

**Understanding Fijian Under-achievement: an integrated perspective**

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In this paper, I am concerned to add another dimension to the explanations for under-achievement among indigenous Fijian students. The framework proposed here may be appropriate in comprehending the complexities and contradictions associated with why indigenous Fijian students do not do as well as other ethnic groups in school. My main argument is that racial inequalities in education are a consequence of the constant complex and multiple interactions of the dynamics of race, gender, class and space/location in the economic, political, cultural and historical spheres. Note here the inclusion of 'history' as an analytic category. This is the dimension which hitherto has been excluded from the under-achievement literature in Fiji.

I do not make any apologies for being strategically essentialist (Spivak 1990, 1995) in my choice of subject matter. The differential standards, access to, participation in and outcomes of the education of indigenous Fijians (henceforth referred to as Fijians) compared to those of Indo-Fijians (referred to henceforth as Indians) have been on the political agenda since independence occurred in 1970. 'Racial' educational inequalities have been a preoccupation of the subsequent three predominantly Fijian postcolonial governments (Alliance 1970-1987; Interim 1987-1994; SVT 1994-May 1999) and, since the early 1970s, have formed the basis for many research papers (eg Tierney 1971; Stewart et al 1980; Kallam et al. 1980; Kishor 1981, 1983; Elley 1982; Basow 1982; Puamau 1991, 1999) and Education Ministers' speeches (eg Naisara 1974; Bole 1989).

In fact, the challenge confronting Fijians in education was one of the seven key terms of reference of the 1969 Education Commission. Fijian students have also been identified as a disadvantaged group in the forthcoming Year 2000 Education Commission. One of its terms of reference is to examine and make appropriate

recommendations on the participation, access and equity to support social justice and redress disadvantage for Fijian students.

From the foregoing discussion, one can see that the problems confronting the education of Fijian students, particularly their poor performance at the upper secondary and tertiary levels, have been at the forefront of political rhetoric and academic research and will no doubt continue to be so in the new millenium.

### **Traditional studies on racial inequalities in schooling in Fiji**

In this section, I review some studies on Fijian under-achievement in Fiji.

Baba (1982) recommended three categories of variables for use by interested researchers as the bases for investigations on racial inequalities in education in Fiji. They are psychological factors (eg motivation/aspiration, need achievement, locus of control, cognitive style), socio-cultural factors (eg individualism/cooperation, cultural conflicts, traditions of academic scholarship) and institutional factors (eg urban/rural, facilities, teacher quality). The areas that attracted a great deal of investigation were the psychological and institutional domains.

In terms of psychological studies, Basow (1982) and Kishor (1981,1983) have concluded that Fijians have lower levels of self-concept and a more external locus of control than Indians. Kishor also found that Fijians valued education less than Indians and had less academic motivation.

In relation to the socio-cultural research domain, Tierney (1971) concluded from his ethnographic study that cultural explanations for the low academic achievement of the rural Fijian students lay in these areas: lack of privacy in the home, lack of desire for competition due to societal preference for cooperative individuals, lack of mobility, and pressure for conformity.

Veramu (1990), working within an ethnographic paradigm, found that rural Fijian students had low self-esteem and that their parents did not seem to be committed to their children's education. Veramu also noted

two institutional explanations for the poor performance of Fijian students: boring and seemingly irrelevant content coupled with the insensitivity and brutality of teachers.

Another study which sought socio-cultural explanations is Joeli Nabuka's (1984) study of ten home background variables to explain racial inequalities in schooling. Nabuka concluded that the most significant variables which differentiated Fijian and Indian students were: the people with whom students reside whilst at school (a significantly higher proportion of secondary-aged Fijian students lived with relatives in urban centres or in boarding institutions compared to Indian students), the educational level of the student's father or guardian, the availability of reading books in the student's home (Fijians had significantly fewer story books) and the availability of the prescribed text books for the students. On these factors, Nabuka emphasised that Fijians came out negatively. Nabuka, like Elley (1982), concluded that Fijians have more disadvantages in their home circumstances than do Indians.

