

DRAFT

**CULTURE, TEACHING AND LEARNING with specific
references to Oceania**

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Abstract

The paper will examine the link between culture and education (teaching and learning) and argues that for most people in the small island nations of the South Pacific Ocean, formal education (schooling) introduced by European missionaries and later emphasized by colonial administrators and now, the international community, had (and continues to) effectively alienated many (young) people from their own cultures. Examples will focus specifically on the areas of language, teaching/learning styles and values. The paper argues that the conflicts between the culture of schooling and that of most Pacific learners (cultural gap) largely contributes to students' underachievement (in formal education) and continuing unsustainable practices leading to unsustainable livelihoods. A suggestion for reforming the curriculum of schools and of teacher education and incorporating Pacific knowledge systems in order to help young people learn important cultural knowledge, understanding and values of their own cultures (in school and university) as a foundation for sustainable development, is proposed.

Introduction

I thank the organizers of this Global Seminar for the opportunity to share ideas with colleagues and seminar participants about the relationship between education and culture. It is appropriate that I am doing this in Japan where one needs only to look around one in order to see the close link between Japanese culture and Japanese education. I come from a region of the world where there are literally hundreds of cultural groups each with their own unique ways of life and languages. Sadly though, many of these are at risk of disappearing simply because of their small sizes and populations and for the fact that for over a hundred years, most of our people have been denied opportunities to learn about their own cultural knowledge and value systems in schools and higher education institutions. Nevertheless, with the United Nations encouragement, we continue to advocate for our cultural survival and the continuation of our region's cultural diversity. In this task, education is an important part of our struggle.

Western social scientists say that Culture shapes people's beliefs and attitudes, their roles and role expectations as well as the way they interpret and make meaning of their own and other's behaviour (Eagly and Chaiken, 1998). Through socialization, roles and role expectations are internalised and they help guide people's behaviour and social interactions. When people from different cultural backgrounds use their own individual cultural norms to define and interpret the role expectations of others, role conflicts often arise. It follows therefore that lack of knowledge and understanding of cultural norms and cues often cause communication problems and makes it difficult to interpret the behaviour and conduct of those involved in the communication process, such as, for examples, between teachers and their students (Riley, 1985; Widdowson, 1987; Ninnes, 1991; Taufe'ulungaki, 2000). A role boundary is said to be central to the teaching/learning process and when it is breached and unfulfilled, the result is usually conflict (Coleman, 1996). This notion of role boundary seems to be akin to the Pan-Polynesian concept of *va/wah*, that many Pacific Island cultures commonly refer to as both a physical as well as a metaphorical space that defines and sanctions inter-personal as well as inter-group relations (Thaman, 2002; 2007).

Cortazzi (1990) suggests that a key factor in the success or failure of the teacher-learner communication process, is pedagogy – or teaching methods . Pedagogy, according to some social scientists, is shaped by the cultural values and ideologies of the society in which it originates and teachers transmit and reinforce the cultural values that are embedded in the teaching approaches that they use (Barrow, 1990; Leach, 1994; Kelen, 2002). Consequently, in the cross-cultural classroom, a teacher's professionalism as well as cultural sensitivity are important considerations for successful learning (Thaman, 1999a). In this paper, Culture is used to refer to the way of life of a people that includes their language, accumulated knowledge, skills, values and beliefs together with the means of acquiring, transmitting and maintaining these. A distinction is made between culture and ethnicity. Ethnicity, like race, is a notion that is based on biology and shared gene pools whereas Culture is a social concept, based on shared values, behaviour and performance. Membership of an ethnic or racial group is determined by biology; whereas membership of a cultural group is determined by behaviour and performance. People may belong to a particular ethnic group but do not identify culturally with that group. According to Linnekin and Poyer (1988), Pacific peoples did not have a notion of ethnicity before European contact but they had a concept of culture in that they were aware of people who were different from them because they behaved differently. It is unfortunate that many people today tend to use culture and ethnicity interchangeably. The distinction is of particular interest to educators in that while a person's ethnicity cannot be changed, culture is learned and a person may indeed choose which cultural group(s) s/he may wish to be identified with and/or belong to.

