Towards Cultural Democracy in Teaching and Learning With Specific References to Pacific Island Nations (PINs)

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Introduction and Definitions

The transmission of culture, seen as a major function of schooling ((Serpell, 1987), underlies Lawton's definition of curriculum as 'a selection 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 (Lawton, 1974:1). This perspective of the role of schooling and teachers is an assumption made in this paper in which I argue that the school curriculum of Pacific Island Nations (PINs) in the 21st century ought to be more culturally democratic, taking more serious consideration of the ways in which Pacific people think, learn and communicate with one another (Ramirez & Castaneda, 1974). Those who teach and/or plan curricula and learning activities are expected to work differently if school learning is to be more relevant and meaningful for most Pacific students as well as for the communities that send them (Pacific Education Framework). To ignore learners' cultures in the teaching and learning process would be deemed unethical (Korman, 1974).

Education is defined here as worthwhile learning and school education is worthwhile learning that is organised and institutionalised as opposed to non-formal education which is not institutionalised. Culture is used here to refer to the way of life of a people which includes their language, values and knowledge systems. According to many Western social scientists, culture helps shape 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). Role expectations, learned and internalised through the process of socialisation, guide people's behaviour and social interactions and there exists a close relationship between beliefs, learning conceptions and approaches to study with learners' cultures (Thaman, 1999; Zhu, C, Valcke, M. and Schellens, T., 2009). It follows then that in the communication process, conflicts often arise due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of cultural norms and cues that are important for interpreting the behaviour and conduct of those involved (Riley, 1985; Widdowson, 1987; Ninnes, 1991; Taufe'ulungaki, 2000).

Most Pacific people are indigenous to the island nations in which they live and their cultures and education systems have existed for thousands of years, predating the introduction of schools by European missionaries and later colonial administrators in the 19th and early 20th

centuries. The school curriculum in many PINs continues to be Eurocentric in its value underpinning, content, pedagogies and assessment of students, causing many learners to be pushed out of school and some parents to refuse to send their children to school as teachers are increasingly expected to bridge the cultural gaps that exist between the expectations of the school curriculum and those of the home cultures of their students (Thaman, 1992; 1993)

Sociologists of education identify a number of factors that influence and affect teachers and learners expectations, including a *role boundary*, which, when breached and unfulfilled, is said to result in situations of conflict (Coleman, 1996). This role boundary seems to be akin to the Pan-Pacific notion of *vaa/wah* which refers to a physical as well as a metaphorical space that defines and sanctions inter-personal as well as inter-group relations (Thaman, 2002). The role boundary can be mediated by pedagogy although pedagogy itself is often 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 various teaching approaches that they use (Barrow, 1990; Aikman, 1995). In a culturally diverse Pacific region, a teacher's professionalism as well as cultural understanding and sensitivity are extremely important considerations for learner success.

A Culturally Diverse Region

The Pacific is arguably one of the most culturally diverse regions on earth (e.g. Papua New Guinea has more than 600 distinct cultures and languages). Yet, teaching, learning and the assessment of learning are often in a language that is foreign to most learners (and even teachers!), resulting in a culturally undemocratic environment. This is a very undesirable situation especially when we know that language has a key role in the development of thinking and understanding as well as the development of teaching and learning strategies (Taufe'ulungaki, 2000). In most PINs learning in a foreign language (English or French) has become the rule rather than the exception, as the structure as well as the processes of schooling continue to neglect the languages (and values and knowledges) of the communities that send students to school.

The second indicator of a culturally undemocratic learning environment is related to students' learning styles where there are also conflicting emphases as well. Pacific learners, according to Taufe'ulungaki (2002) are usually right-brain dominated, emphasising creative, holistic, circular and people-focused thinking rather than left-brain, emphasing abstract, compartmentalised and issues-focused thinking. Pacific indigenous learning strategies include observation, imitation, and trial and error rather than verbal instruction, the dominant strategy in the classroom. The influence of Culture also tends to discourage (Pacific) students from questioning and being competitive, traits that are often interpreted by some teachers as rude, indifference, or not being able to act appropriately in class.

The assessment of school learning is also an area of conflict. In PINs standardised testing continues to be the main means of student assessment, selection, ranking and prediction. There is very little serious work to re-examine student assessment and evaluation despite the fact that standardised testing has been judged invalid and inappropriate for the majority of Pacific students especially those from indigenous and rural communities, often leading to inappropriate placements and improper selections (Fasi, 2006). This situation is not dissimilar to that in the USA, where there was a disproportionate number of children from

culturally diverse backgrounds who were channelled to low track classes (Gopaul-McNicol, 2002, quoted in Fasi, 2006).

The use of English (and French) to assess student learning also makes it difficult for many students to pass and/or gain high grades on standardised tests, despite some teachers' attempts to code switch between English and a local language (often against national language policies). Code switching often helps some students to understand the content of lessons, although they would still need to write their examination answers in a foreign or added language. Consequently, many are destined to fail, especially rural students where English (or French) is a foreign, second, third or even fourth language as is the case in some countries such as Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands.

