Introduction

Over the four decades or so since the 1969 Education Commission, Fijian education has become a major issue, not only amongst Fijians but also in the nation as a whole. The need to address issues pertaining to the education of Fijians cannot be overemphasised. Baba (1983) points out that peaceful coexistence of all races in Fiji, as well as national development, depends on how this significant issue is addressed by the government of the day and other stakeholders. Indeed, the extent to which Fijians are educated may determine how well they can exist in a modern economy. Education is now widely acknowledged by Fijians as the vehicle to modernity.

The performance of Fijians in public examinations has been adversely compared to the performance of Indo-Fijians and other ethnic groups. There is an obvious need to scrutinise the reasons for this. Also, the nature of external examinations needs scrutiny. A brief discussion of both is provided in the paper.

Context of Development and Fijian Education

In the last few decades, there have been many changes in Fiji and the world. The 60s saw the establishment in Fiji and the Pacific of numerous higher education institutions including the University of the South Pacific (USP). This development was, in the main, an attempt by many countries to produce much needed manpower and expertise, especially as they gained independence or self-government. This impetus continued into the 1970s and 1980s. However, as colonial powers left the Pacific, neocolonial powers, dominated by New Zealand and Australia, entered the education scene in the Pacific. This situation was further complicated through external funding of education by these two countries, as well as
by other aid donors such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

These aid donors have been increasingly influential in determining education policies and directions, as well as the content and form of the education that is provided for Fiji’s people. The whole environment for education will and is continuing to change. Today, globalisation and its neo-liberal policies are increasingly impacting on education in general, as well as the education of indigenous Fijians in particular.

**Addressing the challenges to indigenous Fijian education**

The Fiji Education Commission/Panel, like the 1969 Commission, reports (Learning Together 2000) numerous and varied concerns about the education of indigenous Fijians. I think of these concerns as challenges, challenges that should be addressed, not only by Fijians, but by all those in decision-making positions in Fiji. Some of these challenges are discussed here, and suggestions are put forward which could lead to improvement.

**Globalisation**

According to Baba (1999) globalisation and its associated neo-liberal policies will have many implications for education, two of which are discussed here. They are:

a) reduction in the funding of tertiary education and the setting up of cost sharing arrangements;
b) devolution of responsibility of school funding from central governments to school communities;

The reduction in tertiary funding and the resultant cost-sharing arrangements are not favourable for the generally economically backward rural Fijians. Baba (1999:37) wrote:

The capacities for families to support a tuition level of about $3,000 at the University of the South Pacific, let alone boarding and book fees, is a tall order, when the average income per capita of most [Pacific]
countries is below $2,000 a year.

What this means is that the economic capacity of Fijian families needs to be seriously looked at. Alternative sources of funding may need to be explored by Fijian institutions such as the Ministry of Fijian Affairs (MFA) or the Provincial Councils. Scholarships given under the Fijian Education Fund should be increased but this should be subjected to a fairly rigid independent review to ensure that the cost effectiveness of this scheme is comparable to other scholarship schemes in Fiji.

In addition, more scholarships for higher level, post-graduate qualifications should be made available to prepare highly skilled Fijians for the globalised world.

The devolution of responsibilities of school funding from central government to school communities means that schools will increase fees and/or organise more fundraising activities. Because of their comparatively low economic status, Fijians will generally lag behind, especially if Fijian parents continue to give low priority to education. In addition, it means that teachers’ time will be diverted to fundraising activities at the expense of their teaching duties.

Globalisation calls for a smarter approach, one that is serious, business-like and has clear objectives and direction.

... we cannot merely await its impacts because these are already with us ... It seems there is room for creative resistance, creative adjustments, and responsive actions at all levels, including the schools. (Baba 1999:48).

It is not enough just to continue with affirmative action policies. What is needed is not only more directed policies but also more programmes which reach out to adults. At the root of this is the need to convince Fijians about the importance of good performance in school. This will be addressed in some depth later.
Social and Cultural Challenges

Many of the socio-cultural challenges arise from the difference between values and attitudes promoted by Fijians and those promoted by schools.

