

# **Teacher Education for Cultural Identity in Fiji**

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## **Introduction**

There is uncertainty about the place of traditional systems of education in our schools. There is a definite need to integrate cultural traditions into formal schooling processes. Teachers in Fiji are aware of this need and efforts are constantly being made to try to find the right approach, the best way to teach students, and the most appropriate curriculum for us in our distinctively South Pacific setting. We are yet to witness, however, the cultures of Fiji having a truly significant part to play in the education of students in this country. What we need is the right blend of strategies, a culturally sensitive curriculum, and an educational system whose structures enable teachers to implement a culturally balanced education.

This paper examines the relationship between culture and education, and relates it to the South Pacific context, particularly Fiji. It argues that there is a need for balance between western education and the traditional education of Fiji's non-western cultures. A first, important step in achieving this balance is to enable teachers to recognise and affirm their own cultural identities, and to understand and respect the cultural identities of those around them. The discussion moves to a case study focused on teacher education at the Fiji College of Advanced Education (FCAE) where trainees, predominantly from Fijian and Indo-Fijian cultural backgrounds, undertake a two-year pre-service programme. Upon graduation, these diplomates teach in selected subject areas in junior secondary schools.

During their course of study at FCAE, trainee teachers undertake core courses in education which are designed in such a way that their own cultural identity is affirmed and their cultural sensitivity towards others is heightened. One core course especially highlights these goals. Offered in the second year of the programme, the course is entitled, 'Education and

Society in the South Pacific'. The *leit-motif* for the course, prepared by FCAE Lecturer in Art and Craft, Ranbir Singh, depicts a Fijian boy holding traditional materials of learning and the teaching materials of contemporary schools. He is holding both, with no gap between the two sets of materials. One merges into the other, and there is a balance between the two (see Figure 1).



**Culture and education**

The people of the South Pacific have relied on "word of mouth" through generations to pass on their sense of cultural identity, and to keep alive the deep values and beliefs of their societies. Increasingly now, perhaps more than at any time in history, western schooling has pulled children away from their homes and communities, sometimes never to return. This means that the former dependence on the home and community as transmitters of culture, identity, knowledge and traditional skills no longer stands. They do not have ground any more.

In the face of rapid technological advancement and change, a firm footing in one's own culture is vital. People first of all have to be sure of who they are and what they value before they can safely swim in a sea of change. They need a firm foundation to withstand the tumultuous tides that threaten to engulf their cultures. Sir Geoffrey Henry, Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, recently addressed the question of cultural survival, emphasising that everyone in the society has a part to play. He aptly quoted an old Chinese proverb, "We cannot know the village where we are going, unless we know the village from whence we came." (Henry, 1992: 14).

A people's culture will decay if they are not able to determine or shape their own destiny. Education must ensure that the Pacific way of life is preserved and affirmed, just as any other group in the world requires recognition of its unique identity. There is therefore an urgent need to implement educational programmes which, "...recognise the significance of cultural identity as the living core and driving force of all cultures" (Power, 1992: 9).

All peoples should have an opportunity to learn their culture, develop an awareness of its uniqueness, and be proud to belong. Unless people understand and appreciate their own culture, how can they truly understand another? Distinguished Tongan educator, Konai Helu-Thaman, advocates that: "Every child ought to learn the traditions of the particular human society into which she or he is born. ...the first step surely is for each person to become literate in his or her own national language/culture..." (Thaman, 1992: 32). This, she suggests, can be achieved only by systemically incorporating cultural literacy into the school curriculum.

Education and culture are closely inter-related, since education is a significant component of the culture of a society. Everyone has a part to play in it. Teachers in schools have an important role, but so too do parents and communities. Schools should not be closed to the cultures of their students. Neither should communities set their schools apart from community life and culture (Veramu, 1992). The challenge is to discover a balance and flow between culture and education.

The maintenance of culture through education is a positive way forward. It ensures diversity. The world is interesting to live in because of its diversity of colour, cultures, art, histories and traditions. It would be catastrophic if everyone were to imitate one or two dominant cultures. If this happened, the world would become monotonous; it would lose its beauty and splendour, for indeed there is richness and beauty in diversity.

