

The Forgotten Context: Culture and Teacher Education in Oceania

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to share ideas about education in general and teacher education in particular, at this important gathering. My ideas about teacher education have evolved over a long period of time, as I reflected upon my experiences as a student, teacher trainee and schoolteacher and, more recently, as a teacher educator, researcher and consultant in the areas of teacher education and curriculum development. This address is therefore a reflection upon as well as a sharing of ideas about teachers and their education, and is done with one purpose in mind, and that is to contribute to a better and more culturally democratic educational environment for Pacific Islanders in the years to come.

Culture and Education

Culture, which I define stipulatively as a way of life of a group of people, has been viewed rather negatively insofar as education in the Pacific is concerned; first as a barrier to successful learning in school, and secondly as something whose negative characteristics are reproduced by the school. I take a different view of culture by accepting Lawton's (1974) definition of curriculum as 'a selection of the best of a culture', the transmission of which is so important that we cannot leave it to chance but must make it the responsibility of carefully selected teachers. Instead of viewing culture as a barrier to learning, I want to suggest that it form the basis for our teaching and learning. More specifically, I want to suggest that, before we debate different types of teacher education models or argue about what to do about the status of teachers, there is an urgent need for a better understanding by all teacher personnel in our region of the cultural contexts of Pacific

schools and, in turn, of teaching and teachers.

My interest in the area of culture and education began when I was a trainee teacher in Aotearoa (New Zealand) in the 1960s, where I found the information and ideas about teaching and learning that were presented to me to be incompatible with what I knew about students and teachers in my home country, Tonga. However, it was difficult for me to openly question lecturers' and tutors' advice about what I needed to do in the classroom in order to be a good teacher. For example, in my *Educational Psychology* course, I learned that a teacher should praise students when they provide correct answers to her questions as this would be an example of positive reinforcement. I remember thinking then that this practice would not be appropriate in Tonga, where students would be made to feel embarrassed if they were publicly praised, especially for doing something which they were expected to do, and where praise was confined to favourable behaviour that was unexpected. To publicly praise a student for giving a correct response would be to imply that a teacher did not expect that student to know the correct answer in the first place. In the Tongan context, a teacher would therefore use praise for a different reason than positive reinforcement!

Teaching in Tonga

As a high school teacher in Tonga, I found that students had great difficulty in understanding most of what they were supposed to learn, particularly at the senior levels. To make matters worse for me, I was assigned to teach School Certificate English, a subject I had immensely disliked both at school and at university. Teaching English, especially English literature, proved a nightmare, and during my first year of teaching, I was tempted to apply for other jobs. The students hated reading the set texts (so did I) and preferred to memorise only the synopses that were available in the various study guides. The set plays, novels, short stories and poems did not make much sense to them, and why should they when these students grew up in Tonga and the literature

they were studying belonged to a different people who lived in a different place a very long time ago? In desperation, I began to write my own verse about subjects which I thought the students could relate to and/or appreciate. I translated popular Tongan songs and used these to illustrate important aspects of poetry and I enrolled in creative writing classes at the newly established USP Centre in order to learn more about creative writing. I also encouraged the students to write their own poems and stories in whatever language they felt comfortable with.

The students' response was overwhelmingly positive and I began to understand what had been the source of my own learning difficulties and frustrations, and why I had not enjoyed English at school. The problem, of course, was that the students had to write their examinations in English and, although many still failed to achieve the famous 30% minimum mark in English that was necessary in order to pass School Certificate, twice as many students achieved the minimum mark compared to the previous year. I realised the important role of the teacher in making the curriculum meaningful for students. In English, it meant using local examples first before going on to something foreign.

My experience as a high school teacher was largely responsible for my choosing curriculum and curriculum development as major areas of study for a Masters degree in the U.S.A., and my thesis was a critical analysis of the Tongan primary social studies curriculum and proposal to use a problem-solving framework for both content selection and methodology. Problem situations selected from various aspects of Tongan culture and with which pupils were familiar would form the "content" of lessons, and problem-solving skills would be emphasised in both the teaching and learning activities (Thaman 1974). I am sad to report that my proposed curriculum never saw the light of day. I was later politely told by a Tongan educational official that my proposal was "too difficult" to implement in Tonga because teachers would have found it different from what they were used to. Finally, my proposed curriculum was considered inadequate for preparing students for high school History and Geography.

