

Culture in the Curriculum: a contribution to nation building

Akanisi Kedrayate

Introduction

I have been asked to speak on the contribution that culture in our school curricula can make to nation building. For the purpose of this presentation, culture is defined as a way of life of a group of people. This encompasses their language, knowledge, values and beliefs. These aspects of culture which are unique and special to particular cultural groups is what gives them their cultural identity. Thaman (2002) articulates the shared values and beliefs and ways of doing and behaving as, the *faa Samoa* (the Samoan way); *faka Tonga* (the Tongan way) and *vaka Viti* (the Fijian Way).

It is important to understand these ways as they explain the collective values and behaviours of these groups and the way they perceive and interpret their environment.

Culture and Educational Change

In many developing nations which were once under colonial rule, there was a period of adjustment after independence. The emergence of new nationhood was supported by a resurgence of the nation's cultural identity and diversity. This was often articulated in policy statements in education and communicated to the schooling process with prominence provided for the study of local languages in the school curriculum. However, trends in recent years have indicated that, to a large extent, schools have either 'watered down' or neglected certain aspects of the nation's cultural awareness and development. This has occurred as a

result of government policies in many parts of the world making schooling more skills-orientated and putting a high priority on the accumulation of knowledge and much emphasis on examinations.

To prepare students for the world of work is largely seen by teachers, students and parents as a task that is predominantly one of achieving good grades in the knowledge and skills required in the work place. Learning, understanding and making use of students' skills developed within their cultural context are often overlooked and generally not perceived to be part of the repertoire of abilities required by school-leavers when they enter the workforce or proceed to further their education and training.

Multi-Culturalism in the Fiji Context

In Fiji, multiculturalism was the main national discourse after independence and it referred to the distinctiveness, but co-existence, of ethnic groups under negotiated political terms, such as separate political representation of the different ethnic groups in Parliament (Ratuva, 2000). The co-existence approach to multi-culturalism is taken a stage further by those who believe in a greater proximity — an integration — of the cultures by learning about them and understanding the differences. However, as Ratuva succinctly expressed it, when attempts were made to put this kind of multi-culturalism into practice, only the

superficial aspects of culture at the symbolic level were addressed and the fundamental issue of equity was ignored. There was a lot of emphasis on the ‘visible’— token and ceremonial aspects of culture, such as drinking yaqona and eating together and celebrating each other’s holidays. These interactions failed to permeate to deeper levels of interaction. Such a narrow and shallow approach to multi-culturalism, with all its good intentions, camouflages the increasing ethnic segregation and deepening socio-economic disparity between the major cultural groups in Fiji today.

It was articulated in the Report of the Fiji Islands Education Commission/Panel (Government of Fiji, 2000:3) that the multi-ethnic nature of society in Fiji poses a challenge for the nation’s development efforts. It needs concerted efforts by all groups in the nation to help increase mutual understanding and respect. Increasing social harmony among the different cultural groups is vital, as its failure will likely to lead to discontent and social conflicts among them.

The multi-culturalism approach has three fundamental premises: first is the recognition that ethnic groups and their cultures are unique and different from one another; second is that, while the differences need to be maintained, it is necessary to learn about them; and, finally, learning about them leads to cultural tolerance. It is acknowledged that one of the most important agents of multiculturalism is education. Education is assumed to accommodate certain aspects of different ethnic groups such as religious practices, beliefs and values.

Curriculum and Cultural Diversity

In recognising that education is an agent for cultural transmission, the school curriculum

has a central place in this process. It must be emphasised that a school curriculum is not just a syllabus of which the contents are fitted into a timetable for the aims of teaching and learning. For our purpose, the school curriculum should be seen as a series of planned activities, which result in learning and in which the teacher plays an important role. While the learning activities take place mainly in school, they can extend to home and community. This is an extended view of the curriculum, whereby the role of schooling and its relationship with the cultural development of the community is pivotal. In relation to this point, it may be suggested that the school curriculum has a central part to play in the interrelationship between education and cultural development.