Members of a cultural group normally share a cultural history, sustained and maintained by a language, epistemology and a worldview. The Pacific Island region is arguably one of the world's most culturally diverse regions, where different cultural groups have developed particular knowledges, skills and values that together form the bases for the education of group members. There is evidence that Pacific indigenous cultures have existed for a very long time - thousands of years in fact – and their different responses to the

onslaught of foreign forces such as colonialism (and more recently globalisation) was, and will continue to be, a function of their cultural differences (Linnekin and Poyer, 1988).

The relationships between culture and education are said to be of two types: the first relates to the conflicting emphases of formal education (schooling) with those of the home cultures of learners resulting in what Little (1996) calls 'cultural gaps'; and, the second relates to the role of schooling in the development of cultural and/or multi-cultural literacies along the lines that Hirsh (1988) suggests. Both of these are important considerations for education in Pacific Island Nations (PINs), and underlie the collaborative work that I have been involved in during the past two decades.

As I alluded to earlier, the teaching of mainly European based knowledge, skills and values in Pacific Island schools for over a century now, has largely contributed to the transformation of not only the structures and processes of Pacific indigenous education systems but also the way Pacific people see themselves and their environment, as well as the way they think and communicate with one another. During the past two decades an increasing number of Pacific educators have embarked on a process of re-thinking and re-examining their own education as well as Pacific education systems in general, trying to clarify for themselves the differences between their received wisdom (from their formal, mainly Western education) and the wisdom of the cultures in which they grew up and were socialised, and from which they continue to gain important knowledge, skills and values (Thaman, 1993; Nabobo and Teasdale, 1993; Taufe'ulungaki, 2000; Bakalevu, 2000; Thaman, 1988; 1992; 1993). This is important especially in light of Little's suggestion that the difference between these two (sources) is small for those students whose home cultures are attuned to the culture of formal education but large for those (students) whose home cultures are vastly different from the culture and expectations of the school curriculum (1996).

A British curriculum expert once defined 'curriculum' as a selection of the best of a culture, the transmission of which is so important that the task has been designated for specially trained personnel - teachers (Lawton, 1974 :1). This means that the content of any education has value underpinnings that are always associated with a particular cultural agenda. In my view, education is inevitably about culture because it is the values of a culture that must underpin its education system. In the Pacific Islands, it is peoples' cultures particularly their values that provide the frameworks and the lens through which most people see themselves and their world. For millennia, Pacific cultures (their associated knowledges, beliefs and values) have framed peoples' ways of seeing and behaving - ways that comprised intricate webs of relationships that provided meaning to and frameworks for daily living and cultural survival. Generally manifested in various kinship relationships, such frameworks not only defined particular ways of being and behaving but also ways of knowing, types of knowledge and wisdom, together with how these are passed on and communicated to others, especially the young. Today, many Pacific people continue to believe that for the sake of their cultural survival and continuity, schools (and in turn teachers) should have a role in the transmission of the best of their cultures, including their languages, to future generations (Taufe'ulungaki, 2002). This desire is particularly important today as the global market ideology pervades the lives of even the smallest and

most isolated Pacific community. Education is increasingly seen as a commodity (to be sold) in the global market place and many developed countries (including neighbouring Australia and New Zealand) aggressively market their educational services, including in the Pacific Islands.

Teaching and Learning

In most PINs today, teachers have the difficult task of mediating the interface between the different cultural systems of meanings and values that continue to exist in our schools. The stimulus for this mediation of course comes from their professional role, which mandates intensive interaction with other people's children as well as their parents. In the classroom, points of conflicts are usually communicated to teachers indirectly by the behaviour of their students as they move between their home cultures and that of the school. In this context, teachers need to know the differences as well as commonalities between different cultural perspectives. They also need to theorise their own education in order to find ways of integrating the different cultures which have contributed to their own development. This inevitably means focusing a lot more clearly on teachers and their education.