University Teaching

When I joined the University of the South Pacific many years ago and found that most of the students in my classes were destined to be high school teachers, I was excited at the thought of being able to influence future teachers. What I discovered was that they too, like my high school students in Tonga, related better to content that was derived from contexts with which they were familiar. Furthermore, my involvement in several regional curriculum development projects taught me the significance of understanding Pacific cultures and the influence these have on students as well as their teachers. I began to write a number of critical articles about the need to develop a more culturally sensitive model of curriculum development as well as more culturally democratic curricula for PICs (Thaman 1987, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1995, 1997).

I became increasingly aware of the important role of teachers in the work we were doing and how most were left out of major curriculum decisions, even though they were expected to participate in both materials design and development as well as implementation. Because of the centralised nature of curriculum development in our region, most teachers found themselves implementing new curricula without the necessary preparation. The result was obvious: teachers continued to 'do their own thing'.

Teacher Education and Culture

Today I wish to focus a little on the work that some of us are doing in relation to the issue of the teacher education curriculum in our region. I shall first provide a brief outline of how we have arrived at what we are doing, and share with you some examples of attempts to deal positively with the issue of culture in formal education generally and in teacher education in particular.

Culture and the Curriculum

In February 1992, curriculum personnel from several PICs, together

with representatives of the indigenous peoples of Australia and Aotearoa gathered for the first time in Rarotonga under the auspices of UNESCO to scrutinise the school curricula and to examine ways in which the experience of schooling and, more particularly, of the curriculum, might better contribute to social and cultural development in our region. It was midway through the UN Decade for Culture (1987-97) and I suppose UNESCO decided it had better do something about it. At the seminar, I delivered a paper entitled *Cultural Learning and Development through Cultural Literacy* (Thaman 1992), a paper about the need to incorporate Pacific cultural knowledge, skills and values in the school curriculum as a way of ensuring that the curriculum better reflected the cultural contexts of both Pacific students and teachers. Participants later resolved to work towards ensuring that the curriculum at all levels of formal education seriously consider the cultural milieu in which students are socialised, as disregard for this would adversely affect their ability to benefit from schooling and/or develop positive cultural identities (Teasdale and Teasdale 1992).

In June of the same year, at the first Pacific Association of Teacher Educators (PATE) planning meeting in Suva, I presented a paper entitled, *Looking Towards the Source: a consideration of cultural context in teacher education* (Thaman 1993a). The paper argued the need for Pacific people to theorise their own education and to develop more culturally sensitive frameworks for teaching and learning, reflecting the best of their collective cultures. I also suggested that Pacific cultural knowledge and understandings should be incorporated into the teacher education curriculum. Three years later, at another PATE consultation, I was asked to make specific suggestions about how Pacific cultural content might be incorporated into the various subjects offered in teachers' colleges. My paper, entitled *Pacific Cultures in the Teacher Education Curriculum* (Thaman 1995) outlined how this could be done in different subject areas, including communication studies, expressive arts, science and mathematics, the social sciences, literature, education and psychology.

In that paper, I suggested that: i) the content, processes, and contexts of teacher education in our region were and continue to be almost entirely western; ii) teacher educators past and present often assume that there are universally acceptable approaches to teaching and learning and that “traditional” methods and approaches need to change and iii) tertiary education, because it is inherently Eurocentric, continues to reaffirm the idea that western-derived ideologies and value systems are superior to our own cultural values and beliefs.

Curriculum Content

In relation to curriculum content, the question was: should we cover a range of Pacific cultures or concentrate on one or two? In culturally homogeneous societies such as Tonga and Samoa the answer is relatively straightforward. In multicultural ones such as Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu the answer is more complicated. The decision is best made with reference to the people whose cultures are under consideration.

Another issue was related to whether Pacific content should be concentrated in a special subject or be incorporated into a range of subjects/courses. There were strong arguments for the special subject approach and it was strongest where language was concerned. This was the case in Tonga and Samoa, where Tongan Studies and Samoan Studies form core subjects in the Diploma programmes in both countries. The disadvantages of this approach, however, included the fact that the college timetable may already be overcrowded and may not allow for more than one slot. This is the case at USP where Pacific Studies is optional and those trainees who may need it most (notably Science and Commerce students) are not able to take the course because their programme structure does not allow for it. Another disadvantage of the special subject approach is that some staff may feel that because there is a special (Pacific) subject on offer, they can leave content relating to the Pacific out of their own teaching. Finally, having a special subject may also reaffirm the paramountcy of subject-related knowledge, thus undermining the indigenous view of knowledge as interrelated.