### **The Fijian context**

Today, academic achievement in the guise of successful performance in external examinations is the fulcrum on which the Fijian education system rests. With the introduction of western education last century, indigenous Fijian children and the children of indentured Indian immigrant labourers, were exposed to the formal primary schooling system of colonial Britain. Traditional education was discouraged in schools and now, only two or three generations later, it exists in modified form only in the more remote mountain and island villages. The British system, with its prime focus on English language, literacy and numeracy, gained ground and extended to secondary education, which currently emphasises academic achievement in subjects such as mathematics, science, English language and literature, commercial studies, history and geography. Neither of the two major cultural groups has the opportunity to gain a thorough knowledge of the culture and history of their own people in the current education system. In Helu-Thaman's terms, neither group is becoming culturally literate.

On closer analysis it is notable that indigenous Fijian students lag behind other races, particularly Indo-Fijians, in academic achievement (Puamau, 1991). The disparity in performance between the two cultural groups is especially significant at the tertiary level. This problem stems in part from a total disregard of Fijian ways of learning in the formal schooling system. Indo-Fijians have tended to have the upper hand, for their culture has had a longer history of literacy, numeracy and formal schooling; hence children are more at ease in the western school. On the eve of independence, the Fiji Government included this issue in the 1969 Education Commission's seven terms of reference, in the hope that the achievement differential might

be addressed. More than two decades later, Fijian students' underachievement is still a matter of great concern.

There is a distinct possibility that the introduced system of western schooling has been undermining the cultural identity of the Fijian people. Educators need to be aware of the need for positive changes in the system to counteract this process of cultural erosion. These changes must come from within; they need to be effected by Pacific educators and not imposed by outsiders from other cultures. A strong affirmation of the several cultures which make up Fiji's national education system, and a recognition of the importance of traditional knowledge and its distinctive modes of transmission, could greatly enhance the teaching/learning processes in the schools of Fiji. Sir Geoffrey Henry, speaking at a UNESCO seminar sounded a note of warning to Pacific educators: "Culture...is the fulcrum to that balance between the past and the future...But today I am aware not of balance but of disharmony" (Henry, 1992:9).

### **The need for balance**

People in Fiji and the South Pacific at large realise the importance of western schooling, for academic success brings with it money, power and independence. However in the hearts of many South Pacific people is a deep-seated reverence for their culture - for culture is the very soul of the people, and defines their identity. Hence the two ways - the western and the traditional - are both important. There is an obvious need for a balance between the two in the schooling system.

Fiji's current emphasis on western education to the detriment of traditional learning is not unique among developing nations. Colonialism effectively imprinted itself on most of these societies through its pervasive system of education. Today, as "cultural maintenance" becomes an increasingly important global issue, many countries are striving to regain traditional knowledge and modes of knowledge transmission and blend them with the education systems of modern industrialised societies. Australian educator, Stephen Harris, writing about Aboriginal children, talks about it in this way:

...if these children succeed in the western school system, this is likely to be at serious cost to their Aboriginal culture under the present school structure. The vision is that schools can be structured so that new skills learned from another culture can be added to a person's primary cultural make-up, rather than displace it (Harris, 1990: 1).

In Fiji, the pupil, the trainee teacher, and the classroom teacher, given the right training, support mechanisms, opportunities and options, should be able to move towards a balanced bi-cultural approach to knowledge and learning, an approach that cumulatively adds to each person's primary cultural make-up. One form of education should not supersede the other. For this vision to become a reality in Fiji, a wider set of options is needed when decisions are made about school organisation and structure, and about curriculum content and teaching methodologies. An important first step is to prepare teachers appropriately.

### **Sensitising trainee teachers to cultural identity: A case study**

The teacher education programme at the Fiji College of Advanced Education aims to prepare trainees for careers in the junior secondary schools of Fiji in selected subject areas. Throughout their two years of study and practical preparation, trainees undertake core courses in education which seek to blend western and South Pacific knowledge traditions; i.e., all education courses emphasise the cultural contextualisation of western knowledge. This paper focuses on a final year course - 'Education and Society in the South Pacific' - which has as one of its major objectives an affirmation of cultural identity. The course attempts to address the question of cultural balance by enabling trainee teachers to know themselves and their cultures, and by encouraging them to undertake classroom teaching in a culturally sensitive and affirming way.

