

Readiness to teach for cultural inclusivity and sustainable learning: Views of preservice primary teachers in Fiji

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Fiji's formal education system continues to be Eurocentric, and cultural democracy is a frequent source of contention in schools. This research investigated how culturally inclusive and sustainable learning environments can be fostered through culturally democratic classrooms, culturally relevant content and culturally responsive pedagogies. Data was collected through questionnaires and *talanoa*, and subjected to quantitative and narrative analysis. The study showed that culturally democratic classrooms, culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies, and skills for enhancing the usefulness of cultural knowledge are significantly lacking in Fiji classrooms. It also showed that democratic and culturally relevant, inclusive, and responsive classrooms necessitate a shift from the traditional colonial learning environment toward one that values cultural diversity, acknowledges multiple perceptions and diverse paradigms, and values critical thinking as well as social and cultural responsibility. The study recommends that the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts review the Fiji primary school curriculum and make it more culturally inclusive for teachers and students. The study also suggests that teacher education institutions should include cultural democracy, culturally relevant and responsive teaching, culturally inclusive pedagogies and resources, and training for lecturers on how to use them in their courses. They should also add more vernacular courses to their programs.

Introduction

Fiji's formal education system continues to be Eurocentric, and cultural democracy is a frequent source of contention in schools. Thaman (2013) and Wilson et al. (2017) described cultural democracy as a way of life, complete with a language and traditional or indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) that serve as the foundation for value and belief systems and having the social freedom to create one's own culture. Cultural democracy was coined in the 1910s by reformers in the United States who pushed for and supported cultural heterogeneity in the face of white supremacy's attempt to create a single American culture. Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (1995a) devised the term "culturally relevant pedagogy" to refer to practices that not only address student achievement but also "assist students in accepting and affirming their cultural identities while developing critical perspectives that challenge the inequities perpetuated by schools and other institutions" (p. 469). Gay (2010) summarised culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) succinctly as one that teaches to and through the strengths of different students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles, increasing the relevance and effectiveness of learning for them. The word has been widely addressed in Pacific island nations (PINs) in relation to the necessity to bridge the divide between imported scholastic institutes' cultures and that of their students (Lockwood et al., 1998; Thaman, 1997; Va'a, 1997; Wah, 1997). These efforts to fix inconsistencies have shown how important it is to shift the focus away

from the typical teacher and toward one who is culturally responsive and adapts learning to the learner's culture (Brown et al., 2019; Christ & Sharma, 2018).

As a result of the influence of foreign philosophies, modernism in PINs is characterised by the estrangement of cultural values and identities. The Western definition of education has been exaggerated and institutionalised mechanically. As a result, education promotes and supports only one way of life and thinking, relegating PINs ways of life and ways of knowing to a secondary status. Currently, formal education in most PINs, especially Fiji, is less effective because of a focus on ideas and concepts from outside the country, which is not beneficial.

An examination of Fiji's primary schools reveals that they have devolved into culturally undemocratic institutions. English is the medium of instruction in all subjects except vernacular, and English literacy has been prioritised. Additionally, instructors' pedagogies continue to alienate students' cultural and contextual knowledge systems, and evaluation methodologies are shown to be impracticable and unrealistic. Schools in Fiji are becoming easy targets for instructional and policy changes because they are fewer in number and much dependent on aid.

It is critical that educators in Fiji possess professional and cultural competence to promote the Education Ministry's vision, "Education and cultural diversity for empowered and sustainable futures for all" (MEHA, 2018). Thaman (2012) asserted that educators are "licenced to change individuals, elevating the teaching position to a matter of life and death" (p. 2), highlighting the importance of conducting research and implementing more effective educational techniques. Nabobo (2001) articulated this need by stating that "there are significant differences between classroom culture and Fijian children's culture" (p. 63). Educators and other stakeholders in education must understand these critical discrepancies. In light of this, and in light of the *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs) expiration (United Nations, n.d.) and the evolution of SDG 4.7, which requires all learners to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to promote *Sustainable Development Goals* (United Nations, 2015), this study examines the influence of culture on the ability of schools to provide appropriate education to their students. Besides that, the study looked into how teacher education institutions can help teachers learn how to be culturally democratic and how to teach a culturally relevant and responsive curriculum through a number of instructional technologies.

Problem statement

Any conversation about learning and teaching includes language and culture (Thaman, 2012). Most often, the misunderstanding or the lack of intimate knowledge of diverse cultural norms and social behaviours leads to miscommunication, especially in interpreting behaviour between educators and learners (Riley, 1985). This is the case with the majority of PINs, which continue to use content, pedagogies, and assessment tools that are irrelevant to the Pacific setting. Many of these issues can be traced back to:

1. The devaluing of the indigenous language. The indigenous language carries with it a profound history: IK and IKS, *iTaukei*¹ values and value systems (respect, loyalty, generosity, humility, cooperation, reciprocity), culture, relationships with the living and the dead, land, and, in every sense of the word, the Vanua (Ravuvu, 1983).
2. The inundation of school content with foreign 'knowledge' and values alienates the understanding of cultural distinctiveness. The 'knowledge' is often endorsed through assessments, which emphasise the process (Puamau, 2002).
3. Individualistic, verbal, and competitive teaching and learning styles. The teaching and learning styles of the Pacific people are participatory, cooperative, and related to everyday lived realities and are not restricted to an area, time, or space. Teaching is holistic and for the purpose of sustainability (Taufe'ulugaki, 2000).
4. The individualistic, written and decontextualised methods of assessment. For example, the *iTaukei* practice is usually participatory, non-verbal feedback (respect), and contextualised (Taufe'ulugaki, 2000).

