Local knowledge and wisdom in Pacific teacher education

Salanieta Bakalevu, Nauto Tekaira, Vaiaso Finau and David Kupferman

The highlight of this teacher education workshop, for us, was the ‘think tank’ approach that allowed ten workgroups to evaluate teacher education in individual countries and in the region as a whole in light of our workshop theme Teacher Education for New Times: Reconceptualising Pedagogy and Learning in the Pacific. Our four-member team discussed the philosophies and values that underpin teacher education programmes in our respective countries. We examined the extent to which the programmes were based on local/Indigenous languages, cultures, wisdoms and epistemologies, and suggested culturally appropriate alternatives for building on our own sociocultural learning contexts in teacher education. We fully supported the proposition to incorporate local knowledge and wisdom in all teacher education programmes, and were pleased to hear similar sentiments echoed in the presentations of the other nine groups.

While it is true that there are cultural variations among Pacific Islands and that the region is culturally diverse (Bhim, 2003), there are core values underpinning the basic cultural institutions and structures of all groups, and
binding us strongly together (Taufe‘ulungaki, 2001). Visit any Pacific island, observe the ways of life, speak to the people, and one is bound to feel a resonance of common ideals among them, particularly in terms of spirituality, respect for authority, humility, loyalty, cooperation and sharing, reciprocity of relationships and obligations, and collective rights. So while the ideas in this chapter are directly about the countries of our four-member team, we believe they can be generally applied to other Pacific Islands countries. An important consideration is that the four countries that we represent (Fiji, Kiribati, Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI) and Sāmoa) are strategically located and are representative of all cultural groups in the Pacific region: Micronesia to the north, Polynesia to the east, and Melanesia to the west.

**Incorporating culture in teacher education programmes**

Incorporating cultural elements in the formal curriculum is important for the continuing cultural development of both trainee teachers and teacher educators. Our cultures, including our languages and beliefs, define who we are, and must be strongly established in our teacher education programmes. Even as we retain our strong oral traditions, we believe that it has become necessary to document Indigenous knowledge systems so that they will not be lost with the passing of older generations. Including them in formal curricula would support this desire for heritage preservation.

A culture-sensitive pedagogy is necessary to make learning more relevant and promote a better overall quality of education for trainees. Trainee teachers will be attracted to studies and activities where they recognise a familiar background they can relate to and understand.

Teachers at every level are important bridges between society and the school, and must be equipped to build such bridges with their students. The role of teachers has been likened to that of a driver of the school bus who picks up the child from home and takes him/her to school in the morning, then brings him/her back in the afternoon. Teachers act as mediators or bridges between the two contexts and in so doing, assist students in making the transition between their society and the school. As a consequence, students are able to learn more meaningfully. Teachers have status and are role models in
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traditional societies, especially the rural communities, and therefore can be strong and influential agents of positive social change. We support the view that the cultural approach to curricula gives teachers a frontline responsibility in the enculturation process. Teacher educators have an obligation to foster a new consciousness of culture in the programmes they offer their trainees and to keep cultures and traditions alive. As trainees graduate and take up teaching positions, they too become role models and can act as bridges between the society and the school.

All Pacific Islands nations are going through new times; traditions are being threatened by the new economic order. Our societies are under pressure from external forces to shape up and modernise. We see that the greatest challenge now for our education systems, especially teacher education, is to meld the deeply held cultural and social mores of our societies with the new knowledge systems that are increasingly influenced by the effects and demands of globalisation. Part of that fusion is the provision of ‘multivocal’ content and pedagogy. This could serve the diverse yet protect the particular interests of specific groups. Local contexts, activities and vernaculars are important for developing knowledge and understanding, and retaining our distinctive identities.

Teacher education programmes in the Pacific

In schools and institutions of higher education in Pacific countries, the Western style of education is deeply ingrained. English is the lingua franca. Most study programmes in higher education still nurture the notion, planted in the schools, that ‘true’ education means schooling the students in Western theories of doing and knowing. These theories purport to be intent on establishing a culture-free and value-free learning environment. Many theoretical frameworks built on Western thinking, beliefs and values have been presented as givens and accepted as universal truths by educators in the Pacific; the extent to which they derive from specifically Western cultural traditions, rather than from universal absolutes, is rarely recognised or interrogated.

The story is the same in teacher education institutions, where curricula have likewise derived from a Western tradition of scholarship. There is a strong
Eurocentric perspective in most Pacific teacher education institutions. Many teacher educators, says Thaman, adhere to this view by perpetuating Western ways of teaching in the courses they teach (Thackray, 2001). As many teacher educators in the region have been trained internationally, it is not difficult to see why they teach in the way they themselves were taught and why they bring the global perspective to bear in their classrooms, at the expense of the local one. Thus, Western theories of learning, teaching, psychology and assessment are popularly used as primary sources for teaching, measuring and understanding the progress of Pacific Islands teacher trainees.