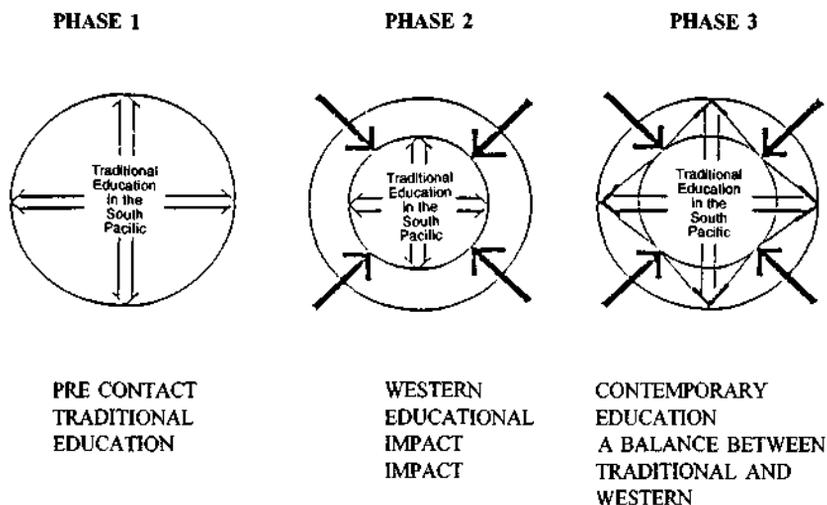
The course does not offer magical solutions to bring about instant changes in attitudes and ideas about education. It does, however, enable trainees to rediscover the traditional patterns of knowledge and education valued by

their forebears, and to strike their own balance between these patterns and the introduced system of western schooling.

'Education and Society in the South Pacific' has three major phases. Phase One reflects on pre-contact traditional education; Phase Two looks at western educational impact; Phase Three examines the contemporary educational situation both in Fiji and in the South Pacific more generally. Trainees are encouraged to start with their own personal understanding of these phases as they relate to their particular cultural background. However, their horizons are broadened to include the cultures that surround them in Fiji, and in neighbouring Pacific island nations. Figure 2 provides a visual and written representation of the course content, direction and methodology.

**Figure 2**

**Course Rationale: 'Education and Society in the South Pacific'**



## **Course methodology**

The course occupied three hours per week over a twelve-week period. One hour was devoted to providing information through lectures and panel presentations to the 85 final-year trainees. In weekly two-hour workshop sessions students interacted in groups of approximately fifteen.

A dynamic, eclectic theoretical approach was used in relation to course content. The notions of conflict and social change fitted well with some aspects, while a structural-functional approach applied elsewhere. The impact upon people drew the human interactionalist perspective to the fore. By using a variety of perspectives judiciously, the course maintained momentum and provided trainees with a more comprehensive understanding of the processes involved and their place within the total picture.

Workshop sessions became pivotal. Trainees chose topics related to one of the three phases. Having chosen a topic, small groups of researchers/presenters fell into place. These groups took their cue from lecture content and prescribed readings. Each group was given full responsibility for a two-hour session and was challenged to use a variety of interesting and culturally appropriate techniques to work with their colleagues on the chosen topic. Using co-operative learning techniques, trainees collaboratively planned, prepared and presented their workshop sessions as a team.

Presentation formats were wide ranging, and included oratory, ceremony, dance, demonstration, debate, discussion and audio-visual presentations. Afterwards they wrote individual papers reflecting upon and linking together lecture content, literature research and their workshop experience. The written requirements of the course included the individual paper and an open-book examination. Actual workshop presentations were also assessed.