In Pacific schools and tertiary institutions, teaching and learning in a foreign or second language is the rule rather than the exception. In the case of the University of the South Pacific (USP) for example, this is the reality for more than 90% of all students. As a school teacher and later university lecturer, it is often sad for me to watch students struggling to make sense of lectures and/or examination questions let alone composing well written and meaningful answers in a language in which they are not fluent. In a study in Tonga to investigate the language in which Tongan bilinguals learn mathematics and the relationship between the language of instruction and students' achievement in mathematics, it was found that students with high mathematical abilities are often disadvantaged by the use of the English language both for instruction as well as assessment. The study also showed how the language of assessment plays a significant role in the failure, poor results and inaccurate classifications of some mathematically able students. When the effect of the language is removed, the true ability of the student is revealed and any selection based on this result would be fairer, more valid and more reliable than one based on language-bias assessment (Fasi, 1999).

The Challenge for Teaching and Learning

If as Lawton (1974) would have us believe, a curriculum is a selection of the best of a culture, then one would think that the content of school and university education in PINs would reflect the cultural agenda and values of PINs especially when it is culture that provides the framework and the lens through which most Pacific people have seen themselves and their world for millennia. Even today, Pacific peoples share worldviews that comprise intricate webs of inter-relationships that provide meaning to, and frameworks for, living and cultural survival. Generally manifested in various kinship relationships, such frameworks not only define particular ways of being and behaving, but also ways of knowing, types of knowledge and wisdom, and how these are passed on and/or communicated to others. Pacific sustainable livelihoods are also linked to cultural survival and continuity and people are keen to pass on to future generations the core values, knowledges and skills of their cultures. In order for schools and curricula to positively respond to the need to make teaching and learning more culturally inclusive, there will be a need for a paradigm shift (Pene, Taufe'ulungaki and Benson, 2002: Johannson-Fua, 2006; Thaman and Thaman, 2009).

This paradigm shift is a challenge for teachers who are expected to mediate the interface between the different cultural systems of meanings and values that continue to exist in their schools. As cultural mediators, Pacific teachers occupy an important but culturally ambiguous position. Whilst their professional training commits them to the rationale and

practices of a western-derived school curriculum, their personal identities, together with those of their students, are rooted in their own cultures and traditions. At school, teachers often de-emphasise the values of the students' home cultures, especially if they conflict with the values that the school is trying to promote. As Sanga says, the extent to which the school represents the cultures of Pacific Island communities is 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).

Targeting Teachers and Teacher Educators

Assisting teachers create a more culturally inclusive learning environment is a major goal of the UNESCO Chair at the USP. After a major review of the teacher education curricula in seven regional training institutions in 1997/98, a series of Teacher Education Modules was developed with improved contextualisation of teaching and learning as its main aim. The Project also helped raise awareness among teacher educators in participating institutions about the importance of Pacific cultures in the education of teachers both as a pedagogical tool as well as an important topic of study. As well as these Modules, two new courses were introduced at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels aimed at raising teacher trainee's awareness of the link between culture teaching and learning and the issue of cultural gaps, and the role of teachers in bridging these. The UNESCO Chair together with staff and students collaborated to carry out research into Pacific indigenous educational ideas of several Pacific cultures, as a way of documenting and providing basic information about Pacific Knowledge Systems. *Educational Ideas from Oceania,* (Thaman, 2003; re-printed in 2009) is used as a student text at the School of Education at USP as well as in other training institutions in the region.

Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative by Pacific for Pacific (RPEIPP)

The relationship among culture, teaching, curriculum and assessment has also been the focus of an important Pacific initiative, now a movement, known as the Rethinking Pacific Education by Pacific for Pacific Initiative (RPEIPP). This initiative, a partnership of donor agencies (the main one being NZODA), higher education institutions (Victoria University, Wellington and the USP), and a network of Pacific Island educational researchers and educators, acts as a catalyst for change as well as provided leadership to several Pacific countries in the past ten years. Founded in 2001, RPEIPP advocates culturally appropriate analyses of Pacific education systems and assisting Pacific educationists to re-focus their planning on Pacific values and knowledge systems. A specific goal of this initiative is to assist Pacific teachers in theorising their education as well as developing and using culturally inclusive content and pedagogies through action research that emphasize the importance of Pacific values and Pacific thought as a foundation for Pacific education and development. Culturally inclusive teacher education is seen as central to the achievement of the objectives of RPEIPP. Advocacy, research and leadership are important foci of RPEIPP and since 2001 many symposia and conferences have been organised in different PINs including Fiji, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, and Vanuatu. The proceedings of these as well as other RPEIPP publications have been widely distributed throughout the region.