On the other hand, incorporating Pacific content into existing teacher education courses has two main advantages. Firstly, it avoids the potential objections of additional subject slots in the timetable and, secondly, it is a useful symbolic statement about the importance of Pacific cultures (including their valued sources of knowledge and insights) in the curriculum of higher education institutions.

The obvious difficulties with this approach include the need to broaden the bases of our formal education systems and the provision of adequate and good quality teaching materials. Furthermore, consultations with people in various communities as to what should be in the curriculum might be considered by some as time-consuming, and coverage may be fragmented as new content is fitted into the plans and objectives of different subjects or courses. Finally, the apparent conflict between the secular nature of college/university curricula and the emphasis commonly placed on the spiritual dimension by Pacific cultures may create problems about what to include or exclude.

These two approaches, special subject and content integration, are not necessarily mutually exclusive, however. They may be combined, although there is a danger that some college staff will believe that there are subjects, such as the social sciences, the arts and humanities, that better and more easily lend themselves to the second approach than do the sciences and mathematics, thus continuing to give the message to students that their own cultural knowledge and understandings are not relevant in higher education. Pacific cultures **can** be incorporated into the curricula of higher education, especially teacher education. In the area of language and communication studies, consideration of the appropriate vernacular languages and their methods of communication may be included. In the social sciences, there are numerous examples from Pacific history and geography, and Pacific cultures, economies, and political systems from which lecturers and teachers can draw, the only problem being the development of appropriate resources for both teachers and students. In the sciences and mathematics, areas often mistakenly

thought of as western achievements, recent important advances in fields such as ethno-science and ethnomathematics have much to offer college lecturers. Two volumes of *Science of Pacific Peoples* (Morrison et al.1994) indicate the interest in and importance of teaching and research in these areas. In expressive arts, teacher trainees can study aspects of Pacific arts and crafts in their cultural contexts, not extracted from their cultural values and purposes and incorporated into mainstream, monocultural programs, as is often done in some art courses. Trainees can examine the history of our Pacific music, art and dance, and focus on the changes which have occurred in these areas over the years, instead of seeing Pacific artistic traditions as static. I am happy to report that this type of approach is what our newly established Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture promotes.

In the area of educational psychology, particularly in courses such as *Human Development*, and *The Psychology of Teaching and Learning*, including Pacific content would not only widen the frame of reference used in these courses, but would also reveal where the beliefs and practices of the home culture of students might be at odds with those of lecturers and/or prescribed texts. For example, many Pacific cultures disapprove of individuals who are self-promoting or talk a lot about their achievements, and often emphasise group membership as significant sources of identification and self-respect. Teacher trainees who study the importance of interpersonal relations and collective action, for example, may obtain important insights into the conduct of social encounters at both the personal as well as group levels in their own societies.

Pedagogy

In terms of pedagogy, many teacher educators in the region are unaware of their own cultures' theories and methods of education, and even if they are aware, they, like me when I first started teaching, believe that these theories and ideas are not worth studying and/or adopting. Most of us have blindly accepted the educational philosophies, methodologies and psychology of the learner and learning that we were taught at overseas universities and teachers' colleges,

despite our own knowledge and experiences to the contrary. This situation, however, is changing, albeit very, very slowly.

As teachers and teacher educators, we must continue to critically examine the educational theories and ideas which have informed our teaching and teacher education programs for the past fifty years, not only so that we might discover their relevance to preparing Pacific teachers but also for the possibility of incorporating the most useful indigenous ideas and theories into “mainstream” courses in order to complement existing trends and widen the range of alternatives. Let me illustrate with reference to my own teaching here at the USP.

Culture in Teacher Education

One of the courses that I teach as part of the USP’s BEd and BA in Education major, is *ED253: Theories and Ideas in Education*. The first part the course deals with Pacific vernacular educational ideas and focuses on students’ analyses of their own vernacular languages of education, using a conceptual framework I developed while studying Tongan notions of education (Thaman 1988). Students also examine the differences between the underlying philosophy of schooling and that of indigenous or vernacular education, the main aim being better understanding of what has happened to them and to others as well, especially in the way they see education and what they consider worthwhile to teach and learn. Students are also encouraged to examine how indigenous and vernacular notions of education have been affected by schooling. For example, in Tonga, the notion of wisdom, or *poto* had to be reconceptualised after the introduction of schools in the 1830s to include the achievement of schooling, although the utilitarian nature of *poto* has remained unchanged, namely the beneficial application of *ilo* (knowledge and understanding) gained as a result of *ako* or learning.