## **The trainees' response**

The spirit and enthusiasm with which teacher trainees undertook this course cannot be adequately expressed in words. Few of the trainees missed a single session; many attended not only their own workshops, but others as

well. Interested staff from other sections of FCAE also came to the workshops. Working collaboratively, the trainees explored their selected topic, often involving themselves in voluntary, practical field research within their own cultural communities, in addition to the reading and reflection that was required. The group process was greatly facilitated by the residential nature of the college. Peer and collegial competition between groups also acted as a positive incentive. Workshop presentations were profound, yet professional and polished, and thoroughly enjoyable for lecturers and students alike.

It is interesting to note that, while all workshops were successful, the trainees really excelled in Phase One ('Pre-contact Traditional Education'). It was here that they displayed a high level of confidence and ease in making their presentations. Comparatively speaking, the workshops on traditional education demonstrated one point: that students do best in what they know best. They showed a quite remarkable capacity to translate traditional knowledge into action. Taking to the stage, they demonstrated, danced, orated, sang, displayed and dramatised this section of the course with ease. They displayed their cultures with pride, exposing not only explicit values but implicit ones, in ways that can never be adequately recaptured in a sociology textbook.

Though written requirements were an intrinsic part of the course, trainees who were not very comfortable with the written word were able to do well in the workshops they prepared. Many showed considerable skill in drama, oratory, dance and/or song. Overall, when it came to documenting workshop outcomes in writing, the students did not display the same exuberance that they showed in the workshops themselves, when learning was achieved through 'doing'. Traditionally Pacific islanders learn through observation, imitation and participation, not by reading and writing. The response of the students partly gave emphasis to this.

At the beginning of the workshop programme it was very noticeable that Fijians and Indo-Fijians preferred to work in culturally similar groups. As the course unfolded mixing increased, and sometimes during role plays trainees took on the role of a person from the other culture. By the end of the course trainees appeared more at ease with cultural difference, and

more able to affirm their own cultural identities. Interestingly, a significant number of trainees regularly began wearing traditional clothing rather than the western fashions strongly in evidence prior to the course.

In the course evaluation trainees affirmed that they felt more sure of their own cultural identity, but also had gained a new awareness and respect for those from other cultures. Certainly they felt a deeper commitment to becoming culturally affirming as teachers, striving to bring at least some aspects of traditional knowledge and learning into Fiji's junior secondary classrooms. Time will tell if they are successful. It is our belief that their attempts will bear some fruit, but that a larger impact will not be evident until the schools' organisational structures, curriculum content and associated teaching methodologies are changed to recognise and manage cultural diversity in a sensitive and affirming way. What is urgently needed is a schooling system which encompasses traditional Fijian and Indo-Fijian cultural maintenance, while simultaneously encouraging success in western academic learning. Maybe these young teachers will become the harbingers of a change to such a system.

## **Conclusion**

Teacher training is an important means of promoting and affirming cultural identity through education. In Fiji, teacher trainees come from culturally different backgrounds and will return after graduation to teach in schools where their cultures are represented. Although the Fiji education system leans strongly towards western knowledge and its modes of transmission, teachers who are sure of their own cultural identity and are motivated to affirm the cultural identity of others, can make a difference. As a starting point, the Fiji College of Advanced Education is attempting through its core Education courses to equip young teachers to take on this role. In this way the indigenous Fijian culture, and those of the Indo-Fijian people, can be recognised and affirmed.

Taken on a global scale, the issue of the survival of small cultures does have a sense of urgency. It is crucial now, in the face of intensive change and development, that formal education addresses this issue. Schooling is

the main means of childhood socialisation in most cultures today, compared with the days when community elders, aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents and other relatives fulfilled this role. Now, with the pull of formal education, children need to be introduced to their cultures through the system where they spend most of their time - the school.

Helu-Thaman has rightfully said that the curriculum must include cultural learning, whatever we in different societies perceive that to be. We cannot totally ignore the value of western ideas, knowledge and technology but, in appreciating these western "imports", we in Fiji or in the South Pacific must not allow our own cultures to be undermined. Our cultures make us what we are. Without them we are like debris in the ocean. In the South Pacific, cultures cannot be separated from people, the two are interchangeable. Culture is the soul of the people. It is what we were, what we are and, with appropriate education, what we can become.

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