The preceding illustrates the importance of shifting pedagogical practice to culturally relevant and responsive ones to ensure success in learning and teaching. In the Pacific, research has concentrated chiefly on re-examining and realigning the curriculum, vernacular language and language policies, learning and teaching gaps, and indigenous education. However, studies have not been conducted to examine preservice teacher trainees' theoretical and conceptual grasp of cultural democracy, culturally democratic classrooms, or culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies. Thus, this study investigates the preservice teacher trainees' theoretical and conceptual grasp of cultural democracy, culturally democratic classrooms, and culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies.

Review of the literature

The acceptance of the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) by the UN General Assembly in September 2015 established the agenda for international development for the subsequent 15 years (United Nations, 2015a). With 17 aspiring goals, the SDGs "seek to build on the *Millennium Development Goals* [MDGs, United Nations (n.d.)] and complete what they did not achieve" (United Nations, 2015b). Some have applauded the SDGs as comprehensive and collaborative (Clarke, 2015), while others have condemned them for fortifying an unsustainable economic model and failing to address the underlying causes of worldwide poverty and disparity (Makwana, 2016).

Target 4.7 of the SDG stipulated that: By 2030, all learners should "acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture's contribution to sustainable development" (United Nations, 2015a). Target 4.7 demands a transformative revolution in education throughout the world. This broadens the scope in contrast to the Millennium

¹ An indigenous term referring to the indigenous people of Fiji or the natives of Fiji.

Development Education Goal, which concentrated in its entirety on the improvement of the provision of education in poorer countries. Fiji's Ministry of Education, Heritage and Art's Strategic Plan 2019-2023, titled "Education and cultural diversity for empowered and sustainable futures for all", hopes to achieve this (MEHA, 2018). The literature review below sheds light on the state of education in PINs. It informs the relevance of more research on culturally responsive and relevant teaching and culturally democratic classrooms (CDCs) in the hope of fostering cultural diversity.

Culturally responsive classrooms and teaching

Taufe'ulungaki (2004) defines culture as "the creative activity of cultural elites, the finest intellectual achievements of human beings, music, literature, art, and architecture" (p. 11). According to Eagly and Chaiken (1998), culture is a way of being, a way of life, a language, indigenous knowledge (IK), and indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). Thaman (1997) contextualised it through a Pacifica lens and defined it as follows:

A group of people's shared way of life, comprising their acquired knowledge and understandings, skills, and values, as expressed and constructed in their language, which they regard to be distinctive and meaningful (p. 120).

Additionally, Thaman emphasises that a culture's durability and survival (its values, language, IK, and IKS) are contingent on its articulation, teaching, and practice in formal and informal schooling. The IK is multifaceted, comprising the beliefs, practices, arts, spirituality, and other types of traditional and cultural experiences that are unique to indigenous populations worldwide (Ali, 2017). Thus, emphasising the significance and necessity of culturally responsive curriculum (CRC) and its different designations as culturally compatible (Jordan, 1985), culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992), culturally congruent (Au & Kawakami, 1994; McKinley, 2010), and culturally diverse (McKinley, 2010). While CRC can be used in a variety of ways, its fundamental value for learners with varying linguistic and cultural backgrounds remains the same. If teachers adopt pedagogical practises that are culturally relevant to their students, they can improve their students' academic performance (Gay & Howard, 2000; Pilotti & Al Mubarak, 2021).

Culturally responsive and relevant classrooms (CRRCs) have been shown to be effective in raising academic standards because they "specifically acknowledge the presence of culturally diverse students who make deeper connections with the tasks and subject matter provided by the teachers" (Montgomery, 2001, p. 4). At its core, CRRCs are student and culture-centred (Ford, 2010), and are defined along at least five dimensions: educator philosophy, learning environment, curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Banks, 2009; Ford et. al., 1999; Ford & Milner, 2005; Foster, 1995; Gay & Howard, 2000; Gay 2002; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2009; Morrison et al., 2019; Shade, 1989; Shade et al., 1997). These dimensions define a multicultural classroom and imply that "educators must be deliberate and intentional in designing classroom practices that represent the cultures of the students in order to enhance the educational experiences of culturally diverse gifted students" (Milner & Ford, 2007, p. 169).

Several recommendations for achieving cultural congruence in instruction have been made. McKinley (2010) identified these in four categories. These included meaningful instructions, scaffolding instruction to the student's home culture and language, responding to student characteristics and needs, and culturally relevant curriculum materials, which raises the attainment of students through culturally responsive teaching. McKinley asserted that utilising constructivist approaches as a source of investigation, scaffolding to match and engage students' learning based on their home culture and experiences, demonstrating content knowledge and competency, and utilising culturally relevant curriculum resources are critical components of achieving cultural congruence in educational instruction. Taufe'ulungaki (2002) argued that learning and teaching are more effective in the Pacific when pedagogical practices are culturally responsive. She described the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) in Hawaiian schools as a success story because it blended cultural aspects of teaching, learning, communication, and respect. Furthermore, Nabobo and Teasdale (1994), posited:

A balance between Western education and the traditional education of Fiji's non-western cultures is necessary. A critical first step in achieving this balance is enabling teachers to recognise and affirm their own cultural identities and understand and appreciate those around them (p. 3).

