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**Policy Borrowing and Teacher Professionalism: Tensions in
Reforming Systems in Response to SDG4c in the Pacific
Islands**

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Abstract: This article examines attempts to professionalize the teaching workforce in the Pacific Islands (PI) in response to the United Nation Sustainable Development Goal 4c – *Increase the Supply of Qualified Teachers in Developing Countries*. The experience of PI educators provides insight into the clash between global standard agendas, driven by targets and indicators, and distinct local realities or vernaculars. Questionnaire data from 82 teacher and principal participants in seven Pacific Island nations and six interviews with education bureaucrats and teacher union officials in Fiji suggest that the goal of enhancing teacher professionalism through credentialism can lead to paradoxical

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deprofessionalization and Indicator 4.c.1, limit the possibilities of teacher professionalization because of the narrowness of the indicator and the enactment of this in specific systems. The Pacific Islands is an under-researched context that highlights the problems with policy borrowing, particularly regarding the idea that developing countries can measure their way to professionalism. Indeed, more voice needs to be given to local practitioners to better understand their needs and aspirations and how the vernaculars of culture and place can enhance (not diminish) teacher professionalism.

Keywords: education policy; teachers; teacher professionalism; developing countries; sustainable development goals; Pacific Islands; qualitative research

Préstamo de políticas y profesionalismo docente: Tensiones en la reforma de los sistemas en respuesta al SDG4c en las Islas del Pacífico

Resumen: Este artículo examina los intentos de profesionalizar la fuerza laboral docente en las Islas del Pacífico (PI) en respuesta al Objetivo de Desarrollo Sostenible 4c de las Naciones Unidas: aumentar la oferta de docentes calificados en los países en desarrollo. La experiencia de los educadores de PI brinda una idea del choque entre las agendas estándar globales, impulsadas por objetivos e indicadores, y distintas realidades locales o lenguas vernáculas. Los datos del cuestionario de 82 docentes y directores participantes en siete países insulares del Pacífico y 6 con burócratas educativos y funcionarios de sindicatos docentes en entrevistas en Fiji sugieren que el objetivo de mejorar la profesionalidad docente a través de la acreditación puede conducir a una paradójica desprofesionalización. El SDG4c y el Indicador 4.c.1 limitan las posibilidades de profesionalización docente por la estrechez del indicador y la promulgación de este en sistemas específicos. Las Islas del Pacífico son un contexto poco investigado que destaca los problemas con el préstamo de políticas, particularmente con respecto a la idea de que los países en desarrollo pueden medir su camino hacia el profesionalismo. De hecho, se debe dar más voz a los profesionales locales para comprender mejor sus necesidades y aspiraciones y cómo las lenguas vernáculas de la cultura y el lugar pueden mejorar (no disminuir) la profesionalidad docente.

Palabras clave: política educativa; maestros; profesionalismo docente; países en desarrollo; metas de desarrollo sostenible; Islas del Pacífico; investigación cualitativa

Empréstimo de políticas e profissionalismo docente: Tensões na reforma de sistemas em resposta ao SDG4c nas Ilhas do Pacífico

Resumo: Este artigo examina as tentativas de profissionalizar a força de trabalho docente nas Ilhas do Pacífico (PI) em resposta ao Objetivo de Desenvolvimento Sustentável 4c das Nações Unidas – Aumentar a Oferta de Professores Qualificados nos Países em Desenvolvimento. A experiência dos educadores de IP fornece insights sobre o confronto entre agendas padrão globais, orientadas por metas e indicadores, e realidades locais distintas ou vernáculos. Os dados do questionário de 82 professores e participantes principais em sete nações insulares do Pacífico e 6 entrevistas com burocratas da educação e funcionários de sindicatos de professores em Fiji sugerem que o objetivo de aumentar o profissionalismo dos professores por meio de credencialismo pode levar a uma paradoxal desprofissionalização. O SDG4c, e o Indicador 4.c.1, limitam as possibilidades de profissionalização dos professores devido à estreiteza do indicador e a sua efetivação em sistemas específicos. As Ilhas do Pacífico são um contexto pouco pesquisado que destaca os problemas com o endividamento de políticas, particularmente no que diz respeito à

ideia de que os países em desenvolvimento podem medir seu caminho para o profissionalismo. De fato, mais voz precisa ser dada aos profissionais locais para entender melhor suas necessidades e aspirações e como os vernáculos da cultura e do lugar podem aumentar (não diminuir) o profissionalismo dos professores.

Palavras-chave: política educacional; professores; profissionalismo docente; países em desenvolvimento; metas de desenvolvimento sustentável; Ilhas do Pacífico; pesquisa qualitativa

Policy Borrowing and Teacher Professionalism: Tensions in Reforming Systems in Response to SDG4c in the Pacific Islands

The emergence of education policy as global, and globalizing, phenomena is a feature of the late 20th century (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). A key aspect of this phenomena has been support for standards and indicators as drivers for improving the quality of education systems (Sachs, 2005). This ‘standard’ discourse, evident in the Global Framework of Professional Teaching Standards (2019) developed by UNESCO and EI, in standardized testing programs like PISA and TIMSS and in global targets and indicators aiming to deliver quality “education for all”, has become a powerful lever employed influentially in policy decisions made at national/jurisdictional levels. This paper investigates how the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4-Education (SDG4), and Target 4.c regarding teacher professionalization, have been taken up as standardizing logics in education systems in the Pacific Islands.