Re-searching the Pacific

Research is an important consideration in any attempt to make teaching and learning more culturally inclusive in the Pacific. Research has always been a challenge to Pacific educators as up until recently, there was no serious challenging of the unilateral assumptions of a universal model of research, with the Academy being the central authority in knowledge production. A few Pacific graduates had realized that some European-derived systems and frameworks of research did not have the concepts by which their experiences and realities could be appropriately represented, named, described and understood. Moreover, they found that if their (indigenous) knowledge was included in their coursework, it tended to occupy a marginal position compared to those associated with Western or Global knowledge. Some of them who work in universities realised that what they thought to be appropriate for their research as well as those of their students existed within colonial frameworks even though political decolonization had already occurred in most Pacific countries. More importantly some realized that the tools that they were using belonged to those very models that they were trying to deconstruct and they realized that they were in danger of becoming equally oppressive themselves (Smith, 1999). Many decided that it was time to look towards their ancestral cultures for appropriate frameworks/spaces in which they could theorise their own indigenous knowledges and education. Over the past two decades or so, a number of pioneering works by Pacific scholars have emerged and are now recognized and accepted as relevant resources and frameworks for teaching and research in higher education in the Pacific region. These frameworks include: Kakala (Thaman, 1992); Fa'afaletui (Tamasese et al, 1997); Kurakaupapa Maori (Smith, 1999); Tivaevae (Maua-Hodges, 2000); and Vanua (Nabobo-Baba, 2006).

Originally developed as a personal philosophy of teaching by the author, *Kakala* is sourced from the Tongan metaphor of *kakala*, or garland of fragrant flowers. Kakala has equivalents in other Pacific cultures, for example, *salusalu* (Fiji), *lei* (Hawaii) and *hei* (Cook Islands). The processes involved in *kakala* making are similar to those used in the research process and comprised of *toli* (materials selection), *tui* (making of a *kakala*) and *luva* (presentation of a *kakala* as a sign of respect and love). A detailed description of the *kakala* framework may be found in Thaman, 1992; 1997). As a research framework, *kakala* has been used by several researchers in the region including Koloto (2002) in a Project involving Pacific communities in New Zealand. Some adaptation of the *kakala* framework was made by two Tongan researchers at the University of the South Pacific's Institute of Education (IOE), who added two additional 'steps' (*teu* and *mafana/malie*). This expanded *kakala* framework was recently used in a major research study in Tonga in 2006/07. Known as Sustainable Livelihood and Education Project (SLEP) some of the data gathered from this study is being used in a major curriculum development project in that country(Taufeulungaki, et.al. 2008).

Some Challenges

In our attempt to help teachers create more culturally inclusive learning environments for their students we face several challenges. These include:

- Lack of relevant and appropriate resources, both human and material, to assist those who wish to change from business as usual

- Pacific Island countries' continuing dependence on foreign finance, technical assistance, and personnel, who bring their own educational ideas and theories, making it difficult for Pacific people to openly critique the processes as well as the planned outcomes of the assistance that they receive.

- Failure of some indigenous as well as non-indigenous people to acknowledge and/or value indigenous knowledge and the people who produced that knowledge

- Until recently, the marginalisation of Pacific cultural knowledge and values in institutions of higher learning teaching and research

- The continual appropriation of Pacific knowledge by foreign researchers and scholars who often claim ownership of the knowledge of Pacific peoples

- The continuing epistemological silencing of attempts to centre teaching and learning upon Pacific values and knowledge systems by those who see this as a 'culturalist' approach motivated by personal yearnings for an era that is gone (See Burnett, 2005).

- The strong force of globalisation, which discourages Pacific teachers and students from recognising, valuing and studying their own knowledge and value systems for fear of being branded old fashioned and/or romantic.

Some Strategies

Despite the challenges, some progress has been made in the Pacific region towards reclaiming Pacific indigenous education and using it to strengthen and improve teaching, learning and research outcomes. A major EU/NZ funded educational project - The Pacific Regional Initiative for the Delivery of Education (PRIDE) is also spearheading culturally inclusive educational planning, teaching and learning, and many centres of curriculum development are beginning to incorporate local and indigenous knowledge into the school curriculum. Pacific Research is now part of Research Methods courses in the region and many graduate students are using and developing new Pacific frameworks in their theses research. This paper concludes with some suggestions for Pacific and other educators who wish to help make the school learning environments more culturally democratic for learners:

- Continue to encourage and develop studies of indigenous educational ideas among teacher trainees.

- Conduct and encourage research and teaching in Pacific knowledge systems using, where possible, Pacific research frameworks.

- Include community elders and community members in decision-making especially in relation to teaching and resource development.

- Demonstrate, encourage and model cooperative and participatory methods of teaching and learning

- Encourage students to take courses in Pacific languages, if these are offered; better still, make these compulsory for teacher training.

- Create more opportunities for teacher educators to model culturally inclusive practices

- Work towards developing synergies between teacher training institutions and curriculum development units so that information and experience are shared among those who are responsible for curriculum reform and teacher education

- Encourage and reward teachers who use a variety of assessment methods including continuous assessment rather than depend on standardised testing and examinations

Conclusion

The role of culture in teaching and learning in PINs cannot be overemphasised and teachers and those who train them need to be more aware of this. For those teachers who call the Pacific Islands their home it is important that they closely examine their (cultural) ways of thinking and knowing in order to explore what might be changed in their practice, so that they can create for themselves and for their students learning environments that are not only inclusive but also sustainable in their processes, contexts and outcomes. Culturally democratic teaching and learning are important not only for the sake of improved students' learning outcomes but ultimately perhaps for the sake of peace in, and sustainability of, Pacific societies and cultures.

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