However, teachers have not been the focus of any educational reforms in our region, a factor that in my view, contributed to the many failed educational reforms that I have witnessed. In Pacific schools, teachers occupy an important but culturally ambiguous position. On the one hand, their professional training commits them to the rationale and practices of a western-derived school curriculum, while on the other, their personal identities are often rooted in their own cultural traditions and norms. Their training makes them part of an intellectual elite whose knowledge, skills and attitudes set them apart from the rest of society, yet their early socialisation, in most cases, was in the medium of a vernacular culture that is very similar to if not directly continuous with that in which many of their students grow up. In most Pacific communities, school children's relationships with their parents and other elders continue to be negotiated within the terms of reference of local cultures and vernacular or indigenous education systems that have their own ideas about cognitive development, interpersonal and social responsibility, as well as the development of wisdom (see for example, Thaman, 1988; Nabobo, 1996; Teairo, 2003). But at school, Pacific cultural values and ideals are often de-valued and discouraged because they tend to conflict with the values that the school is trying to promote. For example, while schooling and the educational bureaucracy rely on notions of universalism and impersonality, indigenous education systems rely on specific contexts and interpersonal relationships. Schooling promotes individual merit while indigenous education is rooted on the primacy of the group (Thaman, 1988). The extent to which the school represents the cultures of Pacific Island communities continues to be minimal as the officially sanctioned values are those of the school structure, the approved curriculum and the teaching profession, and not those of the cultures to which most students and teachers belong (Sanga, 2000). At best schooling offers the lucky few (less than 5%) access to the modernised, monetised sector; at worst it is a recipe for the destruction of the best of Pacific Island cultures.

The neglect of teachers in PINs reflected the global situation where the role of teachers was not usually seen as central to international debates and discussions about education despite the 1966 Geneva Recommendation Concerning the Status of Teachers. For example, as late as 1995 a World Bank Education Sector Review of Six Key Options for reforming education systems did not even mention teachers, their selection or training. Leaving teachers out in the periphery of educational debates helped reinforce a belief that educational systems could be changed without having to deal with teachers. As a result, by the mid 1990s teachers throughout the world had been relegated to an inferior role both in relation to their working conditions and to teaching itself, a state of affairs that must have prompted the then Deputy Secretary General of UNESCO to ask an audience during a World Teachers Day celebration, “Would you let your son or daughter become a teacher in your country today?”

The Delors Report, *Education for the Twenty First Century: learning the treasure within* (1996) did help shift global attention to teachers and teaching by devoting a whole chapter to teachers. Entitled, *Teachers: in search of new perspectives*, the authors assert that countries who wish to improve the quality of education must first improve the recruitment, training, social status and working conditions of their teachers and encourage teacher participation in policy decision-making. The relative neglect of teachers in the educational decision making processes of many PINs also reflected curriculum emphases on learning rather than teaching, an emphasis that partly reflected the global concern about child-centred pedagogies and PINs’ over-dependence on foreign technical advisors, their languages, theories and ideas. Most Pacific indigenous cultures do not easily distinguish between teaching and learning and many have their own notions of learning, knowledge and wisdom and how these should be structured and/or assessed (Thaman, 1988, 1993, 2003). Furthermore, most Pacific teachers do not characteristically interrogate the teaching and learning materials that are provided as part of bilateral and/or multilateral donor-funded educational reform projects largely because they fear that questioning the work of ‘experts’ might be interpreted as ungratefulness or impoliteness (Thaman, 1992).