Recognising their own cultural identities is the enduring issue with PINs, particularly in Fiji. As a result of the enduringly Eurocentric educational system, and its disrespect for the importance of the indigenous language and culture, transitional bilingualism has become prevalent. As a result, trainee teachers have a limited understanding of their own language and culture. Additionally, research in South America has indicated that teacher graduates enter the field with little to no awareness of their cultural identity and are ill-prepared to recognise, design, and evaluate culturally responsive teaching and learning strategies (Cochran-Smith et al., 2004; Cross, 2005; Juárez et al., 2008).

Moreover, research indicates that culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies have limitations (Sleeter, 2012). Aronson and Laughter (2015) conducted a review of 40 publications to examine pedagogical practices centred on culturally relevant instruction. The studies employed prior and post-assessments to gauge variations in student outcomes (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2004). However, only one study compared multicultural literary works on reading intervention to traditional literature-based reading intervention and identified no significant improvement in learners' reading skills (Bui & Fagan, 2013). Additionally, the literature demonstrates another limitation: culturally relevant instruction is primarily determined from the teacher's perspective rather than the learners' perspective (Howard, 2001). Traditionally, researchers selected experienced teachers without respect for the learners' perception of the teacher's connection with their experiences and interests, which is critical for culturally appropriate instruction.

Additionally, evidence indicates that CRT studies are generally conducted in homogeneous and frequently black classrooms (Morrison et al., 2008). There is scant information regarding the effect of CRT on the outcomes of other students of colour in diverse classes. As a result, currently available research is skewed.

Cultural democracy, culturally democratic and undemocratic classrooms

Cultural democracy as a paradigm shift toward decolonising education necessitates the development of an emancipatory, liberatory paradigm upon which to build a critical cultural pedagogy. Student voice and empowerment in supportive environments are vital to 21st-century learning and achieving UN Target 4.7 (appreciation of cultural diversity and the contribution of culture to sustainable development) (United Nations, 2015a). Additionally, cultural democracy in the classroom is a philosophy that acknowledges the way an individual communicates, interacts with others, seeks assistance and acceptance from their society, and reason and learns, is a product of their community's value system. According to Foster et al. (2020), culturally responsive pedagogy facilitates one's learning and innovation. Any educational institution that does not recognise this is culturally undemocratic (Ramirez & Castaneda, 1974). Thaman (1994) made a brief digression and argued that cultural democracy must be contextualised within the context of Pacific island nations cultural heritage in order to contribute to equity.

Additionally, cultural democracy is embraced alongside multiculturalism and pluralism as an alternative ideology to acculturation and assimilation (Finau 2008; Thaman 1994). Forsyth (2012) asserted that a pluralistic approach is necessary for intellectual property rights in IK, emphasising that in order to properly appreciate its importance, traditional knowledge institutes and customary law must be recognised and respected. While Forsyth (2012) and Thaman (1994) advocated for distinct but inextricably linked viewpoints, they both emphasised the importance of a paradigm shift away from utilitarian curriculum and state-centred approaches (Forsyth, 2012; Taufe'ulungaki & Benson, 2002; Thaman, 1994; Thaman, 2009). Additionally, for the majority of indigenous people, their culture describes their way of thinking, interacting, learning, and evaluating. This is applicable in PINs (Ramirez & Castaneda, 1974). However, in the majority of PINs, like that in Fiji, the educational environment has become culturally undemocratic (Thaman, 2009). This has directly impacted school dropout rates and unwarranted disciplinary issues (Chand, 2012; Thaman, 1993).

It is critical for educators to be culturally aware and adept if academic achievement is to be improved (Borrero et al., 2018). Cultural awareness and teacher competency in the understanding and using a native language transform the learning environment into a place of understanding, recognition, and growth (Banks, 2002, 2004; Larke, 1990; Nieto, 2006; Taufe'ulungaki, 2002; Thaman, 1999, 2002). Ministry of Education, New Zealand (n.d) stated that students are more likely to achieve greatness when they see themselves and their culture reflected favourably in the subject matter and learning contexts.

On the other end, cultural democracy has limitations because it is a cultural propagation movement that tolerates the risks of hyper-relativism (Bellavance et al., 2000). Additionally, culturally democratic classrooms require a thorough awareness of all learners' cultural backgrounds and the issues affecting the many locations from which they come. Observations at the majority of PIN teacher preparation institutes suggest that trainee teachers are unequipped for these learning environments (Girsén, 2017). Additionally, Thaman (2012) argued that as this plurality expands, the expectation that

teachers be proficient in understanding their students' cultural intricacies becomes crucial, if not justified. She emphasised the critical nature of teacher roles by stating that they are qualified professionals who have the ability to alter lives; hence, their tasks are life and death.

Following a review of the pertinent literature, it is concluded that contextualised studies and research are needed to reflect the current state of cultural democracy and culturally inclusive curriculum and pedagogy in Fijian primary schools. The current study was conducted to fill this research gap.

Method

This study employed a mixed-methods design. Mixed methods research entails the simultaneous or sequential collecting and analysis of quantitative and/or qualitative data in a single study, with the data being integrated at one or more points of the research process (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). The participants were thirty primary teacher trainees enrolled in Fiji National University's Bachelor of Education (Primary) programme. All were 20 years of age except one, who was 25 at the time the study was conducted. There were fourteen iTaukei (12 females and 2 males), ten Indo-Fijians (7 females and 3 males), and six island students (5 i-Kiribati [4 females and 1 male] and 1 Rotuman [female] student) among them. They were in their 2nd year of study and had successfully completed their first practicum at their designated schools. The participants were informed about the nature of the study and upon their verbal agreement, a written consent was sought before the study began. All efforts were also made to preserve the anonymity of the research participants. Confidentiality to their responses was guaranteed, and participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time during the study.