**Overview of cultural representation in teacher education courses**

Discussion in our team suggested that teacher education institutions in our four countries are at different stages of incorporating cultural elements and methodologies into their programmes. The variation can be represented on a continuum (figure 5.1).

![Figure 5.1](image)

The continuum demonstrates that the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI) has the least input from the local culture; that Fiji and Kiribati are increasingly becoming aware and taking steps to strengthen the local cultural foundation for their programmes; and that Sāmoa is seen as implementing most change. Discussion revealed that the RMI faces the dual problems of becoming culturally overly Americanised and having a large proportion of foreign teacher educators. However, in all institutions across these island nations, it was observed that there was an increasing awareness of and willingness to represent culture in the curriculum, especially at primary level. Regarding secondary teacher training, all countries mentioned their dependence on the University of the South Pacific (USP), which was perceived to be moving toward cultural inclusion in their programmes, albeit slowly.
A 1997 survey investigated the extent to which courses in the teacher education curricula of selected teachers’ colleges in the region incorporated elements of local culture in their content, methodologies and assessment (Thaman, 2000a). Included in the survey were courses from the National University of Sāmoa (NUS), Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE), the Tongan Institute of Education (TIOE), Cook Islands Teachers Institute (CITI) and the four leading institutions in Fiji: USP; Lautoka Teachers College (LTC); Fiji College of Advanced Education (FCAE); and Corpus Christi Teachers College. When we compared the findings of that survey with where we thought we are today, it seemed that some progress had been made, though it was by no means uniform. Overall, there is a greater acceptance of some traditional teaching methods such as group processes and a notable increase in the use of Pacific content in teacher education curricula at the primary training institutions.

The 1997 survey highlighted that the greatest failure to incorporate cultural knowledge was at USP and FCAE. The case against USP was heard again in our team discussions. Our Kiribati member had this to say: ‘Our secondary school teachers come from USP and other institutions. They bring back the ideologies of those institutions and we have to accept what they bring even though it’s mostly different from ours.’

It seems that the belief in the existence of a culture-free and value-free programme that imparts universal knowledge (and is embedded in the educational traditions we have received from our colonial pasts and the neocolonial and globalised present) continues to prevail among educators in the tertiary institutions of the Pacific. Nevertheless, our group acknowledges the work in recent years of individual academics, notably the prominent Pacific Islands educator Professor Konai Helu Thaman and others, who have implemented Pacific knowledge and methodologies in their own courses. We wish to make the case yet again for cultural inclusion in teacher education programmes, and to present some suggestions for how this can be done.
Considering change: which way to go?

Before Western intervention Pacific cultures had their own education systems that were deeply embedded in the socialisation processes, practices and activities of each society, although they bore little resemblance to anything Westerners would call schooling. These systems were challenged and to a significant extent pushed aside by the impact of colonisation. Today many countries still carry strong vestiges of colonial education in the structures, systems and content of their education programmes. The colonial ideologies that the colonialists planted did not leave with the colonial agents. Instead, these ideologies have been inherited and are perpetuated in the current education systems. In the present educational climate, the thrust has been for culturally appropriate curricula. Our group proposes a progressive stage of cultural responsiveness, where the curriculum responds to cultural changes and diversity.

We strongly denounce the requirement for our children in schools to abandon their language and cultural identity and replace it with the language and culture of the dominant Western civilisation, a process known rather misleadingly as ‘assimilation’ (if not by the even more offensive term, ‘detribalisation’). We support the notion of teaching children to affirm themselves as Pacific Islanders who are proud of their culture and can speak their mother tongue with mastery. Durie’s pronouncement, quoted in Bishop (2005)— affirming Māori aspirations as the desire to be Māori and global and live a healthy and secure life, all at the same time—was particularly appealing. Such an ideal is a realistic, transferable objective for all Pacific Islands educators to work toward.

Sources of possible resistance

Reflecting on possible resistance to the ideas put forward in this paper, our team concludes that doubts will linger in some minds but that over time more people will become convinced of the merits of our proposals. In the early 1990s when Konai Thaman was already advocating the idea of cultural inclusion, hers was a lone voice in the wilderness. There were mixed responses to her stance: some thought it was a regressive step, others saw it as divisive,
and still others thought that it may work for perceived softer options such as Education but not for other disciplines like Science and Mathematics. All that is now history, as research has shown the wisdom of cultural inclusion across the curriculum.