The current focus of many educational debates and dialogue on schools and the role of teachers in particular, is a welcome sign to those who have been working towards ensuring cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness among the Pacific’s teaching force. In 1992, a UNESCO sub-regional workshop held in Rarotonga, Cook Islands had reaffirmed the need for ownership of school education by Pacific people, if improvement in student learning outcomes were going to occur. The Rarotonga declaration also noted the vital contribution of teachers towards such a process. (Teasdale and Teasdale, 1992). Later in the same year, the Pacific Association of Teacher Educators (PATE) was formed at a regional consultation held at the USP. Teacher educators from around the region resolved to re-examine their curriculum offerings with a view to making it more culturally inclusive of both students as well as their teachers. The implementation of this resolution was strengthened by the establishment, in 1997, of a UNESCO Chair in teacher education and culture at the USP tasked with advocacy, teaching, research and publications devoted to teachers, teaching and the central role that culture plays in education generally and in teacher education in particular.

In this age of increasing globalization it is Culture that will provide a safety net for Pacific peoples as they try to adapt to global changes. It is my view that globalisation not only challenges the primacy of Pacific nation states but also the very survival of Pacific people, their cultures and their education. The way in which PINs have responded to these global influences will depend to a large extent on their different cultures.

Cultural values in the curriculum

The school curriculum is a good place to go if one wants to find out what a society considers important and worthwhile for young people to learn. This is because the curriculum is usually determined and shaped by a society's core values, which may be implicit or explicit. I have argued that integration of Pacific values into the curriculum will enhance the learning opportunities within school communities and students would be assisted in developing these values through discussion and modeling as part of the learning and teaching processes within a school environment (Thaman, 1993). Teachers have an important role to play here as they help prepare students for a world of rapid change with flexible attitudes and enduring values. However, over the years, educationists have not always emphasized values education. During the 1980s, curriculum guidelines in the developed world seemed to emphasise personal and social education focusing on spiritual, moral, and social development. The 1990s saw some educational reformers stressing citizenship education, especially the teaching of democracy, whilst by the dawn of this century curricula emphases were on four key functions of establishing entitlement; establishing standards; promoting continuity and coherence; and promoting public understanding. In all these, the scope and nature of the curriculum was not questioned. Over the past two decades or so, an increasing number of Pacific educators and scholars have wondered about whether the Pacific school curriculum had potential for delivering learning that is transformative and whether incorporating Pacific knowledge and values could touch young people in such a way as to transform their attitudes, values and beliefs. Some have also questioned whether the school curriculum had seriously taken into consideration the cultural backgrounds of pupils, how they feel about themselves and their achievement in school (Thaman, 1993).

These concerns and others stimulated a study that I carried out in my home country, Tonga in the early 1980s, trying to see a link between education and cultural values, and more particularly how this was reflected in teachers' role perceptions. I wanted to identify a broad set of Tongan cultural values that could be used to underpin the work we were doing in re-developing the secondary school curriculum in some PINs including in Tonga. Although a set of value emphases was identified, linking these to Tongan notions of learning, teaching, knowledge and wisdom, little happened to change the work of the curriculum planners in Tonga until more recently when a second research project was conducted in 2005/06 that tried to gather information on how Pacific Island people conceptualise sustainable livelihood (SLEP). Funded by NZAID and managed by the USP's Institute of Education, a study was piloted in Tonga using Tongan research framework and methodologies, together with Tongan researchers who participated as

research assistants and who stayed in people's homes, observed and talked to them as they went about their daily affairs. Valuable data about people's conceptions of what sustainable living in Tonga meant were obtained. Tongans referred to a notion of *Mo'ui fakapotopoto* which links life (*mo'ui*) and wisdom (*poto*), and assumes a type of learning that is underpinned by the core values of *faka'apa'apa* (respect); *feveitokai'aki* (reciprocity); *loto-to* (sharing); and, *tauhi vaha'a* (relationships). In June this year, researchers presented their findings to the Director of Education who informed them that the information gained from the research project will be used to inform a major curriculum re-development project that is currently in progress in Tonga, funded by NZAID (Taufe'ulungaki, 2008). It has taken twenty years from the time of my initial study to the acceptance by educational officials, of the need for Tongan cultural values to underpin the Tongan school curriculum in a country that was never directly colonized but whose people, because of their formal education, had grown to de-value and de-emphasised their own language, culture and worldview in the name of modern development.

