Towards culturally inclusive teacher education with specific reference to Oceania

Konai Helu Thaman
University of the South Pacific thaman_k@usp.ac.fj

This paper describes attempts by educators in the island nations of the South Pacific to ensure that formal education is more culturally inclusive for learners as well as teachers. Now known by many as Oceania, the region continues to deal with its colonial legacy, educators being at the forefront of the struggle to cope with the impact of its particular circumstances and history.

Indigenous knowledge and wisdom; teacher education; curriculum relevance; culturally inclusive education; Oceania

SCHOOLING AS CULTURALLY ALIENATING

European and US colonial activities in the islands of the Pacific Ocean resulted, among other things, in the introduction of schools and the teaching of European and Anglo-American based knowledge, skills and values. This led to the transformation not only of the structures and processes of our cultures but also our worldviews.

Today, the degree to which such processes influence the way we think and learn largely depends on our ability to clarify for ourselves the differences between our received wisdom (from our formal, mainly western education) and the wisdom of the (home) cultures in which we grew up and were socialised, and from which we continue to learn important knowledge, skills and values. In the context of formal education, the difference between these two sources is the “cultural gap”, which is small for those students whose home cultures are attuned to the culture of formal education but wide for those whose home culture is different.

EDUCATION AND CULTURE

For my purposes I define education as an introduction to worthwhile learning, and culture as a way of life of a people which includes their store of important knowledge, skills and values expressed through a language and transmitted to the young for the sake of cultural continuity and survival. In this context, education and culture are inextricably interwoven since the content of all education has value underpinnings that are always associated with a particular cultural agenda, given that no education can be “culture-free.” In most Oceanic societies today, traditional cultural values underpin much of what people emphasise and think about, and continue to be the framework that people use to justify their behaviour and to explain the behaviour of others (Thaman, 1988).

In most Oceanic communities, people still share a worldview in which life is a web of interrelationships that provide meaning to and a framework for their existence in a particular society. This framework, often manifested in different types of kinship relationships, defines particular ways of being and behaving as well as knowledge and wisdom, and how these are passed on from one generation to another. In this context, worthwhile learning ought to be
about cultural survival and continuity, with a “curriculum” that is similar to that described by Lawton (1974) as a collection of the best of a culture, the transmission of which is so important that it must not be left to chance but to specially prepared people – teachers. Sadly, though, most of our schools and institutions of higher learning (such as teachers’ colleges) are actually sites of struggle as most of our teachers and learners continue to teach and learn about knowledge, skills and values that are almost exclusively associated with cultures other than their own, and often very alien to their lived realities, making schooling irrelevant and meaningless for many learners as well as teachers.

THE SCHOOLING AGENDA

In so-called developed countries the school is normally expected to serve three functions, namely to promote economic progress, to transmit culture and to cultivate children’s intellectual and moral development (Serpell, 1993). We know, however, that in practice schools fall far short of the ideal synthesis of all of these functions. In Oceania, as in most developing, post-colonial contexts, the economic and cultural agendas of schooling continue to come into conflict, mainly because of different perceptions about children’s upbringing and its relationship to their moral and intellectual development. The cultural agenda is embedded within Pacific indigenous cultural traditions, while the economic agenda is European-based, informing what teachers and students are supposed to do in school.

In such a situation, many teachers occupy a culturally ambiguous position. On the one hand their professional training commits them to the rationale, processes and practice of a culturally alien school curriculum, while on the other their personal identities are usually rooted in their (Pacific) cultural traditions and norms. Their training makes them part of an (elite) group whose knowledge and skills help set them apart from the rest of the community, yet their early upbringing was mainly in the medium of an indigenous or local language that is similar to if not directly continuous with that in which most of their pupils are growing up. Furthermore the relationships between pupils and teachers as well as those between pupils and their parents are negotiated within the terms of reference of local and/or indigenous cultures which have their own ideas about moral and cognitive development, interpersonal and social responsibility, as well as the development of wisdom.

In Oceania the extent to which the school represents the cultures of teachers and students is minimal. The officially sanctioned values are those of the school bureaucracy, the introduced curriculum and the teaching profession, not those of the majority of teachers and learners. Moreover, as alluded to earlier, school culture relies on universalism and impersonality while the cultures of most teachers and students rely on specific contexts and interpersonal relationships (Thaman, 1988). Schooling promotes individual merit while Oceanic cultures are still generally based on the primacy of the group. At best schooling offers the fortunate few access to the modern, monetised sector; at worst it is a recipe for cultural destruction and systematised selfishness. Today, as we grapple with increasing student underachievement, high push-out rates and general ineffectiveness, many people are asking the question: “What and whose knowledge is considered worthwhile to teach and/or to learn in school?”