1. Life style

The life style of the Fijian places a lot of importance on social gatherings, group sports, cultural functions, church activities and ceremonies. Such a life style is not only prevalent in rural areas but also in urban areas. While this is not bad in itself, it can be counter productive if Fijian children and the school take second priority or in some cases third priority. Formal education or schooling demands that the home is quiet, conducive to study, well-resourced, provides good nutrition, and offers privacy. These are simply not possible in situations where parents and guardians indulge in excessive socio-cultural activities and ceremonies.

The low priority, the lack of community commitment and support that Fijian parents assign to education compared to vanua (community) and church-related activities need to be discussed by teachers on all occasions when they meet parents. Community leaders, village elders and church leaders also have a crucial role to play.

2. Communal vs Individual Aspirations

Fijian society promotes communal living and work as opposed to individual aspirations for the sake of individual advancement. A close look at the Fijian village, for instance, will reflect a picture where individual homes are dwarfed by two communally owned buildings; the Church and the community hall. Churches are important because they symbolise reverence to God. Fijians build churches as big as they can afford and value them greatly. They are also status symbols. Then there is the community hall, which is symbolic of the unity and wealth of the village. Needless to say, these two buildings are expensive, but their building usually takes precedence over other items
of expenditure. Individual homes are generally small and lack privacy which children need for individual study.

3. Competition and the Maintenance of Good Relations

There is a lack of desire for competition among most indigenous Pacific people because it can lead to the ruining of relationships or the disturbing of peaceful co-existence. The system of ranking children according to their performance in examinations makes for a competitive classroom and, while this system has long been discarded in many countries such as Britain, Australia and New Zealand, it persists in the Pacific. An alternative is to provide a profile of performance for each pupil, covering all aspects of school activities. This will ensure that a child’s worth is not solely dependent on his/her performance in examinations.

Group competition in teams or houses, however, can be encouraged. Good performance is achieved at the same time as helping in the maintenance of good relationships within the school community.

4. Worldview - The Supernatural versus Positivistic Thinking

Fijian education is governed in part by how Fijians view their world. Life on earth (vuravura) is closely tied to spiritualism and the supernatural: nature, the heavens and so on. Thus, when someone falls ill, Fijians may explain it as the result of the person’s inappropriate behaviour or to sorcery of some kind. Increasingly today, Christian beliefs are replacing beliefs in the supernatural. So when someone dies, people say that it is God’s will, lewa ni Kalou; there is strong belief in spiritual causation. This is replacing the ‘old’ notions of the supernatural. The paradigmatic shift in belief systems is one of the main forces affecting the life of the Fijians today.

The world of the school, on the other hand is about empiricism; it is about nurturing the child to analyse, measure, observe, weigh, i.e. use the five senses to verify truth. Scientific observation is promoted.
This is a big step in the opposite direction from the Fijian child’s familiar world. These western processes allow a great deal of control over the physical world through science and technology. The scientific/positivistic outlook involves imagined situations of no personal or immediate relevance to the student and include: extensive verbalising, comparing and contrasting; extensive generalising; hypothesising unrelated to a practical task; evaluating objectively other people’s or culture’s beliefs and extensive summarising, enquiring, justifying, clarifying, interpreting and challenging’ (Harris 1990: 6).

5. Holistic vs Compartmentalised Thinking

Fijians see the world as one, everything in it being related. It is not possible to talk about Fijian land, kinship, or beliefs as distinct entities. They belong to a whole; they are inter-related. Similarly, a person does not exist alone; one’s existence is explained in relation to other people. If someone has drawn public attention to himself or herself, Fijians will not single out that person alone, they will explain the person in terms of his/her father, mother, family, village, tribe, etc.

When in modern economic thinking, therefore, big areas of land are referred to as vacant and lying idle, the Fijian is astounded. ‘Empty’ land in the European eye is ‘filled’ in the native eye, for land is a source of identity, of strength, it is insurance, it is alive. According to Fijians who still believe in ‘old’ beliefs, land houses the spirits. Very often one can hear Fijians referring to a block of land, or forest area as tawa, meaning it contains spirits. The word tawa implies to potential users, or those that tread or trespass on it, that the land needs to be respected, in terms of not abusing the trees by extreme cutting or by being relatively quiet when one is on the land.