SLEP is linked to both the Asia Pacific and Pacific Frameworks for Education for Sustainable Development which encourages educators to take into consideration different cultural conceptualizations of ESD and the ensuing reorientation of curriculum as well teacher education towards ESD. SLEP is also in a view once expressed by the then head of the Geneva based International Bureau of Education (IBE) which warned that educational change strategies, approaches and methods needed to take into account the perceptions of (the) actors in the educational process.

The Tonga study used an adapted version of the *Kakala* research framework (Thaman, 1992) to plan and execute the project. *Kakala*, sourced from the processes of making Tongan floral garlands (*toli*, *tui* and *luva*), has been used successfully in community-based research projects in New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. A modified *Kakala* framework incorporated new elements of *teu* (preparatory stage) to precede *toli*, and a final process of evaluation using two Tongan indicators of success, *malie* and *mafana*, after Manu'atu, (2001) was used in the SLEP pilot study. Tongan research methodologies of *talanoa* and *nofo* were the main tools for information gathering from the various communities that participated in the project; and Tongan research ethics guided both the preparation and conduct of the project.

According to Johannson-Fua (2007) the data obtained from the Tonga project were robust, rich and informative on several educational fronts. As well as data relating to knowledge, skills & values associated with sustainable livelihoods in Tonga, information about other areas of concern such as students' learning styles, team strategies, evaluation and monitoring processes and their implications for teaching and learning were also obtained. For example, the research showed how learning in Tonga usually involves *sio* (observation); *ala* (touch); *fanongo* (listen); and *ta* (perform or act). This meant that a teacher would need to be able to demonstrate ion (*fakatata*), important knowledge and skills, working together with the student (*kaunga ala*), interacting with them (*talanoa*) and closely observing their performance (*sio*). In other words, the notion of the teacher as role model which I described twenty years ago (Thaman, 1988) seemed to be important still for Tongans. (SLEP II is being planned as a continuation of the

project in eleven other Pacific states, using different research frameworks and methodologies sourced from the cultures and languages of the people in these places).

Tongan Core Values in the Curriculum

Because the way we think and act often reflect our values or what I call 'valued contexts of thinking, I had tried to identify major value emphases for Tongans through intensive teacher interviews. The following emphases seemed to me to preoccupy the Tongan mind in the 1980s. They are: emphases on the supernatural; formal rank and authority; concrete and context-specific behaviour; restraint behaviour; good interpersonal relations; customs and traditions; and *'ofa* (compassion) *'Ofa* was a very important emphasis as well as the main motivation for all good and positive deeds. These values are quite different from those that have been identified for other nations. For example, American core values of: life; liberty; pursuit of happiness; common good; justice; diversity; truth; popular sovereignty; and patriotism (Folterman, 2007); or Australian core values as identified in the Western Australian Curriculum Framework of: pursuit of knowledge and a commitment to achievement of potential; self acceptance and respect of self; respect and concern for others and their rights; social and civic responsibility; and environmental responsibility (Department of Education, Western Australia)

It was obvious to me that Tongan cultural values were reflected in teachers' perceptions of their role in that they considered their task as mainly ensuring that students knew how to behave appropriately as well as pass standardized examinations. Passing examinations was seen as an instrumental value in that this would lead to students' gaining better opportunities for further education and/or better paying jobs. Gaining better jobs would mean improved ability to meet their social and cultural obligations to kin and community groups thus ensuring the cohesiveness of the group. Unfortunately the focus on preparing students for standardized examinations seemed to have overtaken teachers' concern with appropriate social behaviour, mainly because of the relative neglect by the school curriculum, of values and moral education in school. Whereas in the past, these were paramount especially in mission-established schools, in more recent times the push for more secular school education together with over-dependence on foreign money and consultants to reform the educational system, the emphases had been on the learning of English, students-centred teaching (where teachers were only 'facilitators' of learning and not 'models' of learning) and individualized (virtual) learning. It took a popular riot in the country (in 2006) to prompt educational authorities to re-examine what young people were learning in school as well as out-of-school.