CURRICULUM RELEVANCE

The concern with curriculum relevance in our region dates back to the early 1970s when the school curriculum was seen by Pacific Island leaders as an important instrument in preparing people for independence from various colonial masters. A major regional curriculum project funded by UNDP and managed by UNESCO was based at the University of the South Pacific from 1970 to 1975. Charged with the development of curriculum materials for junior
high schools (in Mathematics, English, Science, Social Science, Home Economics and Industrial Arts), the project involved foreign experts and local teachers; some of the curriculum materials produced are still used in our schools today.

An important lesson learnt from this project was the realisation by some curriculum personnel that the products as well as the process of curriculum development needed to be more culturally sensitive and inclusive (Thaman, 1985). The designation by the United Nations of a World Decade for Cultural Development (1987-97) served to strengthen this concern and a UNESCO regional seminar in Rarotonga, Cook Islands in 1992 provided an opportunity for Pacific educators to reaffirm the need for them to have ownership of their formal education, for the betterment of their various societies. The establishment of a UNESCO Chair in Teacher Education and Culture at the regional University of the South Pacific five years later, was evidence of the international community’s commitment to teacher education as a vehicle for ensuring cultural inclusiveness in formal education in our region.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHERS

Teachers have not always been at the centre of the international community’s attention. In 1995, for example, the World Bank Education Sector Review of six Kkey options for reforming education systems did not even mention teachers, their selection or training. Such evident neglect of teachers reinforced a belief in many of our countries (including for example, in the regional curriculum reform project I mentioned earlier) that educational systems could be changed without having to deal with teachers. By the mid 1990s teachers throughout the world, including Oceania, had been relegated to an inferior role both in relation to their working conditions and from the viewpoint of teaching itself. A quote from Colin Power, then Assistant Director General at UNESCO, is revealing. In a speech to mark World Teachers’ Day in 1998, Power asked, “Would you let your son or daughter become a teacher in your country today? If not, why not?”

Teachers, however, have finally attracted attention. In 1996 for example, the Report to UNESCO of its Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (the Delors Report), devoted a whole chapter to teachers, and warned that countries that wish to improve the quality of education must first improve the recruitment, training, social status and working conditions of their teachers. In 1998, a sub-regional seminar, held in Fiji, agreed that teachers in Oceania had low levels of remuneration and status, and in their joint message to commemorate World Teachers Day in October last year the chief executives of UNESCO and ILO appealed to the world community to renew their commitment of support to teachers. They also asked governments to find ways of honouring the pledge made at the World Education Forum held in Dakar in 2000, and to endorse the Dakar Framework for Action in order to enhance the status, morale and professionalism of teachers and to reaffirm the claim that teachers will remain the core of education systems in this century.

The general neglect of teachers in the educational reforms of the last thirty years in Oceania reflects the global picture. However, there were also other factors. The first relates to a general belief that teachers did not need formal training, a view that is particularly unfortunate when held by key people such as Ministers of Education. Another reason might have been the emphasis, placed by overseas curriculum development consultants, on learners rather than teachers and their attempts to produce so-called ‘teacher-proof’ curricula, based on the assumption that pupils would learn in spite of their teachers. Finally, teachers were generally left out because of our various countries’ heavy dependence on overseas aid donors and their foreign consultants, most of whom brought with them their own educational philosophies and ideologies which, together with the absence of clear national
education visions, resulted in the uncritical acceptance of educational theories and ideas by their Pacific counterparts.

**TARGETING TEACHERS**

The remainder of this paper outlines how some of us in Oceania are attempting to help teachers ensure that more pupils benefit from their school education by creating culturally inclusive learning environments. I shall explain a joint effort among regional teacher education institutions and the University of the South Pacific (USP), through its UNESCO Chair and its Institute of Education, to assist teacher educators better contextualise their work in the hope that their students, who would be teachers, would do the same.

In 1992 principals of teachers colleges in the Oceania region met in Suva, Fiji, to form the Pacific Association of Teacher Educators (PATE) and to discuss issues of mutual concern. Among these was the appropriateness of the teacher education curriculum for preparing teachers who understood and appreciated students’ needs and backgrounds. It was felt that even though a lot of new curriculum materials had been developed, few teachers understood what curriculum reform was about and fewer still were able to satisfactorily implement new curricula. Participants at the PATE consultation also agreed on the need for cultural relevance not only in the content of the (school) curriculum but also in its philosophy. A paper I presented at that first meeting introduced the idea of a culturally inclusive metaphor - *kakala* - as a framework for both curriculum development and teacher education (Thaman, 1992).