Nevertheless, we identified some possible sources of resistance. A lack of faith in inadequately funded Indigenous educators and researchers is an ongoing concern. Alongside this is a lack of administrative and academic will in some institutions to ‘walk the talk’.

There is agreement that the teacher education programmes at USP need to be more proactive. USP should take the lead in demonstrating to other Pacific tertiary education institutions how to meld the global culture with the deeply held cultural and social mores of the Pacific societies it services. The perceived inability of teacher graduates to make the links between formal classroom knowledge and the cultures of students and their communities remains a concern. Counterbalancing this concern, however, is the increasing number of Indigenous teacher educators attempting to incorporate culture into the content and methodologies of teacher education programmes. This is a positive sign of things to come.

Resistance from traditional societies protecting intellectual property is also likely. It is common knowledge that many Pacific societies have become wiser, instituting legal protection over their artistic expressions and cultural mores. This is largely a response to past abuse and over-exploitation by Western researchers. Skilled local educators and researchers, as ‘insiders’, face the challenge of regaining lost trust. Ironically, dovetailing this with the expectation that we are entitled to take what we wish from the global culture, without respect for ownership, is also a delicate area that we have scarcely begun to consider.

At the same time, in many of our cultures there is a strong sense that certain classes of knowledge belong exclusively to certain groups of people, and also that knowledge is power, and therefore some types of knowledge are guarded jealously. Picking our way through these challenges will not be easy.
Culturally appropriate alternatives

In arguing for contextual teaching and the inclusion of traditional ideas in various courses, we are not advocating a totally new content and methodology. Rather we are envisaging an integration of the old and the new, with the cultural context of teaching and learning becoming pivotal. We suggest the following alternatives.

Teacher education village

Many tertiary institutions, including USP and NUS, have traditional structures such as the Fijian bure and the Sāmoan fale in designated locations on campus. The Oceania Centre at USP is an extended version of this. However, we suggest that none of these goes far enough in portraying the living traditions of the people.

We propose that teacher education programmes adopt a Teacher Education Village model—a material, physical, cultural state—to be an integral part of teacher training. A teacher education village could provide experiential teaching in terms of practical methods, resourcing and living knowledge for trainees. The village could be located outside but accessible to the campus. The same idea was floated as part of proposed development for the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI) in the 1990s (Miller-Kanono, 1999), but was abandoned almost as soon as it started. We suggest that an education village would enhance cultural learning in teacher training programmes.

Vernacular education

To the best of our knowledge, most primary teacher education programmes have already made the vernaculars and vernacular methods mandatory for their trainees. This is happening in Sāmoa, Tonga, Kiribati and Fiji. In Fiji, for example, all trainees at LTC are required to learn one of Fijian, Hindi or Urdu, as well as the language teaching methods for the selected language. This is not the case at the other institutions, including USP, where vernacular options are only for the vernacular language teachers. Short of making vernaculars compulsory for all trainees, we propose that every effort should be made to
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encourage all trainees to be equally competent in the teaching and speaking of their mother tongue as well as English. The adage ‘every teacher is an English teacher’ should be changed to ‘every teacher is a language teacher’.

Rigorous research

We suspect that a good number of Pacific Islanders are unaware of the academic potential and value of traditional knowledge. This may be why it has been kept separate from formal learning. Rigorous research can dispel misinformed fears about the validity of using traditional knowledge in formal learning. Pacific teachers and educators must be funded and supported to undertake ethnographic and anthropological research. Through action research, cultural ideas, traditions and norms can be identified, and the potential of those ideas to be used in classroom teaching can be explored. Conversely, Thaman (Bhim, 2003) suggests the need to interrogate globalised education, knowledge systems and cultures and their homogenising effects on our people.


Local textbooks and resources

English is the medium of instruction in higher education throughout the region: students are taught in English, use English textbooks and write examinations in English. It is a fact that difficulty with the English language remains a big problem for Pacific students at all levels of education. For teachers, especially those at primary level, teaching in the vernacular from English texts is a huge struggle. To assist teaching and learning, we propose maximum support for
the translation of English texts into local vernaculars, for writing new texts in vernaculars and for developing glossaries of local words and phrases in the vernacular.

While the lack of local texts in local language is a real problem in Fiji and initiatives to improve the situation are moving forward but slowly, Sāmoa and Kiribati have progressed further. In Sāmoa, for instance, since the bulk of teaching at primary level is in the Sāmoan language, they have had to move faster (Varghese, 1999). To date many local texts and resources including English storybooks have been translated into the Sāmoan language and are set as required student reading. A few years back the Kiribati Teachers College received an Australian grant to support the production of local learning materials written in the vernacular. This has assisted in the provision of teaching resources in local language.