The Pacific Islands are an under researched context in the critical policy literature investigating the effects of globalization. The unique cultural, historical, economic and geological realities of the Pacific Islands provide insight into what happens when global standards, driven by targets and indicators, meet distinct local realities or vernaculars (Anderson, 2006). Our argument is that professionalization has become a standardizing logic across the globe that nations engage with in parochial ways. In the Pacific Islands this has led to a paradoxical deprofessionalization of teachers as a narrow credentialism, derived from SDG4.c and Indicator 4.c.1, came to define the possibilities of professionalization. Understanding how indicators are enacted, how standards are understood and mobilized within specific systems and the effects that these have in contexts, underlines problems regarding policy borrowing in general, and the idea that systems can measure their way to professionalism.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we theorize indicators and policy borrowing with a focus on SDG4.c. Second, we contextualize teaching in the nations of the Pacific Islands and key issues determining success of the teacher workforce. Third, we report on the methods employed in this project before presenting our findings. Qualitative questionnaire data was collected from 82 teacher and principal participants from seven Pacific Island nations, including Fiji, Cook Islands, Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. Six interviews were then conducted with education bureaucrats and teacher union officials in Fiji to provide further nuance and understanding to the questionnaire data. In the Pacific Islands, the SDG4.c Target and Indicator that came to define professionalization – improving minimum teacher qualifications – had what Clarke and Moore (2013, p. 490) see as a “reductive and narrowing effect” as it reclassified permanent teachers and school leaders as casual or short-term contractors to compel their credentialization. The global standards discourse, perversely, undermined possibilities for ‘rich’ teacher professionalism, negatively impacted teacher wellbeing and failed to recognize how it disadvantaged groups experiencing remoteness, lack of infrastructure and access to complete credentials.

Indicators and Policy Borrowing

The globalization of education policy, particularly as means to reform schooling, constitutes new working arrangements associated with policy work, including new networks, new modes of influence, and new discourses intertwined with powerful global indicators. These working arrangements create ‘folded’ systems, where relationships between states, extra-state actors and non-government organisations, lobby groups and so on function through flows of standardization and legitimation (Waldow, 2012). This new policy work involves the circulation of discourses that legitimate the problems that they seek to solve (Ball, 2012). Within these global policy networks, concern has long been raised about the ways these ideas tend to flow from the Global North to the Global South (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). The concern is that those states that have historically been policy subjects continue to be so, albeit under different arrangements (Ball, 2012, p. 9). For example, Sriprikash, Tikly and Walker (2020) argue that policy frameworks that emerge from the World Bank or the UN, such as the SDGs, effectively construct former colonies as part of a ‘global periphery’ that needs to submit itself to ‘development’ to meet the demands of the global policy elite. In this light, we look at the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF), a negotiated, aspirational agreement among 18 Pacific Island nations in response to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its emphasis on the professionalization of teachers and teaching in the Pacific Islands.

A significant concern evident in critical policy studies with regards to globalization is how ideas move, or travel, become codified as policy (Ball et al., 2017; Peck & Theodore, 2015) and are driven by various global indicators (Grek, 2009). These indicators make systems commensurable and more amenable to standardized policy interventions (Waldow, 2014). An effect of this has been the emergence of pre-packaged and standardized policy solutions that aim to improve performance on those global indicators invariably without considering the implications of context. This is ‘policy borrowing’; the “conscious adoption in one context of policy observed in another” (Phillips & Ochs, 2004, p. 774). Policy borrowing both forms, and is sustained by, global networks of policy actors including International Organizations (IOs), corporations, extra-state actors, lobby groups and think tanks and so on. Indicators function as powerful discourses in these networks, as various interests compete. One result of this is some jurisdictions become policy ‘donors’ while others become policy borrowers or policy consumers. The problem, according to Lempert (2017), is the assumptions that underpin these IOs and their policy development plans perpetuate domination by the global elites (Lempert, 2017). As Grek (2009) writes,

IOs are understood [...] as purposive actors who, ‘armed with a notion of progress, an idea of how to create a better life, and some understanding of the conversion process’, have become the ‘missionaries of our time’. (p. 24)

Much literature, for example, has discussed how international large-scale assessments (ILSAs) have been used to establish global indicators and benchmarks for schooling (Addey et al., 2017; Fischman et al., 2019). Similarly, the World Bank’s policy influence over developing countries through requirements or trade-offs linked to funding and loans has been raised as a concern as many recommendations made by the World Bank are channeled from developed to developing countries without careful assessment of what they offer to new, vernacular contexts (Klees et al., 2012; Tikly, 2017). More recently, attention has begun to consider the policy convergence, emerging from standardization and legitimation, around policy aspirations for teacher professionalism and the indicators that are driving those aspirations (Clarke & Moore, 2013). While the literature suggests multiple theoretical perspectives on professionalism (Mockler, 2013; Ro, 2020; Sachs, 2016), it is

argued that the dominant global discourse around standards tends towards a managerial perspective that emphasizes that teacher professionalism “needs to be regulated and can be controlled by the state according to transparent indicators” (Ro, 2020, p. 2). This control tends towards an emphasis on indicators as defining professionalism which then acts to elicit convergence. As we will argue subsequently, SDG4’s attempt to encourage teacher professionalization is problematic because of the paucity of its indicator, Target 4.c, and how this distorts the very professionalism it seeks to deliver.