Data was collected using a questionnaire and talanoa. The questionnaire consisted of six major questions and was administered to all 30 participants. The questionnaire was shared with the participants during class, completed and collected. For each of the questions, the participants had to choose from the suggestions that were provided (These suggestions are highlighted in the horizontal axis of the graphs in the Findings section). The topics of cultural democracy, culturally democratic classrooms and culturally relevant responsive pedagogy was part of a weekly lecture and two-hour workshop class and open forum discussion with the participants prior to undertaking this study so the majority of the participants were aware of what the terms meant. All the questionnaires were deemed complete and analysed using descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages. The six major questions investigated are identified as subheadings in the findings section.

The talanoa session involved obtaining the qualitative data from five groups of six students, and these were analysed into themes according to the research questions asked. Talanoa, as a means of exchange of information or as a dialogic activity between researcher and participant (Crossley et al., 2017), has been integral to the Pacific way of

life for generations. It involves verbal interactions between two or more people and is referred to as “a conversation, a talk, an exchange of ideas or thinking, whether formal or informal. It is mostly carried out face-to-face.” (Vaiotei, 2006, p. 23). It was first introduced to academia by Sitiveni Halapua as a means for conflict resolution after the Fiji coup in 2000. Since then, Pacific scholars and researchers have discussed and engaged with it as a culturally appropriate research methodology (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014; Nabobo-Baba, 2005, 2008; Otunuku, 2011; Robinson & Robinson, 2005; Sanga, 2004).

This study employed talanoa as a research method since it embodied cultural appropriateness and respectful intent in the dissemination of essential information. Additionally, the talanoa was “guided by rules of relationship ... shared ways of knowing and knowledge and world views”. It did “not happen in void” but was requested for with an understanding of the cultural contexts of the study participants, and where these cultures dictated to some degree the “conditions on how knowledge sought after by the researcher is obtained and used” (Nabobo-Baba, 2008, p.149). Prior to the talanoa process for this study, the researchers took “time to establish a culturally-appropriate interpersonal relationship and rapport” (Otsuka, 2006, p.10) with the participants so as to avoid ‘white lies’ by participants as well as be aware of issues that may be sensitive or difficult to discuss. As a purely voluntary method with “a willingness to engage; to speak, to listen and to interact” (Robinson & Robinson, 2005, p. 24), talanoa allowed the participants time to understand, recollect, gather, relate and communicate their thoughts with the expectation that researchers will allow the process.

There were six talanoa questions and they intended to build on the questionnaire, probing the participants to either expand on their reasoning for their choices or offering examples from their practicum and learning experience. These discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The respondent's answers are discussed under different subtitles.

Findings

Analyses of the questionnaires and talanoa identified similarities and gaps in the respondent's understanding of cultural democracy and culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. The data collected provides insight into the level of understanding of the research participants. The results are displayed according to the sequence of the research questions asked.

Questionnaire Q1: What do you understand by cultural democracy, culturally democratic classrooms and culturally relevant responsive pedagogy?

Figure 1 shows the participant's understanding of cultural democracy, culturally democratic classrooms and culturally relevant responsive pedagogy. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of respondents indicated that cultural democracy and culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies entail using instructional resources that are both relevant and easily understandable to all learners; 20% defined it as tolerance for other cultures; 17% defined it as the freedom to practise one's own culture; 13% defined it as cooperating in group

settings; 13% defined it as having open and constructive conversations; and 10% described it as the promotion and respect for other cultures.

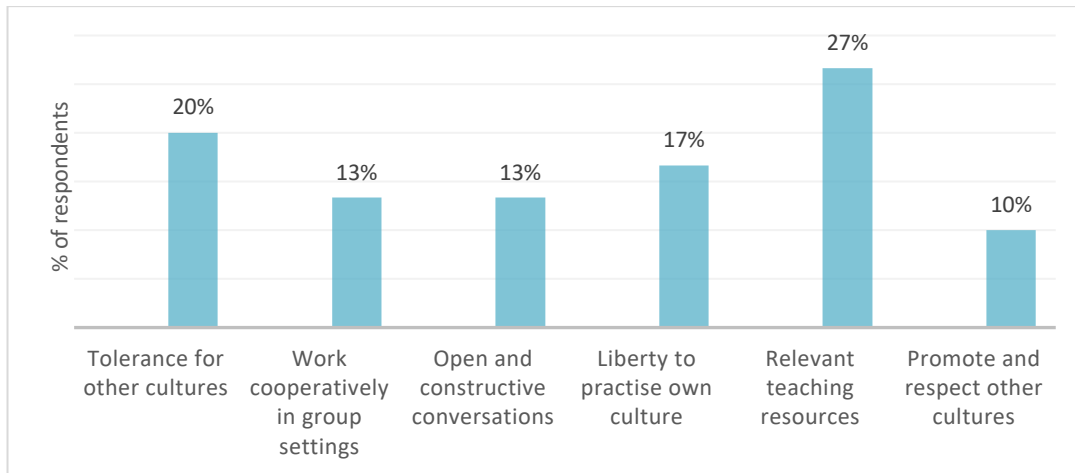


Figure 1: Understanding of cultural democracy

Talanoa Q1: From your experience, was your classroom cultural democratic? Did you see your culture reflected in the resources? Was teaching culturally relevant and responsive?

