional knowledge has not featured prominently in any education assistance generally, let alone in relation to leadership. It is doubtful whether a number of recent leadership initiatives and consultancies, led by the Queensland Educational Leadership Institute; Cognition NZ; and Brisbane Catholic Education, have sought to determine Nauruan or Pacific leadership practices and values. This is work that still needs to be done. What is a Nauruan model of leadership? What are the unique traits and practices of a Nauruan leader? How might these be applied to school leadership?

People-centred development

The 2050 Strategy also stresses the importance of *drawing on Pacific Indigenous knowledges, practices and philosophies* (p. 19) as a driver of development generally. Nauruan Indigenous knowledge, practices and philosophies are no doubt present in the wider community. As mentioned previously, there is on-going work to formally incorporate Nauruan language and culture into the school curriculum as a body of knowledge to be learned by students. However, apart from the specific values enshrined in the Social Science curriculum, there is yet to be any significant identification of relevant Nauruan worldviews and values to inform how schooling and teaching and learning could be re-visioned. The NEP, despite its consultative process does not give significant emphasis to Nauruan Indigenous knowledge and culturally contingent development initiatives and processes. The lack of consideration given to Indigenous knowledge in Nauruan education in comparison to Pacific neighbours is likely indicative of the many decades of strong external Australian influence.

Guiding principles

Finally, two of the 2050 Strategy 'guiding principles' (p. 31) have potential alignment with Nauruan education as follows: *responsiveness [to] national actions and policy positions* (p. 31) and *builds from regional policy frameworks* (p. 31). In terms of national policy and guidelines Nauruan government services, including education, since 2009 adhere to the KPIs of the National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS) (Government of Nauru, 2019) a comprehensive, multi-sector set of guidelines for future national development planning to 2030. The NSDS also forms an explicit foundation for the new strategic plan. There are 15 education-specific KPIs that speak to improved 'scope and reach' and 'quality'. Although the NSDS predates the 2050 Strategy, it nevertheless aligns with the intent of the strategy across all of its thematic areas. In terms of *regional policy*

frameworks (p. 31) Nauruan education has formally accepted the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF). It needs to be noted that the new strategic plan, along with the 2050 Strategy includes the PacREF as one of its foundational documents. The NEP, however, mentions specifically the PacREF only once, in a list of providers, most external to the region, that Nauruan education needs to dialogue with into the future.

Conclusion

At approximately the same time as the 2050 Strategy emerging, the Australian and Nauruan governments entered into a partnership to deliver the NEP, based on a consultative educational needs assessment. As mentioned earlier, starting in 2023, Tetra Tech, one of the dominant four contractors is leading the implementation of the NEP over the next 10 years. Project management rhetoric to date indicates at least an awareness of issues around local ownership, voice and partnering. Consistent with RPEI ideals concerning Pacific leadership (Victoria University, 2022) an in-country project director, from a Pacific background and with previous Nauruan education experience will work and live in Nauru for the duration of the project. The NEP's four end of project outcomes are: to improve school enrolment and attendance, particularly in the early years; improve learning outcomes for all children, particularly in terms of literacy; new and improved secondary to post-secondary school learning pathways; and strengthened and more inclusive education system delivery generally. Each of these outcomes have so far been consented to by the Department of Education in Nauru. The first five years of this project was publicly announced by Australia's Foreign Minister during a visit to Nauru soon after the 2022 Australian election (Government of Nauru, 2022). It is not entirely clear whether the $20 m funding announced is additional on top of Australian DFA that has been given to Nauruan education annually over the past few years. It is often said within the Nauru Education Department that consecutive annual DFA funding has been under-utilised. Initial funding of $20 m over the first five years is likely just five years of existing DFA, only now to be brought under tighter accountability for its use via the Tetra Tech led NEP, with its fixed EOPOs and built in monitoring and evaluation processes. The 2050 Strategy and its intentions for PICs such as Nauru to turn towards the region for expertise and direction remains to be seen.

In one clear alignment, the NEP does prioritise the development of Nauruan language and its implementation in formal schooling both for reasons of strong Nauruan identities as well as the part it can play in the teaching of English literacy (p. 41). The NEP goes further to suggest that lessons for Nauru could be learned from both Vanuatu and Kiribati who have recently innovated in the area of teaching Pacific vernaculars. In other areas, the NEP's intentions seem less Pacific-oriented. The initiative advocates strongly for an un-nuanced pedagogical change towards student-centredness as a desired approach to teaching in Nauru. As argued earlier this approach to teaching does not immediately align with Nauruan ways of teaching and learning or the ways in which adult-child relationships are necessarily enacted. Additionally, the initiative considers educational futures in Nauru contingent upon achieving greater degrees of gender equity as well as addressing issues of climate change, two areas heavily laden with global values. It remains to be seen how Nauruan values will find a place in the initiative in these potentially fraught areas. The NEP will also appoint an external MERL (Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Learning) advisor to oversee all project intentions as they unfold, that is, to 'support management'; 'guide reflection and learning'; 'inform strategic communications'; and to 'demonstrate accountability' (Government of Australia, 2021, p. 19). To what extent this advisor will be familiar with the contemporary and historical nuance of formal education in Nauru, such as that described in this article, as well as the spirit of the 2050 Strategy remains to be seen.

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Conflict of interest

The authors have lived and worked in Nauru education for extended periods of time over several decades. There is no conflict of interest.

Note

1 It is significant to note that Nauruan educator Maria Gaiyabu in 2007 was the first to successfully complete a doctorate. Her research focussed on cultural responsiveness in school reform in Nauru and thus represents a strong basis for further autonomy in Nauruan educational futures.

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