Active relationship and involvement with Indigenous communities

Since traditional knowledge and ideas reside with the people in traditional communities, it is important that organised interaction and exchange between teacher trainees and community members who are the keepers of local knowledge are established. An outcome of this association would be that the knowledge of Indigenous village elders and experts could be passed on directly to teacher trainees through appropriate channels. This relationship could be coordinated through the proposed teacher education village or organised directly.

We also propose a community engagement component to enrich the teaching practice. Currently, the teaching practice covers only activities within the schools. We suggest that a carefully directed investigative study, requiring trainees to observe and listen to the voices in the local community on various issues, be an integral part of the teaching practice. Additionally, trainees could be involved in some village or community engagement for the term of the teaching practice, and they could be assessed orally in the community for this section of their practice. Obviously the details of these activities would have to be set up and specified within acceptable parameters by those managing the teaching practice. However, we believe that both suggestions will enrich the
practicum experience and increase trainees’ preparedness and ability to teach in a school within a local community.

National initiatives

In addition to the specific culturally appropriate course and programme initiatives that teacher education providers could include in their teaching, we have identified some broader strategies that could be addressed at national and regional levels.

Agriculture and fishing in the formal curriculum

Depending on the geographical nature of each environment, fishing and/or agriculture are the main activities of most Pacific people. It makes sense therefore, that traditional areas of agriculture and fishing be incorporated into teaching programmes. Both traditional skills and modern entrepreneurial skills should have priority places in the formal curriculum. Both areas need to take on a more glamorous image than that currently portrayed in education circles. While the employment sector appears to have moved ahead in leaps and bounds, the curricula of schools and higher education have lagged behind, often leaving students ill prepared for the world of work. Teacher training programmes must teach teachers how to incorporate these agricultural and fishing skills into both the formal and informal sectors.

A Ministry of Culture and Tradition

The desire for culture preservation and revitalisation should be the collective determination of everyone in a Pacific Islands nation; it needs to be part of a holistic development if it is to be effective and if it is to endure. It cannot be relegated only to the sphere of formal education. We hold the strong view that an elevated position for culture and cultural entities (music, writing, research etc.) is possible only under the aegis of a government ministry. We believe that there should be a specific portfolio and sufficient funding in our island nations to ensure that a Ministry or Department of Culture and Tradition is a reality. Fortunately this is already happening in some Pacific Islands nations.
We unanimously suggest that these two related cultural matters be prioritised by Pacific Islands governments:

- a review of language policies
- an increased emphasis on Indigenous studies and scholarship.

These and other ideas proposed in this paper could well form part of the brief of Departments or Ministries of Culture and Tradition such as we have suggested.

**Conclusion: self-determination by the people**

The arguments presented in this paper are not new. They have been debated and written about many times over in the Pacific and in other countries and cultures that have experienced colonisation. The fight has been for recognition and self-respect for Indigenous peoples. The disaffected rightly ask that the debate be moved from the margins into the mainstream. They seek a democratic education. The experiences of the New Zealand Māori, though quite different from ours, have been a source of learning and inspiration for Pacific peoples. Their fight has been long, tedious and fiery. Their resilience and success in several areas, despite their diminishing population, has been inspirational.

The Māori philosophy of self-determination for survival has seen them looking inward for the answers. They have mobilised and strengthened their efforts and resources towards achieving the results they want. A Māori renaissance is challenging the Māori people to walk away from apportioning blame. It encourages and equips Māori to move toward individual and collective self-determination. This, they believe, will enable them to have a stronger cultural identity. Yet, in helping themselves they are respectful of the rights and freedom of everyone else.

We have borrowed this concept from Māoridom (Bishop, 2005) for our people. The team believes that the answers are indeed within us as peoples of the Pacific. As Pacific Islands cultures, we can share a common vision and purpose. The onus is on us to mobilise our efforts and resources. We need
to learn how to research, write, develop, experiment and make the necessary changes in every way we can. Our struggle must not disable any other groups, because to do that would be to inflict on them the same constraints that bound us for centuries. If Māoridom says that it can be done, we in the Pacific can do it too.

**The authors**

*Dr Salanieta Bakalevu* is a Lecturer in Education in the Department of Education and Psychology at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji. *Nauto Tekaira* is Principal of the Kiribati Teachers College. *Vaiaso Finau* works as Senior Education Officer for School Improvement at the Sāmoa Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture. *David Kapferman* is Dean of Academic Affairs at the College of the Marshall Islands.

**References**


Pacific Voices—Teacher education on the move