Over the last three years, research by some of the students has indicated that similar notions of learning, knowledge and wisdom exist in other PICs. For example, in Fijian, *poto* is similar to *vuku* or *yalovuku*, the culmination of learning, or *vuli*, aimed at the acquisition

of important cultural knowledge, skills and values or *kila ka* (Capell 1957; Nabete 1997). In Solomon Islands, among the Lengo people, a concept similar to *poto* is *manatha*, the person, who, through learning or *nanau*, obtains knowledge and skills, *lingana*, considered vital for living in Lengo society (Vatamana 1997).

In an attempt to provide a more culturally appropriate pedagogy, I use peer tutorials where students are encouraged to learn cooperatively and from one another and to take turns to lead and facilitate group discussions. In small groups of about 5-7, students share and compare information about one another's educational experiences as well as their own home cultures, and critically examine ideas and theories they come across in lectures and readings. More importantly, students are encouraged to identify the values that underpin their own vernacular education systems and to compare these with the values that underpin the theories and ideas of selected western educational thinkers and theorists studied in the course.

At the postgraduate level, students taking the *Culture and Education* course have an opportunity to further focus on the historical processes through which schooling has evolved in PICs, particularly its structure and pedagogy. They examine learning and human development theories which formal education was and continues to be based on and informed by. For example, they study theories which rely on a biological model of interaction that sees a person as a distinct, genetically determined, self-actualising individual as well as those theories which define persons through their interaction in different social settings (Linnekin and Poyer 1990:7). The former, however, continue to be the theories upon which most teacher education programmes in our region are based.

In my view, it is important for us Pacific educators, to see how the wholesale importation of cultural values and practices associated with schooling has largely destroyed the values that underpinned indigenous education, and how this has resulted not in enlightenment and empowerment but in disenchantment and disempowerment, especially among traditional teachers in Pacific societies, who now constitute mainly rural dwellers and/or elderly folks. Today the trend

continues, under the guise of globalisation (read westernisation) and the mass export of the cultural practices and values of the industrialised and post-industrialised world, including their languages, communication networks and non-sustainable consumerism. UNESCO has even warned that this trend may produce a sense of dispossession and loss of identity among those who are exposed to it (Teasdale 1997:1).

Finally, we need to critically examine the concepts of science and western liberal education, upon which our formal education in teachers' colleges and universities is largely based. What I think we would discover is the misleading and unproven assumption that a largely non-prescriptive, culture-free, academic education can and does occupy some kind of ideologically neutral high ground, an assumption that is at best naive and at worst arrogant, since the methods of liberal education are founded on contested beliefs, its neutrality neither possible nor desirable. Like all beliefs and values, liberal ones are embedded in a particular cultural curriculum and agenda (Vine 1992:169-210).

Like most of us present here today, the majority of our own students are having to endure the conflicting demands and expectations of their home cultures and those of their formal education. Many of us now live in urbanising environments, away from our source cultures, and have invariably been forced into a code of conduct, metaphysical belief systems and economic activities that are more typical of our colleagues in metropolitan countries than the majority of our rural sisters and brothers. As teachers, most of us probably see formal education as something that will open up endless possibilities, not only for self-discovery and improvement, but also for social and national development.

But we would be less than honest if we did not admit that, for the majority of Pacific Island students, these are unrealistic expectations. Schools have failed most of our students. Three years ago, a study conducted by the Asian Development Bank showed that there was a general decline in the quality of both primary and secondary education in most PICs; that a large proportion of well-qualified people continue to leave their countries for perceived greener pastures overseas; that

the economic and social returns for educational investment were poor; and that in many places the education system at all levels was expensive, wasteful and of poor quality (ADB Report 1996:27). Formal education, instead of helping our communities improve, is contributing to their eventual demise. Worse still, many educational projects, including those which focussed on curriculum development and teacher education, have not really worked, and why should they, when the processes and models that were adopted did not even work for the citizens of those countries for whom these models were intended in the first place?

Learning to Fail

I suggest that the dominance of the western curriculum model in teacher education has directly and indirectly led Pacific teachers, including ourselves, to believe that the wisdom of their own cultures is worthless, or at least irrelevant for “modern” educational development. Many of us continue to see Pacific cultures, including their languages, as obstacles to rather than a basis for success at school and university, a myth planted by early educators and one which is still firmly entrenched in the minds of many teachers as well as teacher educators today.