When participants were asked about the implementation of cultural diversity in schools, the responses varied. While all agreed that some form of cultural diversity was implemented in schools by celebrating cultural and religious festivals, significant gaps and discrepancies were identified in their freedom to express cultural and traditional ideas verbally and through inclusive educational practises. For instance, two participants commented:

I believe that when I was in primary school, I did not know how to answer to specific questions asked in a harsh tone since I was unfamiliar with the approach. When my teachers yelled, I was always scared to respond (Participant 3).

When we celebrated Fiji Day, the only activity was the raising of the flag. There was no Meke or Indian dance. Despite having Hindu classmates, we did not celebrate Diwali because our school was Muslim. I don't recall learning much about the iTaukei culture other than social studies, but it didn't seem significant (Participant 2).

Questionnaire Q2: From recollection and observance during practicum, do you think the teaching and learning process in primary schools is culturally relevant and responsive?

The participant's responses to culturally relevant and responsive teaching and learning process in primary schools is shown in Figure 2.

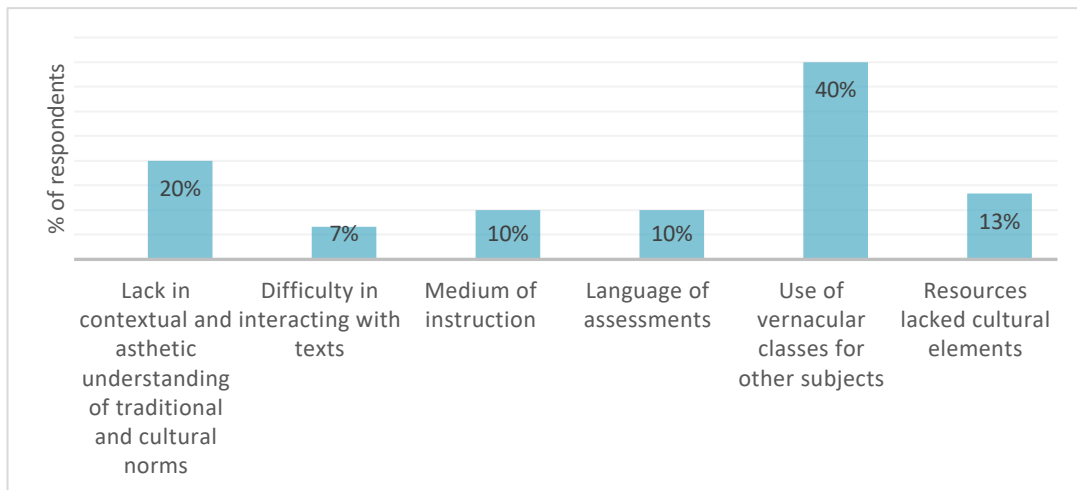


Figure 2: Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy (CRRP) in schools

The majority of respondents (40%) indicated that vernacular classes were substituted for other subjects, while 20% stated that teachers lacked a contextual and aesthetic awareness of the traditional values and cultural norms in the classroom. 13% stated that teaching and learning tools lacked cultural components; 10% stated that (while degrading vernacular language) it was mandatory to communicate in English at all times. 7% stated that the texts were difficult to comprehend and connect with, while 10% stated that the language used in written exams was occasionally confusing and challenging.

Talanoa Q2: Is there a need for culturally democratic classrooms (CDCs), culturally relevant teaching (CRT), and culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies (CRRP)?

All respondents agreed that CDCs, CRT, and CRRP are necessary because all classes (except some rural and remote schools) are culturally diverse. For instance, a participant from Group 4 commented:

We live, socialise, learn and teach in diverse classrooms. I don't think the primary school I attended understood that, but the school I went to for practicum was the opposite - maybe because the head teacher there was young. They even had a library that had reading materials in iTaukei, Hindi², Rotuman and Urdu³, which were newly purchased.

Additionally, the respondents stated that all staff, students, school administration, and communities should be responsible for practising, developing and maintaining vernacular language and culture. For instance, a participant from the Group 1 highlighted:

... As teacher trainees here in FNU, this is important, so we break this chain of ineffective and harmful teaching methods. I think those teachers furthering their studies have changed their teaching methods. I saw this in my practicum in Labasa ... My AT

² Language spoken by Fijian people of Indian descent

³ Language spoken by Fijian people of Islamic descent

was very accommodating and respectful. He said a course he took last year changed his perspective. My AT told two boys who were arguing that in the iTaukei culture, it is inappropriate to use rude and foul language and that being respectful is important. My AT was Muslim.

Questionnaire Q3: What kind of teaching resources were used in your primary school? Were they current and culturally relevant?

The respondents expressed similar sentiments when answering the above question (Figure 3).