The valuing of Pacific indigenous cultures and values is one of the main underpinnings of the work of the UNESCO Chair in teacher education and culture. Besides advocacy through public lectures, seminars and conference addresses, I work with curriculum planners and teachers to encourage them not only to consider students' cultural backgrounds in their work but also to incorporate Pacific knowledges and values in the school curriculum. Some of my students are school head-teachers and principals, who have a lot of influence in what their schools teach. They too are targeted in the

work that we do. Teacher educators also are major clients and we have developed materials that would help them to better contextualize their work. More details about these and other activities of the UNESCO Chair can be accessed on www.usp.ac.fj/unesco-chair/

I wish to conclude by identifying a few challenges that we face as we try to ensure that Pacific knowledge systems and values are included in formal education in PINs.

1. There are not enough research activities in the region that utilize Pacific knowledges, frameworks and methodologies. We need to develop more Pacific research frameworks and critically assess the usefulness and relevance of current ones in order to ensure their robustness and relevance for the purposes for which they were developed. Pacific scholars in New Zealand are beginning to do this. Koloto's work (2001) is instructive here, and she has written about the use of *Kakala* (Thaman, 1992); Fa'afaletui (Tamasese, et.al. 1998) and Tivaevae (Maua-Hodges, 2000).
2. Some critics say that Pacific teaching and research frameworks are not transferable; that they do not work across cultures. Well, one can say this about most research frameworks and models. For most indigenous cultures, knowledge and techniques are context specific and this is probably why many Western models and paradigms do not seem to work here. The issue of cross cultural applicability may not be a serious challenge to some. So far, my framework, *Kakala*, seems to work well for most Pacific students perhaps because they could find equivalent notions in their own cultures (e.g. the Fijian *salusalu*, or the Hawaiian *lei*).
3. Lack for institutional support for research on Pacific knowledge systems and values continues. There is not enough research money for staff and students at our university, and most monies are tied to aid projects with their own strings and conditions. Indigenous research using indigenous paradigms is not something that is well understood, or popular with aid donors, and in the academy who are the gatekeepers of research or who make decisions about whose research should get funded. The inclusion of Pacific knowledge systems and Pacific research in our university's Research Strategy was greeted with mixed reactions, with the most positive one coming from Education, indifference from Business and Law and disbelief from Science and Technology!
4. An increasing number of our postgraduate students are keen to explore their own cultures, values and knowledges for their higher degree studies. We need to increase the number of training programs in Pacific Research aimed at research staff and students. In this we are trying to engage others especially those in regional organizations and donor agencies. However, it has been an uphill battle with some potential research supervisors simply refusing to see the value of incorporating Pacific cultural knowledge and values into their work whether this be at school or university. In fact some have branded our activities as minimalist

and cultural politics implying that there are approaches to education that are culture-free.

Conclusion

As well as global knowledge and skills, many Pacific Island people believe that the collective wisdom (as expressed by ordinary people, teachers as well as students) of their cultures need to be transmitted to young people so that they are well informed about their culture, language and knowledge system in order for them to live sustainable lives and not suffer hardships (Johansson-Fua, 2006). For Tongans in particular, a lot of hope is being put in the current curriculum re-development work that would ensure a more prominent role for Tongan culture, language, cultural values as well as Tongan knowledge system, in the curriculum of formal education. After all, this is what happens in developed countries, including those that offer assistance to education in Tonga. We cannot ask for anything less.

Come take this *kakala*
Symbol of life and love
Tie it around you
Where it will grow
In the nourishing flow
Only the sky knows

(Thaman, 1993: 12)

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