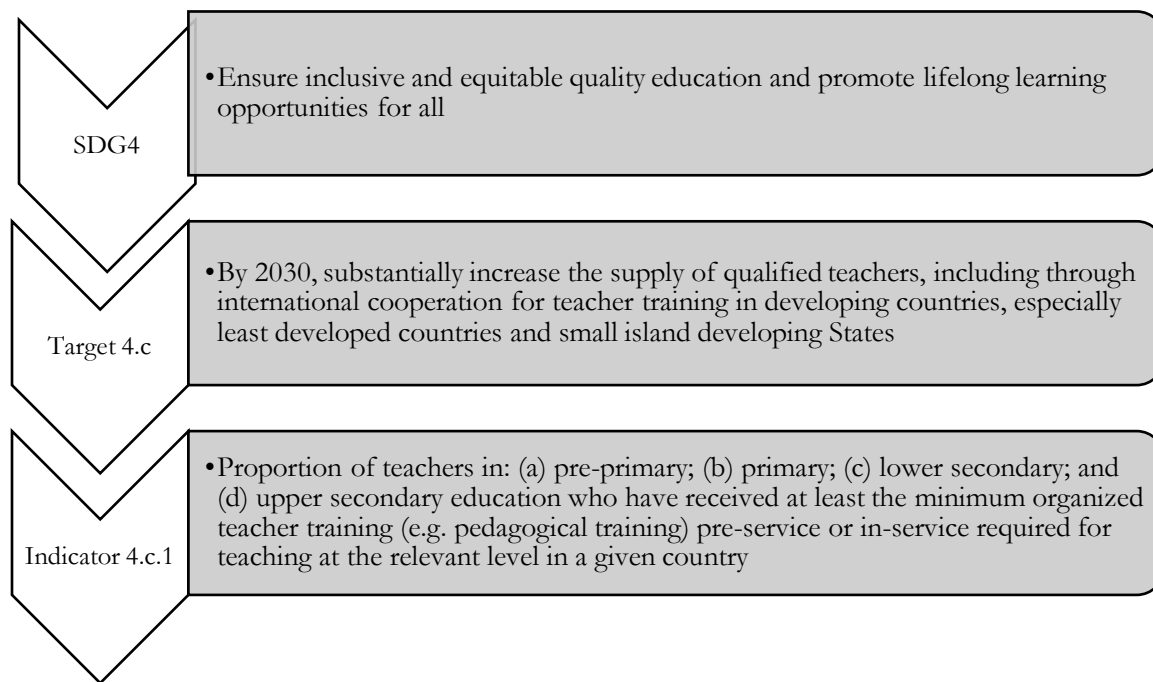
Problems with Indicators

In 2015 all UN member states adopted a set of 17 SDGs. SDG4, which focuses on education, aims to ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (UN, 2015). Within this goal are targets for expanding education across all life phases, achieving universal outcomes in literacy and numeracy, increasing the supply of qualified teachers, gender equality, and formulation of global citizenship. Despite the seemingly laudable aims, critical researchers have identified slippage between the goal statement, targets and the global indicators selected to evaluate progress (Unterhalter, 2019). There are competing understandings, for example, about what constitutes ‘quality’ education. Western models of education dominate and knowledge and skills that have been passed on through generations are put to the side (Chandra, 2019). As Tikly (2017) argues, quality of education is often conflated with performance on standardized tests, and thus importance has been attached to the participation of low-income countries in ILSAs such as PISA and PISA-D. Moreover, Tikly (2017) identifies that the long-term ‘education for all’ (EFA) movement, led by the World Bank and UNICEF, dominated the construction of SDG4 and has resulted in a shift away from UNESCO toward the Global Partnership for Education (GPE).

There is also a contradiction between the SDG4 targets and the ability of developing economies to meet these, particularly given falling levels of aid (Lawrence et al., 2020). This complexifies regional development plans as strategic decisions need to be made about investment priorities. Further, regional plans may be confused by proxy indicators. Target 4.c.1 calls for a substantial increase in qualified teachers that are ‘empowered, adequately recruited and remunerated, motivated, professionally qualified, and supported within well-resourced, efficient and effectively governed systems’ (UN, 2015). However, as explained by Unterhalter (2019), rather than focusing on professional practice and reflective engagement as a measure of meeting this target, the primary indicator refers to the proportion of teachers with a minimum level of training, without giving any indication as to the quality, focus or depth of that training. She argues this is therefore an arbitrary indicator that does not provide an accurate measure of meeting the target. Tatto (2021) similarly cautions that such an indicator risks influencing regional or national policies in ways that might ‘perpetuate the dangerous notion that expertise in teaching can be measured simply by a credential’ (p. 40).

Figure 1

UNESCO's SGD4, Target 4.c.1 and Indicator 4.c.1



Problems of Policy Borrowing

One of the conclusions drawn by those studying policy borrowing is that, despite cautions regarding the problematic nature of comparing education systems (cf. Sellar et al., 2017), it has become the “norm” of policymaking (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). Steiner-Khamsi (2004) argues that policy borrowing is essentially a process of externalization, where policymakers look to external systems to devise policy suites. Externalization “does not come to the system from the outside: it is both instigated from within and processed within the system” (Waldow, 2004, p. 418). It is not an external force “but rather a domestically induced rhetoric that is mobilized at particular moments of protracted policy conflict to generate reform pressure and build policy coalitions” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014, p. 147). In other words, externalization is driven by internal interests and desires, albeit in a way that effectively standardizes and/or legitimizes various ideas, problematics, solutions and metrics such that they flow between national and international borders. Professionalization, and the targets, standards and indicators chosen to demonstrate the extent of that professionalization, emerge from an “inadequacy ... in relation to the rich complexities – and possibilities – of teaching as experienced, practised, and understood by teachers” (Clarke & Moore, 2013, p. 490). Further, as Ball (1994) suggests, there are always first and second order effects emerging from policy reforms. First order effects are changes in structure or practice, and second order effects are the impact of these changes on equity and access.

Bacchi (2009) reminds us that the lending/borrowing dynamic rests upon an acceptance of particular discourses or problematizations that are presented as natural, apparent and reasonable. Policy borrowing always functions through this presentation of simple complexity - the solutions to ongoing education problems are complex but can be resolved through borrowing policy from other systems with the idea that there are always levers, drivers, or solutions, that can be pulled, pushed, tweaked to make systems more convergent or commensurate. However, research into

standardization continues to suggest that this simple complexity can not account for the problem of context, resulting in a variety of unintended consequences. This then, is what we see as the policy malaise, externalization which works well for policymakers in that it resolves protracted policy (and presumably, political) conflict because it operates as a “coalition builder” that “enables opposed advocacy groups to combine resources to support a third, supposedly more neutral, policy option borrowed from elsewhere” but that structures that coalition building such that policy reforms “are transferred from the global North/West to the global South/East” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014, p. 156). The SDGs exemplify this problem.