A curriculum model offered by Stakes (1969) and modified by Thomas (1994) comprises three interlinked elements. An important element is that of the learner background. In order to plan curricula that are relevant from a cultural standpoint, it is essential to know and understand as much as possible about the cultural context of the learner. In other words, cultural analysis needs to be undertaken and questions raised relating to the learners’ preferred language, their family background, religious persuasion, styles of thinking, as well as their adherence to certain cultural customs — all of which affect the learners and provide a valuable profile from which a meaningful curriculum can emerge. Similarly, the second element, which is the learner-teacher interaction, would also benefit from a cultural analysis and hopefully improve the quality of the school curriculum. According to Thomas (1994) one of the major issues faced in schooling is the question of rejecting or neglecting important cultural elements from the school curriculum, especially when they may add substantially to the relevance

and overall quality of instruction. Through a careful process of cultural analysis, it should be possible to ensure that planning a curriculum not only results in what the learner needs to meet the demands of the world of work, but also provides the cultural diversity which is part and parcel of the learner's background.

How Do We Integrate Culture into the Curriculum in Fiji?

It has to be acknowledged that the Ministry of Education through its Curriculum Development Unit has already introduced multi-cultural issues as core components in the social studies curriculum at the primary level. The promotion of the use of a variety of teaching methodologies in this area is commendable. As you all know, Social Studies as it is taught from Class 1 to 6 examines families and kinship. Students learn about marriage, birth and death ceremonies observed by a wide cross-section of the community. Conflicts and conflict situations in various communities are studied in Classes 5 and 6. The past co-ordinator of CDU claims that students of today know more about and embrace multiculturalism much more positively than does the older generation.

Another curriculum programme that CDU has introduced which is crucial to reconciliation and nation building is the cross cultural program on Language. As language is an important medium in communication which leads to better understanding of cultural values, the teaching of the two languages, Hindi to non-Indians and Fijian to non-Fijians, has now been taken up by some schools.

Another CDU initiative, the Values Education course, is intended to teach school students universal values, which are common to all

religions and societies. It is taught at all levels in both primary and secondary schools in Fiji.

It is unfortunate that the latter two initiatives are not succeeding as well as was hoped. Very few schools offer the language courses, and the Family Values course succeeds only where the teachers support it themselves.

While there is a lot of rhetoric about family values, in practice it is paid only lip service in many schools. It is not an examinable course; another thing that works against it being given the attention it deserves.

Clearly, a greater effort must be made to improve cultural education in schools. I believe that this can be achieved by implementing recommendations and suggestions put forward in Chapter 6 of the *Report of the Fiji Islands Education Commission/Panel* (Government of Fiji 2000). The report has identified several areas of inclusion into the primary curriculum:

1. *Fijian knowledge and culture as a systematic area of study throughout the school system.* Schools which serve Fijian communities should include stories of their people and place. It is important to utilise the wisdom of the elders by involving members of the community who have special knowledge: song/dance performers, orators, navigators, traditional farmers and fishers. This would greatly enrich the educational programme as well as extend community participation.
2. *Social studies as a core area of the curriculum.* This should be concerned with the study of the socio-cultural groups that make up Fiji society. It needs to emphasise the importance of both the cultural diversity and social cohesion

within a nation. A respect for others' cultural beliefs and practices, and an understanding and acceptance of how cultures change should be the key goals of the social studies programme.

3. *Scientific and technological skills and concepts in the science curriculum.* Students need to explore the interaction between humanity and the natural environment. The science programme should enable students to learn traditional knowledge about their ecological systems and about indigenous people's roles as guardians of the sustainable use of natural resources and protectors of local biodiversity.
4. *The arts, which include music, dance and the visual, are vital forms of personal, social and cultural expressions.* By extracting the richness of the cultural traditions existing within Fiji's multicultural society, primary schools can strengthen community development and shape national identity. The potential of the arts in promoting community participation and cultural and intercultural studies within the primary school curriculum cannot be over-emphasised. Arts are also crucial to the development of the creativity and imagination required for lifelong learning, as well as promoting group learning and co-operation and co-ordination which are greatly needed in our multi-cultural society.