The result, of course, is that schools are turning out more failures than successes. Tatafu (1997) has estimated that in Tonga, fewer than 10% of school children starting Form 1 will be successful in obtaining a School Certificate when they reach Form 5. In that country, where the achievement of the School Leaving Certificate is a major indication of *poto*, this finding, although not surprising, is disturbing. Furthermore, because the senior high school curriculum is overly academic and geared towards studying at university, most school leavers will not know the uses, let alone the names, of their plants and animals, knowledge which once formed the basis for the subsistence affluence that gave many Pacific Island societies their cultural and economic resilience (Fisk 1972). We cannot expect school leavers, as the International Community does, to protect their physical and cultural environments, if they lack the necessary knowledge and understanding.

I apologise if the picture of formal education I have painted is too harsh for your sensitive eyes. There are, however, some hopeful signs. An increasing number of scholars is interested in conducting research in the areas of teaching and learning of Pacific students. Over the past two years, I have examined doctoral theses by Pacific Islanders attending universities in Australia and New Zealand, seriously questioning and analysing long-accepted educational theories and practices, and suggesting new syntheses and models for future action, including new research paradigms (Mead-Smith 1996). In 1997, a major teacher education research project was launched by PATE, aimed at examining the extent to which the curricula of teachers' colleges incorporated Pacific cultural knowledge and understandings. The Project, managed by the USP's Institute of Education and funded by UNESCO, is now complete and plans are in place to produce materials that would assist teacher educators to better contextualise their work. Data analyses indicated a need to incorporate more local content in teacher education courses both at the various teachers' colleges as well as in our own USP programmes. The recent establishment of a UNESCO Chair in Teacher Education and Culture at our university should strengthen our efforts in this area.

Finally, it is pleasing to note that the International Community is now making teachers and their education a priority area of concern. The 45th International Conference on Education (ICE) paid particular attention to teachers and their education, and its analyses and recommendations have been the object of discussion and dissemination in high level congresses and seminars as well as the foci of several articles published in newspapers and reviews in different regions of the world. The December 1997 issue of *Educational Innovation* is devoted to a summary of policies connected with four of the nine recommendations of the ICE in respect of teachers. These are: 1) how to attract the most talented young people to the teaching profession; 2) how to connect pre-service training with the requirements of professional activity in an efficient manner; 3) how to support the initial years of teaching with strategies designed to convert this period into an integral part of professional training; and 4) the most effective strategies to strengthen the on-going in-service training of teachers. As the Director

of ICE proclaims in the same issue, "Teachers can no longer continue to be overlooked in the process of educational transformation. Changes . . . will not achieve the desired effect if they are not accompanied by an integrated policy intended to strengthen the role of teachers" (Tedesco 1997:1).

Conclusion

As a member of the Joint ILO/UNESCO Committee on the Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers (CEART), and the holder of the UNESCO Chair in Teacher Education and Culture in this university, I have devoted much of my professional career to working in the areas of teacher education and curriculum development. My mission, as I see it, is to assist students, teachers and others in our region to become more aware of the contexts in which they study and/or work, in an effort to ensure that more Pacific students benefit from their formal education. I recognise the different conditions in which teachers work, the complexity of modern education and how its many aspects may be largely incompatible with those of most of our Pacific cultural traditions. I would, however, like to suggest that it would be to the benefit of all, if those who are responsible for making decisions about teachers and teacher education showed more consideration for and tolerance of the realities of teachers and/or students who identify with cultures that have different histories from those that dominate the scope and processes of our formal education systems. I am not advocating a kind of "blind" tolerance here in the sense that we ought to pretend that we understand Pacific cultures and beliefs, but a tolerance which means learning to see things from the point of view of other people and their cultures and the possibility that some of their beliefs and practices may come to make sense to us too.

After all, tolerance is a value emphasised by both western liberal and Pacific cultures. I believe that this value could help us leave behind totalising conceptions of Anglo-American and Eurocentric perceptions of learning and teaching that often lead some of us to reject anything that does not fit a scientific and/or psychologically based conception of education as traditional, or alien or irrational. I am suggesting that we

look and learn from Pacific cultures and their accumulated knowledge, skills and values, in order to expand our own learning and knowledge of the realities and conditions of teaching and learning in our various countries, so that we may become better teachers as well as more critical learners,

for what is it that the mynah fears
in moving closer to the door
or the sailor doubts
as he approaches the harbour
at midnight

come, be brave
the restless night
cannot break
the dreams
the stars have sprayed
on the mountain top
and after tear-flows meet
the fertile valley below
the harvest will be good.

(Thaman 1981)

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