Teaching in the Pacific Islands

Each of the seven Pacific Islands nations in this study are distinct, with their own heritage and culture. However, all these countries were either colonized (e.g., Fiji, Samoa, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu), or had some form of governing agreement or treaty (e.g., Tonga, Cook Islands) put in place in the late 1800s. While Britain was the dominant colonizing force, both Germany and France also exerted their power at different times. Colonial powers determined who could go to school. For example, government schools were built in Fiji to educate British children (White, 2001) and schooling models were imported from Western nations. Policies, practices and structures were largely implemented without modification, and ignored the local knowledge that resided within these countries. All seven nations gained full independence between 1962 and 1980. While independence may have promised self-direction in education, most of the colonial education practices and structures remained (Crossley et al., 2017). For example, in Fiji, 98% of schools are operated and managed by non-government organizations, of which the most predominant are church groups that have existed since colonialization (Devi & Fernandes, 2019).

Beyond the structure of the education system, the geography of the Pacific Islands has, according to Devi and Fernandes (2019), overwhelming implications for the delivery of a ‘quality education’:

Huge disparities are found in the structure of education between rural areas and towns. Within rural areas, defacto segregation often leads to isolated, single race classrooms. Village schools consist of multi-age groups in a single room school. 20% of children in villages miss out on primary education altogether. In towns, class sizes are bigger and one teacher may often have a class of 50 students. (p.56)

Indeed, the average years of schooling of children in the Pacific Islands varies considerably, from a mean of 5.7 years in the Solomon Islands to 11.2 years in Tonga (Pacific Data Hub, n.d.). Sharma and colleagues (2016) observe that teachers generally face large class sizes (often more than 40 students) and have poor access to teaching and learning resources. They argue that this, along with poor teacher salaries, contributes to low morale for teachers and poor student performance.

Given the complexities of schooling in the South Pacific, particularly in relation to the region’s geography, cultural diversity and economic standing, it is unsurprising that researchers have observed challenges with regard to teacher training (Sharma et al., 2016). Teachers in the Pacific Islands are classified as licensed, trained or qualified. Licensed teachers are those who have graduated from high school with no subsequent training. As Chandra (2019) describes, demand for teachers has always outweighed supply, so licensed teachers are still employed throughout the Pacific Islands despite the fact that teacher training in the Pacific Islands has existed for more than 100 years. Some countries also have other unique issues. For example, Fiji has experienced several coups since 1987 (Fraenkel, 2013). This upheaval has led to a ‘brain drain’ with many teachers and other

professionals migrating to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the US, creating a vacuum in the educational system (Reddy et al., 2004). To complicate this further, there are few post-secondary education providers offering courses that allow teachers to become ‘trained’ or ‘qualified’ across the region, and those that do exist are reliant on donor funding for many of their quality assurance activities (DFAT, 2019). This reliance on foreign donors means that many teacher training programs have a strong western influence, silencing local teacher voices in the design of these programs. Teachers often view training opportunities as “irrelevant, ineffective and unconnected to their everyday work of helping students learn” (Mohan et al., 2017, p. 94).

SDG4.c and the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF)

Aspirations for education in the Pacific Islands are crystalized in PacREF. PacREF (2018-2030), informed by indicators associated with SDG4, aspired to professionalize the teaching workforce in the Pacific Islands through focusing on teacher credentialing. This narrowed focus must be understood within the orchestration of the SDGs as global standards for education, and the narrow indicators selected to evaluate progress (Unterhalter, 2019). Developed by the Pacific Heads of Education System, PacREF outlines a “transformative and sustainable regional education agenda aligned with global agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly SDG4” (p.4). The PacREF outlines four key policy areas for schooling, including: quality and relevance; learning pathways; student outcomes and wellbeing; and teacher professionalism. Focusing on the latter, the PacREF outlines the goals, outcomes and proposed strategies for achieving teacher professionalism. The goal is for “competent, qualified and certified teachers and school leaders” and teachers who are “supported, engaged, effective and committed to the holistic development of their students” (p.11). The outcome of achieving this goal would include a qualified teacher workforce, who are supported in developing new skills to create better outcomes for students and an increased recognition in the status of the profession throughout the region. The PacREF establishes that national systems need to identify strategies that are most relevant to them and participate in activities that progress those strategies and share effective policies and practices in South-South cooperation (p. 23). Thus, while the Pacific Islands nations have a shared vision, how they achieve this is dependent on the reforms actioned in each national context. For example, Fiji has sought to address teacher reform through a performance management framework that formally assesses performance and rewards achievement. This included placing all teachers on temporary contracts (between one and five years), and basing teacher pay on educational qualifications (MEHA, 2017).

According to the Pacific Data Hub (PDH), a repository of data on the Pacific Islands funded by the New Zealand Government, “average” progress has been made towards the advancement of SDG 4.c.1 (Pacific Data Hub, n.d.). In terms of the SDG 4.c.1 target of teacher professionalism, progress has been towards the number of trained teachers employed in primary schools. As table 1 shows, except for Vanuatu, there is a high proportion of trained primary school teachers in the Pacific Islands. However, a closer look at the data shows variations in terms of when and how these data were compiled. The countries used either the “Primary School Teacher” or the “All occupations” indices to report the data. A definition for these measures could not be established either on the Pacific Data Hub (PDH) website or through other searches on the web. The lack of consistent measures makes it difficult to compare the progress that the countries are making towards the SDG4.c indicator. Countries also report on the progress made towards the SDGs through ‘Voluntary National Reviews’ that highlight their successes, challenges and lessons learnt (UN, 2015). The Voluntary National Review compiled by the Republic of Fiji (2019) shed some light on the progress made towards the SDG 4.c.1 target. The proportion of teachers who had “minimum organized teacher training...required for teaching at the relevant level” (p. 90) was 100% at pre-

primary, primary and secondary levels in 2015, 2016 and 2017. However, in 2015, the proportion of teachers with university degrees in primary was 21.7% and 57.7% in secondary schools. So, while 100% of teachers are ‘trained’ far less are ‘qualified’.