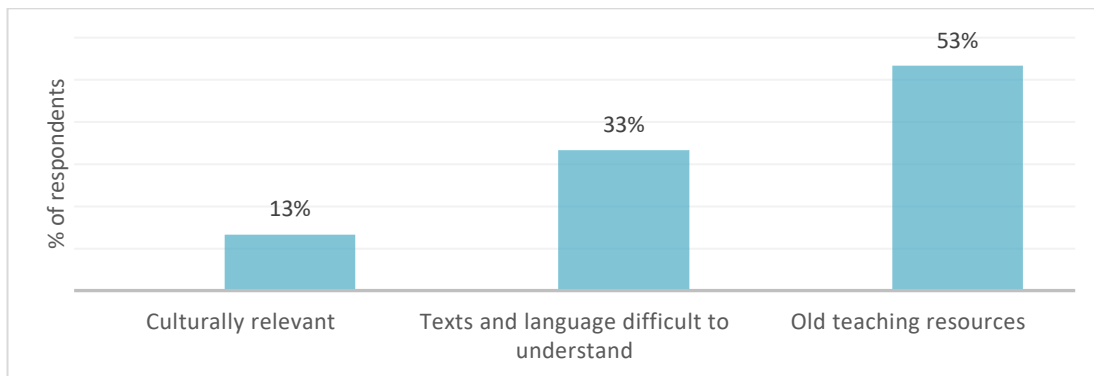


Figure 3: Teaching resources

53% of respondents claimed that most teaching resources were outdated, while 33% stated that the texts and the language utilised as a means of communication were challenging to grasp. By contrast, 13% of respondents indicated that resources were culturally significant. The overwhelming majority stated that educators lacked variety and that the majority taught from previous students'/teachers' books, indicating that the material imparted was outdated.

Talanoa Q3: Were your teachers culturally sensitive during teaching and class discussions?

The question had a mixed response from respondents. While about a quarter (23%) of teacher trainees agreed that their teachers were culturally sensitive and inclusive, the majority claimed that they were not. The majority explained that: (i) Teachers were frequently biased and taught from their cultural perspective; (ii) Teachers lacked content knowledge; (iii) Teachers did not see the need to make references to the past; (iv) Teachers lacked a basic understanding of the students' culture and thus could not respond to culture-specific questions, and, (v) Teachers lacked a grasp of indigenous respect principles as in the educational environment, the tone of voice and conventional standing are not honoured. Two of the participants from group 5 stated:

Most of my primary school teachers were insensitive to cultural differences when instructing and leading class discussions. My Year 4 teacher, in particular, continually praised the virtues of his own culture. When my iTaukei friends misbehaved in class, he

always said that he understood their behaviour as they came from the village. As a result, my friends hated him. He was always biased and shouted as if that was what his own culture taught him to do (Participant 2).

For two years in primary school, my class teacher was terrific. He always spoke respectfully in class and during discussion times when we had conversations. He didn't give out punishments. Instead, he would call the students and talk to them when the other students were busy with their work. He never used a loud voice. I don't believe there are many teachers like him around anymore. On the other hand, my class six teacher would vigorously pat or slap the iTaukei students on their heads. I had a similar experience during the practicum (Participant 4).

Questionnaire Q4: In your view, what are the needed skills, competencies and resources for better teaching in culturally diverse classrooms and the achievement of SDG 4.7, specifically the "... appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development"?

Figure 4 illustrates respondents' perceptions of the necessary skills, competencies, and resources for improving teaching in culturally diverse classrooms and achieving SDG 4.7.

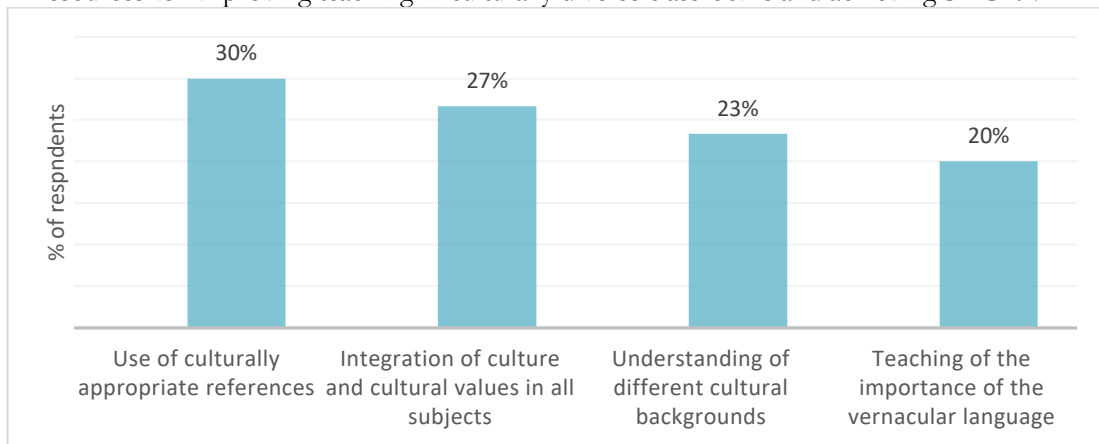


Figure 4: Needed skills, competencies and resources

30% of the participants felt the need to use appropriate language and culturally appropriate references during teaching and assessment, while 27% suggested the integration of culture and the underlying cultural values for effective and appropriate interaction; 23% of the respondents stated that an understanding of iTaukei traditional background of all learners in the room is required; 20% feel that it is vital to teaching the importance of the vernacular language, culture and traditions for sustainability.

Talanoa Q4: How do you think teacher training in FNU can be improved to produce teachers who are knowledgeable and competent to teach in culturally diverse classrooms?

The respondents suggested that lessons on culture, indigenous knowledge and knowledge system be integrated into education courses, precisely when delivering lessons on teaching methods. For instance, a participant from group 3 suggested:

Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning must be incorporated into our curricula. They include Hindu, iTaukei, Rotuman, and Kiribati. To ensure that their instruction reflects ethical standards, future teachers must be taught the importance of knowing other cultures (Participant 4).