The Fijian world, then, is composed of inter-related parts. So in modern economic activities, Fijians do not compartmentalise things. Often one hears that a person is treating his company or the bank of which he is manager like a village. To a large extent it is to do with this holistic relationship. Fijians cannot separate work relationships from kinship relationships. The school is the same. Pupils may not
be able to separate play from studies, or their attitude at home from that needed at school. The school compartmentalises everything: time, subjects, teachers, departments and so forth, while the Fijian perceives ‘relatedness’ of the material and non-material world.

6. Time Perspective

In school, there is rigid scheduling of activities. This strict structuring of activities is new to Fijian children and is directly contradictory to values learnt in the community where time is not adhered to in this way. There is a loose structuring of activities and it is important to wait for participant readiness. Fijians are not an exacting people when it comes to time. Ceremonies or events take place when participants are ready. It is not uncommon, for instance, for a village meeting that was supposed to begin ‘after lunch’ to actually start at 4 pm or even later. Events will begin when the necessary attendants arrive. This is also because of the importance of maintaining good interpersonal relations. Not to wait for some people before a ceremony begins is to be saying in effect that they were not important enough to be waited for.

This time orientation affects the routine of a Fijian school. It affects not only the students and teachers but also the school management. In the work of Singh (1992), this is documented in the case of a small Fijian school with Fijian management and Fijian ethos. This is where a strong hand of supervision from the Ministry of Education is needed for Fijian schools.

7. Talking and Questioning

In most indigenous Pacific societies, children are not encouraged to talk a lot. Verbalising is not seen as a positive attribute in growing children. Ritchie and Ritchie (1979), writing on Polynesian childhood, state that, generally, learning occurs by observation, imitation and participation, and that verbal interactions primarily instigated for the purpose of learning are rare.

With Fijians, adults would normally not expect children to take part in conversations and when a child does, s/he is told, *kua ni silima na gau ni*
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*dali* (don’t interrupt) or *tikolo* (shut up) or *siosio* (to be cheeky and say or something inappropriate). Similarly, in Fijian schools children who are quiet, listen passively, follow instructions and advice and ask few or no questions are favoured. They are praised and made to feel worthy of being born and a pleasure to have around. A child said to be *dauvakarorogo* (good listener), *dau galu tu ga* (always quiet) is considered *vinaka* (good).

Interpreting the passivity of Fijian students as a lack of intellectual prowess could affect the expectations of teachers, which in turn affect their teaching and assessment of students and consequently students’ performance. This phenomenon has been documented by Rosenthal and Rubin (1978) and appropriately called the “Pygmalion effect” or in non-technical terms it is referred to as the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’.

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To summarise this section on socio-cultural challenges, it is clear that there are major differences between the culture of the classroom and that of the indigenous Fijian children. These major differences need to be understood by teachers and other interested parties involved in schooling. Teacher education curricula need to include a course on culture in which these issues are examined and strategies are developed, especially in the teaching of science. In addition, research on teaching and assessment approaches appropriate to enhancing Fijian self-concept needs to be done.

**Economic challenge**

Addressing challenges in Fijian education cannot be done in isolation as many of the concerns relate to the socio-economic circumstances of the communities that support the school. Hence, an intersectoral perspective is a useful approach.

Schooling and schools reflect the community they are a part of, they are a microcosm of larger society. Rural parents, especially of rural Fijian schools, in the main, are subsistence farmers. There is very little economic activity in rural areas. Even where there is so much gardening or farming
potential, in many cases, there are no markets. There is the need for government to arrange market outlets for rurally produced crops. Sustained economic activity is needed if parents are to afford the schooling needs of their children. This is a crucial part of the whole debate on Fijian education.

In a voluntary school system where the community is expected to run and manage schools, the community’s economic capacity cannot be ignored in the examination of this issue. It is encumbent on the government, in maintaining such a voluntary system, to ensure that appropriate action is taken to enhance the economic viability of Fijian communities. This must be provided for in governments’ integrated approach to development.

Institutional Challenges

1. Teachers

Numerous submissions to the 2000 Education Commission suggested that teachers in Fijian schools have a poor attitude to work and that the professional work of teachers in rural Fijian schools was undermined by their excessive indulgence in social activities. One can only explain this as a result of a general lax attitude found in our Fijian communities with regard to schooling and the lack of a business-like approach given to schooling in general by Fijians (Singh 1992).