Table 1

Data on SDG 4.c.1

Target 4.c.1:	Fiji	Cook Islands	Kiribati	Samoa	Tonga	Solomon Islands	Vanuatu
Trained teachers, primary school	100 ¹ (2012)	100 ² (2015)	92 ¹ (2016)	100 ² (2018)	93 ² (2015)	76 ² (2018)	22 ² (2015)

Note: Source: <https://mg.pacificdata.org/dashboard/sdg-4-quality-education>

¹Primary School Teacher Index

²All Occupations Index

Methods

This research was commissioned by Education International (EI) and supported by the Council of Pacific Education (COPE), a regional conglomerate of education unions from the South Pacific. The project emerged from a concern that EI had about the teacher workforce in the Pacific Islands, and in particular, whether teachers were being deprofessionalized through the use of short-term contracts linked to accreditation. In constructing a method to research this concern, we adopted Bacchi’s (2012) concept of policy problematizations, by first asking ‘what’s the problem represented to be’. As explained above, the problem is represented within SDG4, and subsequently, the PacREF as an issue of low teacher accreditation in the Pacific Islands. Bacchi (2012) challenges researchers to consider how the problem could be thought about differently, or disrupted and replaced. Thus, our methods focused on understanding how local actors, including policymakers, union officials, school leaders and teachers, understood and/or contested this problematization.

This project adopted a 2-stage design¹. First, a short qualitative questionnaire instrument (see Appendix 1) was designed to gather teacher and principal perceptions of the challenges they face in their school systems, including current working conditions, education policy decision-making and reform trajectories. Questionnaires were completed by 82 principal and teacher participants across the Cook Islands, Fiji, Tonga, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Samoa (see Table 2). The questionnaire was conducted as a paper and pencil format to ensure that infrastructural issues (internet accessibility) did not preclude participation. However, the uneven participation across the seven countries evidences difficulty in participant recruitment in some contexts and is a limitation of this questionnaire. Further, given the self-selection bias evident in a volunteer sample, we acknowledge that this can only be considered a preliminary or exploratory study. That said, as an exploratory study of under-researched populations, this questionnaire presents findings of interest that should provide the focus for further research. On demographic indicators such as years teaching, school role and school size, the sample of respondents indicates that the questionnaire attracted views from teachers and principals working in a range of school contexts (see Table 3). In the reporting of results we present demographic information in brackets after each quote: (school role, years of teaching experience, school size, country) so that the following qualifier (T, MC, Large,

¹ This project received Institutional Human Research Ethics Approval [2019000087] and further approval from the Fijian Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts. All participants gave informed, written consent prior to data collection.

Samoa) indicates that this opinion was voiced by a mid-career teacher working in a large school in Samoa.

Table 2

Questionnaire Participants

Pacific Island	Union	Participants
Cook Islands	Cook Islands Teachers Institute	8
Fiji	Fijian Teachers Association	8
	Fiji Teachers Union	6
Kiribati	Kiribati Union of Teacher	15
Samoa	Samoa National Teachers Association	15
Solomon Islands	Solomon Islands Teachers Association	3
Tonga	Friendly Island Teachers Union	15
Vanuatu	Vanuatu Teachers Union	12

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Role in school	School leader	23
	Teacher	55
	Other	4
Size of school	Small (1-100 students)	7
	Medium (101-400 students)	36
	Large (401-1000 students)	11
	Very large (1000+ students)	18
Teaching experience	Early career (0-5 years)	13
	Mid-career (6-15 years)	21
	Experienced (15+ years)	44

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three union officials in Fiji and three former and current education bureaucrats in Fiji. In the collection of interview data, each participant was provided with information about the study and informed consent was collected prior to involvement. Interviews were of approximately 45 minutes to one hour in duration and were conducted using an interview guide developed by the researchers, which sought to examine key features of the Fijian education system. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online using Zoom. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed. In ensuring participant anonymity with this small sample size, we do not provide any identifying characteristics (e.g. name, gender or organization) in the reporting of the results, and refer to each participant as either Bureaucrat X, Y and Z or Union Official A, B and C.

These data are presented in two ways. First, questionnaire data is used to provide a broad perspective of teacher and school leader understandings about teacher professionalization across the seven Pacific Island nations included in this study. Second, interview data from the union officials and education bureaucrats is used as a case to highlight how Fiji – as the largest Pacific Island nation – is both representing professionalization as a policy problem and enacting particular solutions

(Bacchi, 2012). This highlights the tensions that exist between education bureaucrats seeking to reform teacher professionalization to meet Indicator 4.c.1 and union officials (representing the interests of teachers and school leaders) who argue that the effects are punitive in a number of ways.

Teacher and School Leader Perceptions of Professionalization

Questionnaire participants articulated a range of challenges that shaped the conditions of the teacher workforce in Pacific Island nations. Two themes contributed to an overall concern for teacher professionalization, including: a narrow understanding of teacher professionalism influenced by external actors and agencies, and how associated policy reforms introduced to meet the SDG4c indicator impacted negatively on teacher employment conditions. Each of these themes are briefly discussed below.

The Influence of External Actors on Professionalism

There was a common concern amongst teachers and school leaders that recent policy reforms in the Pacific Islands had adopted a managerial understanding of teacher professionalism (cf. Ro, 2020). The focus on teacher qualifications, for example, was viewed as problematic. Participants suggested that there was a lack of adequate teacher training programs available in the South Pacific, and moreover, they tended to critique the varying standards of the programs that did exist. For instance, one participant observed that “there are few opportunities for teachers to train in colleges” and that there needed to be a “centralized training system for teachers to be trained by professionals before taking their place in the classroom” (T, MC, Small, Cook Islands). Another participant argued that the current “poor training opportunities for new teachers” meant they often lacked the requisite skills to deal with “challenging students and difficult school contexts” (T, E, Small, Cook Islands). Similarly, others spoke of teachers lacking fundamental subject-specific skills even when “they come straight out of teachers training college [meaning] they still require a lot of training on lower end skills” (T, E, Very Large, Tonga). The general perception across teachers and school leaders was that the “standards of teacher qualifications are low” in the South Pacific (T, MC, Very Large, Tonga), and that regardless of qualification level of type, “teachers need further training” (P, E, Medium, Vanuatu).