Baba (1983) summarised the institutional variables which could explain the poor performance of Fijians, particularly in the science, mathematics and commerce disciplines. First, he identified a lack of qualified teachers in these disciplines. Second, Fijian secondary school principals were less experienced than their Indian counterparts. Third, Fijian schools offered an integrated science course compared to the pure science courses offered in Indian schools. Finally, the infrastructural development of Fijian schools was not as adequate in terms of laboratories, library and supportive office equipment. What is clear from Baba's summary is that Fijians are also disadvantaged when it comes to issues of quality – in teaching, school leadership and resources.

Explanations for the under-achievement of Fijians typically have been attributed to some shortcoming on the part of the Fijian learner, be it psychological (Stewart, Mulipola-Lui and Laidlaw 1980; Basow 1982; Kishor 1981, 1983) or socio-cultural (Tierney 1971; Thomas 1978; Nabuka 1984; Elley 1982). Institutional factors such as poor quality of teachers and lack of resources (Fiji Education Commission 1969;

Baba 1983; Bole 1989) are other explanations posited for under-achievement. Logistical issues such as isolation from urban educational centres and the related issues of distance have also been raised to explain the relatively poor quality of education in Fijian schools (Education Department 1967; Naisara 1974; Ministry of Education 1992), the bulk of which are situated in rural areas. Poor economic conditions in the rural areas is another factor that has been posited as contributing to poor educational performance of Fijians (Kallam, Rika, Rustam and Tukania 1980; Baba 1983).

It is my view that these earlier explanations of under-achievement among Fijian students do not acknowledge the complexities involved. They have been sought in one domain (eg psychological, institutional or cosio-cultural).

### **An alternative perspective**

Given the inadequacies of many explanations for racial inequalities in achievement, what could be an alternative theoretical model? McCarthy offers the parallelist position theory to explain racial inequalities in education. The parallelist position:

...presents us with a theory of *overdetermination* in which the unequal processes and outcomes of teaching and learning and of schooling in general are produced by constant interactions among three dynamics (race, gender and class) and in three spheres (economic, political and cultural). (McCarthy, 1990: 80)

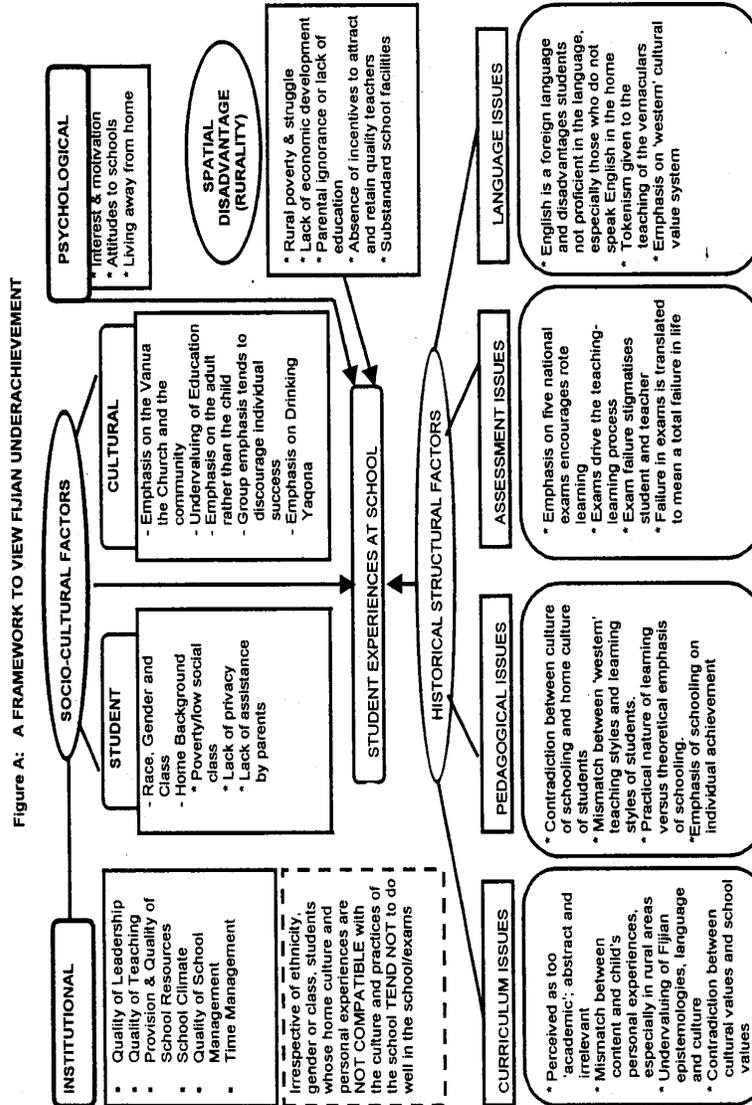
This model is a useful one to apply to under-achievement in Fiji. In a recent study (Puamau 1999), I have added two categories to this model, those of space/location and history, to provide a comprehensive, integrated and holistic perspective. The reason for this addition is that the issues of space/location (rurality) and colonial history are specifically pertinent to education in Fiji. Figure A summarises part of the findings of this research study and provides a useful framework from which we can understand the complexities and contradictions that underlie Fijian under-achievement.