Furthermore, some participants suggested that the cultural attributes in the FNU *Teacher Graduate Attributes and Professional Standards Framework* be reviewed.

Questionnaire Q5: From your experience and observance, what do you think are the causes of culturally undemocratic classrooms?

The causes of culturally undemocratic classrooms are recurrently a source of contention. Figure 5 summarises the respondents' viewpoints.

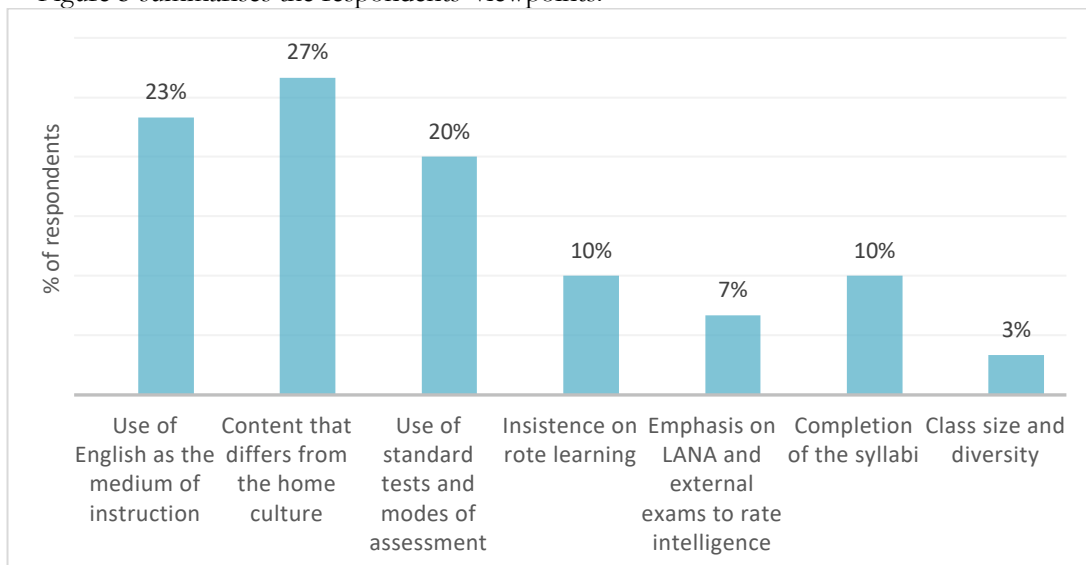


Figure 5: Causes of culturally undemocratic classrooms

27% of respondents indicated that the content taught differed significantly from their local cultures, and 23 % cited the extensive and accentuated English language usage as a cause. Other issues included the use of standardised tests and assessment techniques (20%), and an emphasis on rote learning (10%). Additionally, 10% of respondents cited the teacher's insistence on completing syllabi, 7% cited the excessive emphasis on the Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (LANA) and external exams as a means of

determining intelligence, and 3% cited class sizes and classroom diversity as contributing to culturally undemocratic classrooms.

Talanoa Q5: As teacher trainees, how can you create and implement culturally democratic classrooms (CDC), culturally relevant and responsive content (CRRC) and culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies (CRRP)?

The talanoa session highlighted numerous recommendations for establishing the CDC, CRRC, and CRRP. Respondents emphasised the importance of collaboration between curriculum developers, the community, teaching fraternities, and the school administration. They emphasised the creation and implementation of the following: (i) a new subject (other than Social Studies or Vernacular) to teach about culture and appropriate cultural behaviour; (ii) Community and Parental Support Programs (CAPs) (MEHA, 2016) emphasising the importance of teachers, parents, and guardians demonstrating, and building on cross-cultural awareness; and (iii) Professional development by CDC, CRRC, and CRRP specialists on best practice. The following were stated by participants:

I believe it must be a collective effort, and all parties involved must understand these concepts. It will fail if it is part of the curriculum and not taught by teachers and teacher training institutes. If we learn it here, but the educational system remains traditional, we won't be able to make any changes (Group 3 Participant).

As education is everyone's responsibility, there should be a collective effort. Curriculum designers must be aware of changes and collaborate with teachers on their implementation and training. Monitoring is also essential, and teachers evaluating the teaching methods of other teachers should consider the students' cultures and abilities (Group 5 Participant).

Questionnaire Q6: Upon graduation, do you think you will be able to teach in a culturally diverse classroom?

Much discussion ensued regarding graduates' readiness to teach in culturally diverse schools. This is shown in Figure 6.