Three years later, at another meeting of PATE, I was asked to present another paper on how Pacific cultural knowledge, skills and values might be incorporated into the curriculum, not only of schools but also of post-secondary institutions. At this meeting, participants agreed to review their respective teacher education curricula in order to make them more culturally democratic. The mechanism for this review was a UNESCO-funded research project that was undertaken jointly by the UNESCO Chair, the USP Institute of Education and regional teachers’ colleges. The aim of the project was to find out the extent to which teacher education curricula incorporated aspects of Pacific cultures. The results showed a need for improved contextualisation of teacher education courses and a decision was made in 1998 to develop and produce materials in the form of modules which teacher educators in the region might use to help them understand and incorporate indigenous and local (Pacific) knowledge and processes in their work.

The authors of the modules are Pacific researchers and educators who recognise the important role of teachers in any attempt to change what goes on in schools. The modules are intended for use by staff of teachers’ colleges to help them better contextualise their teaching as well as to stimulate debate on the relationship between culture and formal education in our region. So far, six modules have been published. The first, entitled *Towards culturally democratic teacher education* was written by me. It introduces the project as well as making brief suggestions about how elements of Pacific cultures might be incorporated into different subject areas such as language and communication studies, expressive arts, science, mathematics, human development and education.

The second module, *Vernacular languages and classroom interaction in the Pacific*, by Dr. Ana Taufe’ulungaki from Tonga, examines the use of the mother tongue in basic education as a medium of teaching and learning, and the implications for teacher education. Module 3, *Incorporating local knowledge in teaching about education and society* is authored by Ms Una Nabobo and describes a very successful course which she and a colleague, Ms Jennie Teasdale, designed and taught at the Fiji College of Advanced Education. Module 4 was
written by New Zealand born Samoan researcher Anne-Marie Tupuola. Entitled *Making sense of human development: beyond western concepts and universal assumptions*, she interrogates western psychological theories of human development and examines, in particular, the stage of ‘adolescence’ as well as notions of individuality and independence. She concludes that it is culturally inappropriate to interpret human development in Pacific societies using only western psychological terms and concepts.

Module 5, *Ways of mathematising in Fijian society*, by Dr. Sala Bakalevu, suggests that the problems Fijian students face in learning mathematics is largely due to a mismatch between the students’ cultural background and the expectations of schooling. She also says that the Fiji school mathematics curriculum does not recognise Fijian ways of mathematising, such as how Fijians count, measure and practice traditional economy and exchange although Fijian notions have the same mathematical purposes as those described in school mathematics. She suggests that an understanding of ethnomathematics would help teachers encourage students to use strategies derived from their own ways of mathematising, and proceed to formal operations only when pupils are ready.

Module 6 is authored by Dr. Kabini Saga of Solomon Islands. Entitled *Learning from indigenous leadership*, Saga raises the issue of schools not reflecting the important values of their communities, leading to a denial of ownership of schooling. He urges teachers to help develop ownership and representation and suggests that the study of indigenous leadership processes and structures be included in the teacher education curriculum. Through such studies, he argues, teachers would not only become more sensitive to the cultures of the communities they serve but become better cultural bridges for their students. Four more modules are expected to be published soon.

**COMPARATIVE STUDIES**

As well as materials production, research into indigenous educational ideas is also being encouraged as a major activity. During the past five years, staff and students at our University have been gathering information on various indigenous communities’ notions of learning, knowledge and wisdom as part of a course that I teach on *Educational theories and ideas*. A summary of this course appears in Teasdale and Ma Rhea (2000). An important part of the course is students’ exploration of their own cultural values and educational ideas, and comparison with those of other students. The exercise has proven to be both interesting and instructive as students become aware of the similarities and differences between their own cultural values and those of other Pacific cultures as well as between Pacific and Western values (Thaman, 2000). A collection of essays about vernacular educational ideas from Oceania is currently under preparation; when completed it will be the main text for the course.

**A WAY FORWARD**

I will conclude with a summary of a Pacific education symposium held at the University of the South Pacific early in 2001. A group of about fifteen concerned educators from our region met to discuss educational issues currently facing our various island nations with a view to future collaboration especially in the areas of educational research and development. A summary of our main recommendations was presented to a meeting of Education ministers from the region that was held in Auckland in May 2001.

Our symposium was made possible by a grant from the New Zealand Overseas Development Agency. Participants came from Fiji, New Zealand, Tokelau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands and the University of the South
Pacific in Fiji. The meeting was jointly hosted by the USP Institute of Education and Victoria University of Wellington, N.Z. Participants were chosen because of their reputation in the areas of innovative teaching, consultancy and research as well as their commitment to seeking alternative ways of addressing long established educational issues. Although participants identified many issues, the two overriding ones were: (i) lack of ownership by Pacific peoples of the formal education process, and (ii) lack of a clearly articulated vision that could inform both development and education in the region (assuming of course that education is accepted as an instrument in achieving national visions and developmental goals). Symposium participants agreed that the main challenge facing our region today had to be the reconceptualisation of education in a way that would allow Pacific peoples to reclaim the education process and at the same time allow for the articulation of a Pacific vision for education. (Interestingly enough the issue of ownership had already been identified at the Rarotonga meeting of 1992). A new metaphor, The Tree of Opportunity, was endorsed by participants as an appropriate framework for re-thinking Pacific education.