A number of participants across each context (e.g. 4 in the Cook Islands, 3 in Fiji, 5 in Kiribati, 2 in Solomon Islands, 6 in Tonga and 7 in Vanuatu) perceived that the policy changes and reform initiatives that had recently entered the Pacific Island education systems were externally influenced. As an experienced school leader of a large school in the Cook Islands observed, “all policy goals are aligned with the SDGs.” Other participants commented that “UNESCO [provides] advice and policy alignment” (T, -, Very Large, Tonga), “guides and directs policies” (T, E, Very Large, Tonga), and “shapes curriculum and policy beliefs” (T, E, Large, Vanuatu). Various other organizations and aid agencies were also cited by participants (e.g AusAid, NZ Aid, UNICEF, Oxfam, Save the Children, Red Cross, etc.) as contributing to schooling, particularly through volunteering, donations of resources and materials, or assistance with school infrastructure. However, these agencies were largely seen as helpful rather than influential. Indeed, participants were concerned that the policy reforms being driven by UNESCO (and to some extent, Australia and New Zealand as regional neighbors and ‘reference societies’ (cf. Sellar & Lingard, 2013)) were being enacted without “promotion and information about these into our schools” (P, E, Large, Cook Islands).

Participants agreed that reform often occurred without consultation where “teacher views and welfare are not considered as it is more of a ‘government say’ directive” (T, MC, -, Fiji). These directives often came from “external political interests” (P, E, Very Large, Tonga), that “often suit

the aiding donors, not the country's context" (T, E, Large, Solomon Islands). The effect of this type of policy borrowing, according to an experienced teacher working in a large school in Vanuatu, is that "international organizations indoctrinate the education department with their western ideas to be disseminated in schools". The concern raised by a number of these teachers and school leaders was that such "decisions and policies are inappropriate for our culture and way of life" (T, E, Very Large, Solomon Islands) and that "cultural values we used to have are fading away and adapting to foreign thinking" (P, E, Large, Cook Islands). As one participant summarized, "policies are copied and pasted from other countries to implement in our small society" but there is a "need to keep things more simple and focused [and] more on the care and needs of our people given the fast development of our country" (T, MC, Small, Cook Islands). Participants feared that their countries would "continue to implement practices that do not work" (P, E, Large, Cook Islands), creating "a lot of confusion, misinformation, and a lack of transparency about why particular decisions are made" (T, MC, Large, Fiji). Participants were clear that they wanted their "cultural values and beliefs upheld with less influence from outside institutions" (T, MC, Small, Samoa), and that "citizens who pay taxes and contribute to the economy are not neglected and ignored when it comes to decision making" (P, E, Very Large, Tonga).

Corporal punishment was brought up by ten teachers (predominately in Fiji and Kiribati) to exemplify the tension between reform trajectories in the South Pacific, and a lack of support or training for teachers to implement them effectively. For example, a mid-career teacher of a large school in Fiji explains, "behavioral problems such as disobedience, bullying, fighting, laziness, truancy, swearing, etc. are never ending daily challenges" and are affecting "the environment of teaching and learning". This participant argued that if "children are to excel they need to be disciplined correctly" and that "corporal punishment should be allowed... because that's the context we are brought up in" (T, MC, Large, Fiji). Others, however, agreed that a "zero tolerance approach on corporeal punishment was now necessary" (T, EC, Large, Fiji), but that they were struggling to find strategies to deal with student behavior effectively. Indeed, one participant reflected that "when students start to fight, I feel nervous about what I should do about it now" and that the only strategy they had been given was to trial a "time out corner" (T, EC, small, Kiribati). A number of participants called for "intervention to help solve the misbehavior of students" (T, -, Small, Kiribati) and "additional training for teachers to be able to deal with students to give them proper discipline" (T, EC, Very Large, Tonga). In general, participants argued they needed a more accessible and effective system for ongoing professional development and learning, that would "help teachers with the continual upgrading of their knowledge" (T, E, Large, Tonga). Teachers and school leaders thus understood teacher professionalization as an ongoing pursuit of context-specific skills and knowledge, and that there was a tension between the politics and policies targeting teacher professionalization (through credentials), and what they understood as necessary for improving teaching and learning in schools.

Concerns Regarding Employment Status

One of the most concerning elements to teaching in the Pacific Islands as perceived by questionnaire participants was the employment status of teachers and school leaders. Participants in Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Samoa were concerned by the widespread use of short-term contracts tied to teacher credentials. Participants felt that this created instability in the workforce because "teachers are treated like casual workers" (T, E, Medium, Solomon Islands), with "high job insecurity" (O (admin), E, Very Large, Fiji). As described by some participants this leads to feelings of "stress" (P, E, Small, Samoa) and "disturbs the love of teaching" (T, MC, -, Fiji).

Teachers and school leaders across all contexts voiced concerns about salary, with many arguing that current pay levels do not reflect the challenges of teaching. An early career teacher in a small school in Kiribati argued “the pay is not enough for a professional teacher who is dedicated and devoted to their duty”. Others reflected on how the demands of teaching had intensified, and that teacher salaries - of “\$32,000 annually” (T, E, Medium, Cook Islands) - did not compensate adequately for the expected teacher “workload, responsibilities and time spent in school” (P, E, Medium, Samoa). Some participants were also concerned that current teacher salaries were unable to support the cost of living in the Pacific Islands. An early career teacher in a medium school in the Solomon Islands argued “my salary does not cater to my cost of living” and a mid-career teacher in Kiribati similarly described that their “pay is not enough for all the expenses in our family”. Teachers and school leaders commented that the under-payment of educators was not only affecting the current workforce, but future teacher recruitment, as “school leavers see teaching as a less attractive career compared to other professions” (T, MC, Large, Tonga).