Figure A provides a framework with four sets of explanatory models: socio-cultural, psychological, spatial disadvantage and historical structural disadvantage. Under socio-cultural models, the home background of the student and his/her race, gender, class, cultural deficiencies and school/institutional disadvantage are identified as major determinants of Fijian under-achievement in formal schooling. In terms of the second explanatory category, psychological models, Fijian attitudes and the impact on children when they live away from home when attending school are identified as two important factors to explain school failure. The third explanatory category, spatial disadvantage, identifies rural poverty, lack of economic development, parental ignorance or lack of education and substandard school facilities as some of the factors associated with rurality that disadvantage Fijian students. The fourth explanatory model, historical structural, refers to the negative impact of the colonial experience which is manifested in neocolonial educational structures of the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and language of schooling.

The inclusion of the historical structural category as of useful explanatory value is a new addition to studies carried out in Fiji on Fijian 'failure' in school. I will now discuss the usefulness of history as an analytic category and the related notion of symbolic violence.

### **History as an analytic category**

The historical structural category highlights an important explanation that is missing from discussions on racial inequalities – that of history. It is interesting to look at educational structures as a possible explanation for under-achievement because it takes the emphasis away from the under-achiever. The focus of examination moves from the student to the school to see whether structures, such as the curriculum, school organisation, pedagogies and assessment, might disadvantage categories of students. This argument holds the structures responsible because they disadvantage those students whose culture, language, styles of learning, knowledge systems and epistemologies are different from those desired by, and zealously guarded by, the school system.



The hegemonic neocolonial educational structures in play at this historical juncture demonstrate how powerfully colonial metaphysical and epistemological 'realities' are embraced by the ex-coloniser. As Raymond Williams (1976) has described it, educational institutions are the main agencies for the transmission of an effective dominant culture. In the case of Fiji, the dominant culture is the 'western' culture that became institutionalised during the period of colonial rule. The British-based system of 'knowing' and 'doing' have so totally and deeply saturated 'the consciousness' of Fijian society that the educational structures inherited from a colonial past have continued in hegemonic forms. Moreover, as Michael Apple (1979:6) has emphasised, schools not only process knowledge, they also process people by acting as "agents of cultural and ideological hegemony".

Educational and political leaders in Fiji need to reflect on the answers to the questions that Apple (1979) has asked regarding the supposedly 'legitimate knowledge' that is taught in schools. For instance, whose knowledge is it? Who selected what is taught in the curriculum? Why is it organised and taught in this way? What knowledge is made available and, just as importantly, unavailable to students? Much local and national reflection needs to be undertaken to examine closely the curriculum, pedagogies, school organisation and assessment that are in play at this historical juncture, almost four decades after political decolonisation occurred.

Thomas and Postlethwaite (1984) also asked some questions that would assist leaders in thinking about the continuing impact of colonialism on educational institutions. For instance, in terms of the purpose or role of schooling, they asked who determined this, from what culture is this derived and whose welfare is served by the purpose of schooling. In terms of the curriculum and instructional methodology, they asked: Who determines the nature of the curriculum and teaching methods? What are the cultural sources of the curriculum and teaching methods? Whose welfare is served by the curriculum? These are important questions that need deep examination or colonial hegemony will continue to hold power in supposedly politically decolonised nations.