The **Tree of Opportunity** is firmly rooted in Oceanic cultures. The strengths and advantages that the tree gains from its root source will facilitate growth and strength, and allow for the incorporation of foreign or external elements that could be grafted on to the tree without altering its identity. In educational terms, this would mean ensuring that Pacific cultural values are appropriately embedded within the processes and structures of formal education in order to provide a strong foundation for worthwhile learning.

The symposium also considered the various implications of their accepted metaphor. Politically it means defining a new vision for education that recognises the contributions and roles of Oceanic cultures (including the people) in modern development in general and educational reforms in particular. Such a vision needs to be supported by political commitment and resource provisions, and formalised by various appropriate policies and legislations. Economically, it means focusing on the most disadvantaged groups and ensuring that adequate financial and human resources are allocated in order to facilitate desired results. It would also mean enhancing and strengthening village economies in order to ensure sustainability and security, important bases for developing our modern cash economies. Socially it means strengthening relationships and partnerships at all levels, especially links between schools and their communities in order to ensure that all stakeholders are participating in the formulation of national visions and processes of education and development. It will also require the development of appropriate school language policies and the active involvement of custodians of Pacific cultures in the process of schooling in order to identify skills and behaviours as well as values, beliefs and knowledge systems that are considered critical for the survival and sustainability of our cultures and societies.

Finally it would mean broadening the outcomes of education in order to ensure that Pacific heritages are enhanced and maintained while at the same time provide a foundation for building other types of worthwhile learning that are a synthesis of indigenous and global knowledges. This may be achieved through:

(i) better contextualising the curriculum;

(ii) developing a new pedagogy based on Pacific values, beliefs and knowledge systems that incorporate Pacific styles of learning and ways of knowing;

(iii) reorienting teacher education and training in order to ensure that all teachers are competent in, and have a deep understanding of, as many Pacific languages and cultures as possible;
developing new forms of student assessment that take account of the anticipated changes in curriculum and pedagogy;

incorporating indigenous Pacific processes, ways of management and administrative structures; and

strengthening research capabilities in our post-secondary institutions as well as in our various communities.

The symposium also made a number of recommendations both short and long-term in nature, focussing on national as well as regional contexts. These recommendations were grouped under headings such as: Educational Policy Formulation and Development; Curriculum Reform; Teacher Education; and Financing of Education, including the role of foreign aid. However, the recommendations did not seem to sit comfortably with the popular view which promotes education almost entirely for economic reasons, concerned largely with the issue of human resource development and widening paid employment opportunities. Although the importance of the economic agenda of schooling cannot be over emphasised, it was felt that the other agendas of the school needed to be taken seriously if student achievement is going to be an important criterion for assessing the success of national “investment” in formal education.

If, however, we wish to use an economic lens to view schooling in Oceania, we would have to ensure that there is strong link between a community’s economically productive activities and the content of basic education (or primary schooling). Unfortunately the primary school curriculum has been neglected for many years with school examination results (for entry into secondary schools) being used as the main indicator of what a student knows (based on a prescribed program) rather than what a student may know as a result of the quality of teaching experienced. It is therefore important for our schools to place more emphasis on the other agendas of schooling, especially its moral and pedagogical agendas, even though the scope for religious and political manipulation may seem great to some people. Given the contrast mentioned earlier between the practices of children’s home cultures and that of the school it would seem desirable for school authorities to consult with adult members of different communities as part of the process of curriculum development. Another factor which was seen as significantly contributing towards students’ underachievement in school has to do with our region’s heavy reliance on English or French as the mediums of instruction, languages that are the second, third or even fourth languages to many school children. This is a major educational issue that merits deeper analysis.

CONCLUSION

The contrast between the culture of modern schooling and most Oceanic cultures as these are lived today and its implications for formal education (learning and teaching) cannot be over-emphasised. It is, however, not an unbridgeable gap. The main bridge, in the view of many Pacific island educators, must be the teacher, and so we have decided to focus our attention on those who prepare teachers in our colleges and higher education institutions. We understand that this is not the only solution, however. We continue to encourage research on Pacific indigenous knowledge systems as well as pupils’ learning styles, in the knowledge that these would help inform our work. Much remains to be done as we continue to interrogate our different ways of seeing the world in general and our education in particular. We hope that collectively we will be able to find better and more culturally inclusive ways of ensuring that the majority of our children will benefit from their school education and to have the opportunity to learn about the best their cultures have to offer so
that they can create for themselves a synthesis for the purposes of cultural continuity and sustainability.

REFERENCES