This problem is compounded by the lack of academic stimulation teachers receive and a lack of professional networking amongst themselves. This is largely due to the geographical scatter of Fijian schools and their relative isolation.

Teachers who are not given adequate incentives are reluctant to teach in schools which are isolated and far from the main urban centres. Another disincentive is the poor quality of facilities, infrastructure, and teaching and learning resources, noted by the Fiji Education Commission/Panel Report (Learning Together 2000), Tavola (1991) and Singh (1992) as being a feature of Fijian schools. In addition,
most rural Fijian schools are small, so their government funding, determined by school roll, is low. Hence, they fail to attract the much-needed teachers that bigger, urban, well-resourced and well-funded schools are able to attract.

The better-qualified teachers of other ethnic groups are reluctant to be posted to Fijian schools, especially those in rural areas, and the current practice of posting teachers to schools run by their own ethnic and religious groups does not help the situation. In addition, there are fewer Fijian than Indo-Fijian graduate teachers. Fijian schools are victims of this imbalance, especially in Science, Maths and Commerce (MOE Annual Reports 1973 - 98). These subjects are important in equipping Fijians in today’s world and this should be viewed as a matter of urgency by the government.

The number of qualified teachers available in these schools determines the range of subjects taught. No effort should be spared to ensure that highly-qualified teachers are sent to rural and/or disadvantaged schools. This should be a central part of affirmative action policies on Fijian education by government. It is probably one of the most critical recommendations made in this paper and it is a recommendation that can be implemented fairly quickly, provided a package of incentives, such as study opportunities, extra pay and good housing, is available to attract the teachers concerned to move and remain in these schools.

Untrained teachers teaching in rural schools should be put in urban centres where they can update their qualifications, given reasonable teaching loads.

Staff in-service development programmes are a must. These need to be done in-school, perhaps once a term. Qualified professionals from USP, MOE and elsewhere can be drafted to do this work.

2. Leadership and Management - School management committees

Good management has been identified as problematic by numerous authors, including Singh (1992) and Tavola (1991), as well as by the
It has been mentioned that, in many cases, management is derived from the community and it is usually because of one’s social status and standing that one is made a school committee member. Tavola (1991) highlighted this, saying that one’s knowledge or expertise was not usually the criterion for selection on such committees. There is no formal management training before one becomes a member of a management committee, or a school principal for that matter. Because of a lack of training, most Fijian schools do not have a vision, mission statement, or strategic plans, let alone an annual plan. The school is run on an ad hoc basis; school activities take place without much overall thinking and a common platform around which everything in the school should revolve is absent.

Some submissions to the 2000 Education Commission highlighted the fact that principals in Fijian secondary schools are less experienced than their Indo-Fijian counterparts. Nabuka (1982), and the Fijian Teacher’s Association (2000:40) have also raised this issue.

Management and committees of Fijian schools must attend workshops on school management, especially in rural areas. This can be organised and funded at the district level by the MOE and assisted by the MFA. Among other things, members can be advised on the need for strategic plans, the need to set both short and long term objectives for the school, and the need for a vision and/or mission statement – all of which give a sense of direction and solidarity to the school’s stakeholders.

Committee members must be chosen carefully and must satisfy some criteria set by the Ministry of Education. There is also a need for a Handbook on School Management which provides clear guidelines for the operation of school committees in Fiji. Further, the MOE must ensure that Fijian schools are provided with management and administrative support which are at least comparable to that available to urban schools.
Principals and headmasters in predominantly Fijian schools need to be experienced. Fijian education should be seen as a critical area of need and, as such, it should get the attention of government. Well-qualified and experienced leaders need to be identified and posted to such schools. This has implications on terms and conditions of rural service. Rural and remote areas also need to be given special recognition by government. Principals and headmasters of other ethnic groups who have a proven record of performance and good leadership need to be identified and lured into rural Fijian schools.

3. Resources/School Physical Facilities

The importance of resources in terms of equipment and facilities has been well documented. It has also been stressed in many submissions to the 2000 Education Commission. Bole (2000: 26) pointed out in his report that “Good buildings, furniture and equipment gave parents and teachers confidence in a school”, and when teachers’ morale is good, according to Pennycuik (1990), other school factors may improve as well, such as enrollment numbers.