Participants clearly articulated that their employment status - as underpaid, contract workers - was detrimental to teacher recruitment and retention in the Pacific Islands. As a mid-career teacher in a medium school in Fiji argued, “with the way teachers are treated, I fear many will resign.” Another participant observed, “teachers are overworked with administration, discipline, and imparting knowledge. This creates a lot of stress for teachers and most end up dying at an early age. Some leave to find other professions that will help their family and take away some stress” (T, EC, Large, Fiji). A Tongan participant commented that “teaching has become a temporary job where people come to work while they look out for a better job with a good salary, and once they find that job, they move on” (O[school chaplain], MC, -, Tonga). Another participant from Tonga observed “that the staff turnover is getting higher and higher every year” because “politics is taking over the school system” (T, MC, Very Large, Tonga). An early career teacher in a very large school in Tonga said “there are people with authority to do something about the workload of teachers, but they have different priorities”. They continue, “I am hoping that something will be done to address the workload of teachers in Tonga and other islands in the Pacific as they are probably experiencing the same challenges.” Participants in the Cook Islands similarly observed that there “are no incentives to lure young people into the teaching profession” (T, E, Medium) and that there “is a long line of retiring teachers” (T, MC, Small).

In summary, questionnaire participants perceived that many of the recent reforms in Pacific Island schooling were making teaching a less attractive profession. Ongoing concerns about class sizes, student behavior, and teacher work conditions (including remuneration, employment status, workload, and wellbeing), coupled with concerns about the cultural appropriateness of externally influenced policy reforms, and a lack of access to appropriate training or professional development around the enactment of these, were all seen to be detrimental to teacher professionalization. Indeed, despite SDG4c and the PacREF identifying teacher credentials as the most appropriate way to improve professionalization, some questionnaire participants contested the quality of the teacher training programs available in the South Pacific, as well as how accessible these programs are to all teachers and school leaders.

The Case of Fiji

The interviews conducted in Fiji provide a different perspective on the policy challenges and representations that teachers and school leaders highlighted in the questionnaire. This small case study of bureaucrats and teacher union officials explores the tensions that exist for governments

seeking to address teacher professionalization and the implications that addressing this challenge can have on the teaching workforce.

Reforming Teacher Qualifications

A pertinent issue raised by some teachers and school leaders in the questionnaire was the use of short-term contracts. However, as explained by an education bureaucrat, the use of contracts has been a matter of policy in the Fijian civil service for a number of years and, from their perspective, shouldn't be considered a cause for alarm,

[I]t's not a new phenomenon. Part of it is to keep people on their toes. It has to be performance related. Traditionally, if you're a permanent employee in the civil service, you're in a comfort zone and you do the same job every day. You don't try to do things better. You don't try to do things more economically. So, this [contracting] is a way of ensuring there's proper performance in the best interest of ensuring there's a quality education system in place. (Bureaucrat X)

Part of increasing the effectiveness of the teaching workforce, according to this education bureaucrat, was the need to improve the qualifications of the workforce. It was noted in the interview that while some statistics and people might suggest that Fiji has a qualified teacher workforce, in reality, “we've got a good couple of thousand teachers who don't have an education qualification.” Bureaucrat X explained that part of the rationale for utilizing one-year contracts was to provide the Ministry with an opportunity to “audit every single teacher's file” to ensure “they get the right salary for their qualification”. As they detail further,

We're appointing people as classroom assistants [licensed teachers] without proper qualifications ... because of a shortage of teachers. So, ... we told them they needed to upgrade their qualification... It's essentially a win-win... If they've got their qualification and their graduation certificate or their completion letter, we go through a process of verifying it. If it's all hunky-dory, then we upgrade their salary and their contract.

Once teachers have this qualification their pay increases (dependent on qualification level) and their contract length is often extended to three or five years. As Bureaucrat X summarizes,

We need to be able to ensure that teachers are up to date in terms of what they're teaching. We need to ensure that teachers are literate and numerate so that our students are literate and numerate. There are a whole lot of reforms that we need to put in place to be able to achieve those outcomes... For us it means hopefully an improvement in quality and stability in the school system.

The problem with this approach, according to other interview participants, including former education bureaucrats and teacher union officials, is that the use of contracts to drive teacher certification is a borrowed policy driven from the top that leads to dysfunctional effects that could have been avoided with better consultation.

Former Bureaucrat Y spoke of their concern in how the government “is pushing their [reform] agenda” tied to external indicators without a clear understanding of the complexity of the Fijian school system. They spoke of “Ministers of Education who want reform, who have power... but no education background” and how “ad hoc changes were leaving schools and teachers confused” and “fearing for their jobs and future, because of the contract issues.” Indeed, another former Bureaucrat Z, argued that the Ministry never “consulted teachers or teacher unions” about

this reform strategy or how “it was to be implemented effectively or the people who would be most affected.” Instead, certification “reform was pushed by the Ministry with a rapid deadline.” Union officials were unsurprised by this lack of consultation, arguing that

consultation is always minimal. They just implement from the top, pass it down. Implement from there, pass it down. Go and get the curriculum from Australia, or Bangladesh, or whatever, and come and implement here and tell the teachers what to do. In terms of looking at the context and what is best, it’s not happening here.
(Union Official C)

Union Official A agreed that there was too much “cutting and pasting” from other contexts without thinking carefully about “a reform that’s workable for our country.” They argued that “the intention of the government” to use short-term contracts to drive up teacher qualifications “was to show off to other countries that we can do good things to the education system in our country.” However, as this official observed, “we had a structure that was working... we produced lecturers, philosophers, pilots and doctors.” They suggested the government needed to “loosen the reigns on their reforms and engage in further consultancy” with teachers and teacher unions about what would best drive enhanced teacher professionalization.