The Role of Teachers in Culture and Nation Building

The contribution which teachers play in cultural development and nation building is crucial. Unless the role and training of teachers is recognised as having a pivotal position in the relationship between

schooling, cultural development and nation building, any plans to revitalise the school curriculum become redundant. Furthermore, even if common principles or cultural universals have been identified, without the capacity and commitment of the authorities to train teachers to be aware of the broader and deeper understanding of their own and other cultures, the outcome is likely to be a narrow ethno-centric brand of education and schooling.

Curriculum planners claim that measures have been undertaken to accommodate cultural diversity alongside uniformity. Teacher educators also have an important responsibility of ensuring that teachers are trained and prepared for their role in accommodating cultural diversity and forging national identity. The shortcoming is often reflected when teachers have to make a choice about whether to spend time on the part of the curriculum that is examinable, and that part which is not. The cultural aspects of a curriculum are usually the non-examinable parts of the curriculum and therefore receive much less attention.

The curricula of teacher preparation courses need to enable the newly qualified teachers to know the cultural context of learning and teaching for a particular society. Secondly, there is a need for teacher educators to be trained in the design and implementation of pedagogy, which is able to select from the culture or cultures the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes which can be transferred and, where appropriate, incorporated into basic requirements of any school curriculum.

Finally, the in-service training of teachers needs to be assessed with regard to the extent to which it enables teachers to gain the expertise of making their teaching more innovative, sensitive and adaptive

to the requirements of the intercultural schooling.

In the Pacific context, Thaman (1999) and others at the University of the South Pacific have, over the last decade, worked conscientiously to assist teacher educators in the region to better contextualise their curriculum and also their pedagogies and assessment techniques. The emphasis is on learning and understanding the students' backgrounds, and then focussing the teaching and research on cultures and issues important to the Pacific people. A lot of work and research has been done to date and several Teacher Education Modules have been published by the Institute of Education, all of which are culturally inclusive.

Not only are relevant teaching materials being developed for teacher educators; Thaman (2000) has also encouraged research into Pacific indigenous educational ideas and worldviews. Through her own work in undergraduate and post-graduate teaching, some university staff and students have researched and written accounts of their own cultures' perceptions and notions of learning, knowledge and wisdom. The articles are currently being edited and will shortly be published in a Reader entitled *Educational Ideas from Oceania*. This reader will be used as an important resource, not only at the USP but also in higher education institutions in the Pacific.

Conclusion

Education has a vital role to play in inculcating tolerance, respect and empathy among the various cultural groups in Fiji. The school curriculum and the teachers who implement it are key elements in this process. While some progress has been made, it has not gone far enough. The inclusion of

cultural elements into all subjects can go a long way towards achieving the aim of educating young people so that they can play a constructive part in nation building.

References

- Government of Fiji** (2000) *Learning Together: Directions for Education in the Fiji Islands (2000)*. Report of the Fiji Islands Education Commission. Government of Fiji, Suva.
- Ratuva, S.** (2000). Towards Multiculturalism and Affirmative Action: A case for Fiji. In J. Cortrell (ed.) *Educating for Multiculturalism*. Citizens' Constitutional Forum. Suva.
- Stakes, R.E.** (1969) Language Rationality and Assessment. In W.H. Bently (ed.) *Improving Educational Assessment*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria.
- Thaman, K.H.** (September 2002). Towards culturally inclusive teaching and learning, with specific references to higher education in the Pacific Islands. Paper presented at the Higher Education in the 21st Century Conference, Malaysia.
- Thomas, E.** (ed) (1994). *International Perspectives on Culture and Schooling: A Symposium Proceedings*. Department of International and Comparative Education. Institute of Education, London. Great Britain.