# Teachers as miracle workers?

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**It always amazes me that in just over four or five hours by jet from Sydney or Auckland one can be visiting a classroom in a developing country that seems to be 'a whole world away' in operation. I was first confronted with this difference in the early 1980s as a schools' supervisor and pilot for a Seventh-day Adventist Mission in Papua New Guinea. I was on my way to Rakamanda in the Enga Province and called in to a small bush school at Tomba at an elevation of nearly 3,000 meters. The school was one of the poorest I had ever seen and yet, I was to discover, not unlike so many others. The floor was dirt; the students had no books or pencils. The teacher's desk was an old electric stove with the elements gone. I noticed that each child had brought to school a piece of pit-pit stalk and later watched them using this as a pencil to write in the dirt on the floor. They had no other resources and yet, in spite of this, they could read and write and weren't too bad at math either.**

Amazingly, in some parts of the Pacific, not much has changed. I recently flew into Karamui, located some 20 minutes flight south of Goroka, in the Eastern Highlands of PNG. There I met students who had walked for seven days to attend the school. Their teacher had a B.Ed. degree and when I asked her why she was working in such an isolated community rather than in a better equipped town school she simply said, "This is where the need is. These students really need me and this is where God wants me to be."

I talked recently with a teacher who has 180 students in her class! She divides her school into three rooms and moves from room to room on a 20 minute rotation. I asked her if she ever got discouraged to which she replied that she often went home discouraged and cried. I asked what her husband's reaction to that was and she replied: "He just says, 'Let's just keep working until Jesus comes and then we can take a rest!'"

She isn't the only teacher with a large class. I know of another in Western Province in the South West of PNG who has 200 students. Last year I visited a large primary school in Honiara, Solomon Islands with an average class size of 70 students. I also visited a school in Lae, PNG in 2009 with 400 students, all smartly dressed in blue uniform. Last year their roll was 750 with no increase in classrooms or teachers. At this same school, in 2008, one of their security guards was murdered at the school gate as children were preparing to head home for the day. Violence in broad daylight is part of everyday life for many children in PNG.

Some scenes are quite unexpected. For example, the school at Enekis in Tana, Vanuatu, a bush school with over 100 students and a gruelling three hour's walk from the end of the road, has a beautiful campus overflowing with happy children. Not far from the school, under another thatched roof, is a flat screen monitor and out under a nearby coconut tree is a small Honda generator. These village folk have purchased this resource for the school. When I asked what educational DVDs they had, they proudly showed me Rambo, Charlie Chan, and the Terminator! They had no other educational materials. No wonder the kids enjoyed school!

On more than one occasion, while visiting a remote school in Vanuatu and also in the Solomon Islands, a villager has turned up and asked if we knew about another school just over the mountain there, or down the river, "long this way". Village parents value education, though they are most likely illiterate themselves. They often build a simple school and conscript one of their young people who

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[Photography: Ken Weslake]



may be lucky enough to have completed Grade 6 to be the teacher. It is estimated that in the Solomon Islands alone some 25% of the teaching force could be untrained. Vanuatu figures are similar.

There are many boarding schools across the Pacific. Most of them offer a standard of accommodation that is better than in the village, but some struggle. Dormitories are often old and dilapidated and in urgent need of repair. At Kwataparen in Vanuatu, girls have to bathe in a makeshift enclosure made from sticks and plastic sheets. The boys' accommodation is deteriorating badly due to the school's close proximity to the sea and salt air.

By Western standards there are few schools in the Pacific that would be judged to be well equipped. The further one travels away from the major centres the less equipped and resourced they become. But what impresses me is that in spite of the lack of resources—no library books, no text books, barest of furniture, to say nothing of the absence of computers, interactive whiteboards and data projectors—the students still succeed in numeracy and literacy. Their teachers are nothing short of committed, faithful, miracle workers.

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So, if ever you, as a teacher, are tempted to complain about your lack of reliable technology, or your large class, or your old textbooks that needed updating five years ago, just remember that less than a few hours travel time away are teachers and students who would think they had arrived in heaven if they had a quarter of what we so often take for granted in our schools here.

We can be thankful for all the blessings that God bestows on us. We do not have the overwhelming educational needs that some of our Christian colleagues have to deal with in developing countries on Australia's and New Zealand's doorstep. Should our arms merely be folded in gratitude or is there a nobler, more generous and practical response open to us? Who knows what miracles YOU can achieve? TEACH

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