Most, if not all, submissions on Fijian education highlighted the inadequate resourcing of schools and their poor physical facilities and infrastructure. They need classrooms, toilet blocks, offices, staff quarters and hostel facilities. They are also poorly endowed with resources for teaching. The absence of science and computer laboratories with sufficient equipment, and libraries with sufficient volumes places major disadvantages on teachers and students. Teaching aids are also found to be wanting in Fijian schools. Most submissions stated the need for library books in particular. Fijian schools will need to develop a culture of scholarship and this begins with the encouragement of reading. Bole (2000: 67) rightly said:

... if children have to really benefit in any substantial way that will make a real difference from the current picture of attainment, they have to establish a reading culture so that they can explore knowledge on their own.
Resources need to be improved in Fijian schools. Firstly, fund allocation by the government should not just be based on school roll. This is a disadvantage to most, if not all, Fijian rural schools which have relatively small rolls.

A new capital development grant for schools needs to be instituted by the MOE to enable disadvantaged Fijian schools to meet minimum classroom and building requirements. The baseline standard should be drawn up by the Ministries of Education and Fijian Affairs and should include infrastructure: facilities like laboratories, classrooms, offices, and library. This grant should be based on a Composite Index of Disadvantage (CID) derived from such factors as distance from urban centres, school size, availability of public infrastructure in the area, availability of boarding facilities, socio-economic status of parents, etc.

A special project by MOE or the proposed Institute for Fijian Education needs to be set up with external funding to examine and improve boarding schools, especially in rural areas.

A separate funding for facilities, books, equipment and other teaching and learning resources can complement capital development funding. This fund could also be allocated on the basis of a CID.

With adequate funding and close monitoring by the Fijian Education Unit or an Institute for Fijian Education, Fijian schools can be expected to raise resource standards over a given time.

4. **Curriculum**

While all schools in the country receive the same curriculum plan from the Ministry of Education in the form of syllabi and prescriptions, it is up to individual schools and teachers to implement such plans. It is important that teachers implement the curriculum plan properly and imaginatively. Thaman (1990: 29) noted:
Teachers are the ones who will make something out of these materials (curriculum materials) in different ways. Some may make something smaller or bigger than what curriculum developers have in mind. *The difference* between the intention of curriculum developers and the actual situations in the classrooms as decided by a teacher is what some writers refer to as the *gap* between the curriculum in theory and the curriculum in practice. (Emphasis added.)

Another important point highlighted by Thaman (1990) is the fact that teachers will determine how the curriculum plan is translated. Needless to say, good teachers will make the most of the plans and poor teachers will do the reverse. This is why it is said that the curriculum is only as good as the teachers who implement it (Sharpes 1988; Hughes 1973). In the light of the difficulties faced by Fijian schools, it is strongly recommended that teachers sent to these schools are among the best qualified in the profession.

5. **Assessment**

Numerous submissions to the 2000 Education Commission raised concerns on the nature of examinations and assessments. Some current research highlights the point that most examination questions focus on recall of information. Current external examinations assess school learning exclusively. This means that Fijian children in Fijian schools, which are often poorly resourced and poorly staffed, are disadvantaged. Teachers who have experienced teaching Fijian students are aware of their creativity and imagination. Unfortunately, these are not assessed in current examinations. There is a strong case for urging that examinations assess the full range of abilities of children. This suggests that current assessment procedures need to be re-examined and that new modes of assessment be explored.

Teaching methods and evaluation procedures can be a focus of some in-service workshops for teachers. These may help teachers improve their approaches and henceforth excite learning. Assessment and evaluation procedures and results need to inform teaching and vice-versa.
Psychological Challenges

Studies have found that there is no difference in intelligence or general intellectual ability of Fijian, Indo-Fijian and students of other ethnicities (Chandra 1975; Bennet 1972). This means that the reasons for the so-called performance inadequacies of Fijians have nothing to do with their innate abilities. It means that the home, community and school have a lot to contribute to the whole performance debate.