One thing is clear. Educational structures in play, even at this historical juncture, have not been decided by 'local' people. The curriculum and pedagogies or "teaching methods", as Thomas and Postlethwaite (1984) have described it, are definitely 'western' in origin and content and have not been designed to serve the welfare of the people. During colonial rule, they served the purposes and welfare of 'western' people in Fiji. They were certainly not designed to serve the welfare of 'locals'.

### **Symbolic Violence**

Sultana (1993), drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, a French philosopher and sociologist, emphasises the point that schools that do not value the "realities, language and dignities" of their students are guilty of "symbolic violence". As Sultana points out, these schools are violent and powerful in their labelling of who a school failure is, and it is the experiences they provide for students who are 'different' that marginalise and exclude. So powerful indeed are the people who do the labelling that those students who are labelled failures internalise this attitude and are seriously marked for life.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977: 18) define symbolic violence as: any power that succeeds in imposing meanings and in imposing them as legitimate in disguising the relations of power which are at the root of its force, adds its own force, that is a specifically symbolic force, to those relations of power.

It is the "violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992: 167-168). Symbolic violence, then, is the power to dominate the disadvantaged groups by imposing "instruments of knowledge and (sic) expression of social reality ... which are arbitrary but unrecognised as such" (Bourdieu 1977: 115). Bourdieu's work in education has been to describe and account for the objective processes which continually exclude underprivileged children (Harker 1984). Schooling becomes the monopoly of those classes

capable of transmitting through the family the instruments ('habitus') necessary for the reception of the message of schooling. As Bourdieu has put it:

The culture of the elite is so near to that of the school that children from the lower middle class ... can acquire only with great effort something which is *given* to the children of the cultivated classes – style, taste, wit – in short, those attitudes and aptitudes which seem natural in members of the cultivated classes and naturally expected of them precisely because (in the ethnological sense) they are the *culture* of that class. (Bourdieu 1974: 39)

I argue that the neocolonial educational structures that are an inheritance from British colonisation with their alien ideologies, epistemological bases and orientations represent a form of symbolic violence. The curriculum, pedagogical methods and assessment do not value the cultural knowledge, expertise and wisdoms that Fijian students, and indeed students of other ethnic groups, bring to the classroom. The fact that English is the language of schooling, and the tokenism given to the teaching of the vernaculars, is testament to the dominating presence of colonial authority and power. Because Fiji has continued with western models of assessment, those who do not pass the national examinations carry the label of 'failure' in education.

The curriculum, assessment and pedagogies that are in play in this postcolonial moment are more or less a continuation of those in play prior to 1970, that supposedly magical moment when Fiji became a politically independent nation-state. The curriculum and the ensuing pedagogies and assessment system are still 'western' in focus and emphasis and are, in many cases, considered too foreign, inappropriate, irrelevant and impractical. There has been some measure of localisation of the content to include material on Fiji and the South Pacific. However, the focus is still very academic, theoretical and fashioned after offerings in the New Zealand and Australian curricula.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have described a new framework from which we should view and understand Fijian under-achievement by adding another dimension to our understanding: that of the salience of the historical structural category as an analytic tool in adding to this understanding. I have argued from a parallelist position which recognises the interplay between the dynamics of race, class, gender and location working with each other and amongst social, cultural, political and historical forces to explain racial inequalities in education. The picture emerging is one of complexity. Social-cultural deficit models, psychological explanations and the negative impact of neo-colonial schooling structures present only partial and incomplete stories. However, when one puts all these explanations together as in a jigsaw puzzle, the pieces interweave into a multi-faceted, multi-layered, comprehensive, holistic and complex explanation that goes some way towards explaining the issue of Fijian under-achievement in school.

What are the implications of this for reforming Fiji's education system in order to improve the performance of Fijian students at school? This is the basis of a later article. Suffice it to say now, that identifying the causes of Fijian under-achievement is the first step.

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