Implications of Professionalization Reforms

As identified by teacher and school leader questionnaire participants, a focus on certification for enhancing teacher professionalization could be considered problematic given the quality of, and accessibility to, teacher training programs in the South Pacific. Bureaucrat X was asked to respond to concerns of quality and accessibility in their interview and argued that neither were a limitation. For instance, they observed how the Fijian Ministry of Education had worked closely with the University of the South Pacific (USP) to “concentrate their 18-month teacher qualification into a 12-month online program that would align with contract requirements.” Bureaucrat X argued that internet accessibility – even within rural and remote areas – shouldn’t be considered a “hardship” as there’s “probably only 150 schools that have iffy connections, but they still have connections.” Similarly, this bureaucrat identified that the cost of attaining this certification wasn’t an issue either as the Ministry had worked with USP on an arrangement where teachers could access the qualification immediately, and pay their debt off once they were being paid a teaching salary,

What we said to USP is that because it's the teachers, the unqualified teachers, soon to be qualified teachers who are earning the least amount of money that it'd be helpful if they extended the payment process. So that they paid what they could, negotiated that with the university, and then once they get their salary upgrade, they can pay off at a quicker rate. So we did intervene with USP at the time to say that they need to be kinder than they usually are.

This bureaucrat was confident that the concerns being raised by teachers, school leaders and union officials were either redundant – because they had been solved – or were never an issue in the first place. They reminded the research team that “unions push particular lines” but that the Ministry was “focused on wide social impact”. Their argument was that the Ministry may not have been working collegially with the union to improve teaching standards, but “at the end of the day, their members are going to be better off” (Bureaucrat X).

Despite these assurances from the Ministry, the three union officials interviewed spoke of ongoing concerns they had about how a narrow focus on qualifications was sidelining what teachers and school leaders understood as the most pertinent issues effecting a quality education system.

Union Official B, for instance, argued that many of the ‘real’ problems in schools were being ignored by the Ministry. They used the example of the “zero tolerance approach around corporal punishment” to explicate this, suggesting that “there’s now no discipline in schools, [and] students are not learning because teachers lack training in an alternate approach.” Union Official B and C suggested that teachers did not need a qualification to deal with poor student behavior. Rather, targeted, contextually relevant professional development would be far more beneficial in addressing specific challenges identified by teachers. Indeed, Bureaucrat X conceded that there was a “need to sort out who should be responsible for continuing professional development because there’s no culture of it here [in Fiji].” Union Official A argued that current reforms were leaving the Fijian teacher profession “confused and demoralized”,

I've had five people who have come here to give me a copy of their resignation in the last three months. They have decided to go and plant kava back in their villages. They think they would live a much more peaceful life. They would not be shoved about and given unfair treatment by the Ministry of Education... The teachers now hate their jobs so much they're having second thoughts about having chosen to be teachers. (Union Official A)

In summary, this brief Fijian case study highlights the tensions that exist between education bureaucrats seeking to reform teacher professionalization via the SDG4c indicator and union officials (representing the interests of teachers and school leaders) who argue that minimum teacher qualifications are unlikely to have an impact on broad-scale systemic improvements. Indeed, basic indicators are likely to mask systemic problems and the resources required to address them.

Conclusion

SDG4 promotes seemingly laudable goals, yet in practice, these can have perverse effects, particularly when applied to developing countries. As described in this paper, blunt indicators around teacher qualifications work to narrow potentials for teacher professionalism. While the use of short-term contracts in Fiji is believed to incentivize teachers to gain qualifications, our participants perceive this to be a punitive policy that is de-professionalizing teachers through the wide scale casualization of the teacher workforce. Teachers, school leaders and union officials argued that teachers are facing precarious employment conditions with various consequences. They reported feelings of diminished wellbeing and perceived this reform as affecting the likelihood of retaining and recruiting quality teachers into the future. Of course, the limitations of this research as a scoping study means that our intention here is not to provide any substantive conclusions about effective policies for driving teacher workforce change. Rather, it is to highlight the tensions that occur when extra-state actors assume that all education systems have a set of common circumstances and are therefore amenable to the same policy indicators.

As we defined in the beginning sections of this paper, 100% of teachers in Fiji are ‘trained’. However, less than 60% of secondary teachers and 22% of primary teachers are ‘qualified’. These data do not account for the difference (if any) between teacher ‘training’ and ‘qualification’ programs. Yet, these figures have significant implications for Fiji in reporting against the SDG4c target of teacher professionalism. This indicates that there is a particular global politic emerging that seeks to define what appropriate teacher credentialism is. The problem with this global politic in contexts like the Pacific Islands is that it is neither meaningful nor responsive to local vernaculars. Indeed, our teacher, school leader and union official participants perceived issues with accessing quality teacher qualifications and argued they would gain more benefit from contextually-relevant

and continuing professional development. As these participants described, targeted learning opportunities - particularly around emerging agendas, such as zero tolerance corporal punishment - would have far greater impact on upskilling the teaching profession to manage twenty-first century learning. Yet, through this case we clearly see that an extra-state indicator is driving political decision making, rather than the teaching profession.

The policy discourse established by SGD4.c is constructed 'above' and 'outside' the Pacific Islands and suggests to local policymakers that teacher professionalism can be measured by easily identifiable standards or indicators. Yet as Ro (2020) argues, such an instrumental viewpoint on education disregards the voices of teachers and school leaders. It creates a system in which regions might be able to produce data to show positive steps towards workforce professionalization, but in reality, the teacher workforce feels de-professionalized and neglected. Echoing Tikly (2017), we argue that it is important that teacher professionalism isn't defined by a narrow conception of reform and development. More voice needs to be given to teachers to better understand their needs, aspirations and practices, and in particular how the vernaculars of culture and place can enhance (not diminish) teacher professionalism.

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