Self-concept is important in school achievement. The work of Basow (1982) and Kishor (1981, 1983) has highlighted the fact that Fijian students have lower levels of self-concept than Indo-Fijian students. Teachers need to be made aware of the socio-cultural factors that inhibit the development of a healthy self-concept, such as a child being discouraged from asking probing questions, or his/her opinions not asked for. Fijian parents also need to be made aware of this so that they can improve their child’s self-concept by allowing the child some degree of participation, for instance, in family discussions and decision-making.

Fijian students also have greater external locus of control compared to, for instance, Indo-Fijian students. This means that they are more externally driven. Students that have internal locus of control are more internally driven; and this behaviour is associated with school success. As already discussed, Fijians tend to be community oriented by virtue of their social/cultural upbringing but academic success at school demands a high degree of individual orientation. Thus it is important to recognise this in teaching by using both group and individual approaches to teaching and learning, and in assessing students’ progress.

Fijian children need academic motivation. Many submissions to the 2000 Education Commission highlighted the poor attitude of Fijian pupils, teachers, parents and communities towards schooling in general. Fijian children need the right attitude to be motivated to do well at school. Correct motivation can begin by appropriate support from home, community and teachers. As suggested earlier, the correct
prioritising of education by parents can help here. Awareness programmes on this will ensure that parents understand the importance of their role in helping the child to acquire the correct attitude to schooling. Qualified and committed teachers can also help boost correct attitude patterns in children that will ultimately encourage pupils to work harder and succeed at school. Needless to say, the importance of having good quality schools can only boost such efforts, as clearly demonstrated by Foster (1965) in his work in Ghana, which demonstrated that school quality is the most significant factor in school achievement in developing countries.

Conclusion

Fijian education today needs to be seen in the light of the present socio-economic context. With the onslaught of globalisation, the challenges of Fijian education have to be addressed with more urgency than ever before. Globalisation and its neo-liberal policies of development mean that Fijians need to be more economically capable and competitive today if they are to develop with others in the new market economy. This means that education needs to be given greater priority and sharper focus and must be integrated with economic development. Globalisation pushes economic responsibilities of schools onto the communities. This has wider implications for Fijian communities today.

The colonial legacy has left behind an entrenched voluntary school system in Fiji where communities run the majority of the schools. In a situation where Fijian communities were reasonably affluent up to the 1960s, Fijian schools were adequately supported and supervised under the joint efforts of the then Department of Education and Fijian Administration. However, after independence in 1970 and particularly after the 1980s, it became very obvious that Fijian communities need more help in supporting secondary and technical institutions with specialist provisions, requiring teachers with specialised qualifications and a high level of management skills to run them.
For the Fijian communities today, this means that affirmative action policies need to be enhanced as well as new policies put in place. A new affirmative action policy on transferring only qualified teachers to Fijian schools is an example. Other new affirmative action policies can be put in place to target specific challenges or problems, but decisions on this have to be informed by research and constantly evaluated to ensure that monies and resources are put to good use. Questions have been raised on various occasions regarding the monies spent on affirmative actions over the last 30 years. These questions are legitimate and they need to be answered as dispassionately as possible. Current programmes need to be independently evaluated, not only to advise on future policies but also to respond to demands of transparency and accountability in the use of public funds.

Teacher education programmes need to include aspects of Fijian culture and values so as to sensitise teachers with regard to the conflict between Fijian values and values promoted by the school.

Attitudes to schooling among indigenous Fijians must change. This can begin in the child’s home and community; current awareness programmes are not enough. A more concerted and integrated approach in the creation of awareness, including radio programmes, community education and related community programmes needs to be explored. Awareness programmes and their supporting activities need to include topics like getting parents to accord higher priorities to education in relation to other priorities.

In order to coordinate all affirmative action policies, finances, research, programmes and activities, an Institute for Fijian Education (IFE) can be created. The IFE can be funded separately by government through the MOE and MFA and also be in a position to attract external funding for its projects. The largely autonomous unit can function directly under the aegis of the Public Service Commission. One of its roles could be the drawing up of a comprehensive long-term plan on Fijian education for the next 20 years. Another would be the scrutiny of curriculum and curriculum related issues of resource, teaching and learning methods,
teacher quality, infrastructure, perhaps twice or three times a year until the so-called ‘problem of performance’ ceases to be a problem.

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