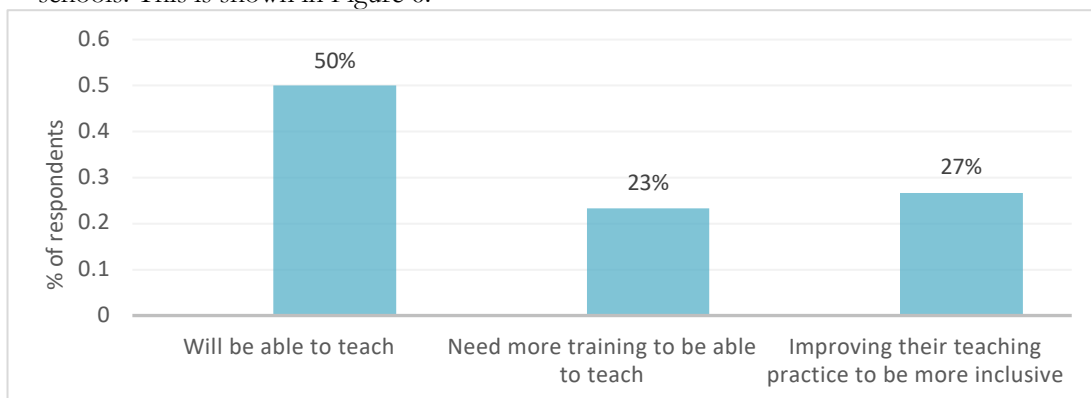


Figure 6: Readiness to teach in culturally diverse classrooms

While 50% of respondents felt prepared to graduate and work well in a culturally diverse classroom, 27% believed their teaching practices must be enhanced to be more inclusive. In comparison, 23% of respondents indicated a need for additional training.

Talanoa Q6: Given the discussion carried out on CDC, CRRC and CRRP, what are your recommendations on the current teacher training program?

The respondents reflected on and emphasised on the current teacher training program, stating the following: (i) The current teacher training program is not culturally inclusive; (ii) Assessment methods used in teacher training institutes and schools are still very traditional, with a heavy emphasis on written tests; (iii) There is an emphasis on abstract and alien content, rather than on culturally relevant and culturally inclusive content; and (iv) While a greater emphasis is being placed on digital content delivery and students to integrate ICT into the teaching and learning process, traditional schools continue to use chalk and board. Participants from groups 2 and 3 suggested the following:

I do not believe that the current teacher training program is inclusive of cultural diversity. During my practicum, I saw that our classrooms are still very traditional. I would urge CDC, CRRC, and CRRP be introduced into courses at teacher training institutions, as well as the usage and instruction of alternate assessment methods that support cultural inclusion (Group 2 Participant).

Our classrooms are still largely traditional. Here, we are taught how to teach using ICT, but this is not the case in schools. It's blackboard and chalk. Our content is foreign! It is funny but true. Sometimes we don't understand. I mean, why do we teach about other countries and history when some students have never been to Suva or know where Tavua is? Shouldn't our focus on assignments be confined to written assessments? I suggest that we change this; we must initiate change in primary schools. Our content, assessment, and textbooks must also change. They are outdated (Group 3 Participant).

Discussion

The study revealed that the respondents had a reasonable conceptual understanding of cultural democracy and its classroom practice, the significance of culturally relevant content, culturally responsive and relevant assessments, and inclusive pedagogies. The CDC definitions derived are consistent with that of Fearnley et al. (2001), who described CDC as an active engagement of students with their own learning, cooperation, practices of respect, recognition of equal worth and entitlements and the development of a school culture of tolerance and engagement.

Although trainees understood the importance and necessity of cultural inclusion, the majority considered it was secondary to the values of equality, as the bulk of educational policies were oriented towards inclusivity, equality, and equity. Contrary to the earlier findings of Brown and Crippen (2016), this study recognised the importance of teachers' expertise in facilitating CDC and cultural responsiveness and relevancy, particularly about assessment for and assessment of learning. The differences could be attributed to the

context as teachers are exposed to different educational settings required to teach effectively.

Consistent with the findings of Appiah (1994), the study revealed differences in common understandings of what culture is. There is some confusion over the terms culture, race, and tradition. This could be interpreted as a lack of knowledge and a thorough comprehension of Fiji's cultures and their integration into formal teaching and learning processes.

Milner (2010) stated that teacher education is crucial for teacher preparation because it prepares educators to address the different needs of their students. This study's findings do not entirely support this. Apart from the iTaukei, Hindi, and Urdu language programs, which were taught in vernacular languages using culturally appropriate pedagogies, respondents noted gaps and inconsistencies in the teacher education program due to culturally inaccessible or irrelevant courses. The disparate findings may be explained by the diverse, multicultural contexts in which teachers teach.

Due to an over-emphasis on the theoretical components of teaching and learning, using technology in teacher education for most course activities was not appropriate for mainstream schools. The findings here corroborate Thaman's (2012) findings which showed that the emphasis is more on intellectual than practical knowledge, on direct thinking instead of circular and indirect thinking, on experiential knowledge rather than knowledge of everyday life, on clarity and accuracy of thought expression rather than imaginative and emotion-filled expressions, and quantity rather than quality.

Consistent with Ladson-Billings (1992) earlier findings, teacher trainees agreed that while much emphasis has been placed on information, resources, and skills necessary to adapt successfully to culturally diverse learning contexts, linguistic and cultural sustainability have been neglected. The participants felt that they have the potential to be change-makers through effective and appropriate education when empowered through practical learning pedagogies.

Additionally, this study emphasises the critical nature of re-evaluating current teacher education curricula. As Klotz and Canter (2006), Muliaina (2018), and Thaman (2000) have demonstrated, there is a significant knowledge gap regarding the characteristics of culturally relevant content, evaluation, and instructional methodologies. There is a strong emphasis on intellectual content growth at the expense of other areas. Visual materials of cultural significance are scarce and, when they exist, are not displayed. Teachers are more concerned with equality and equity than with cultural sensitivity. Priority and attention are placed on English language instruction over vernacular instruction.

The study's findings also corroborate with the earlier findings of Thaman (2009), which showed the need to create synergies between teacher education institutions and the Curriculum Development Unit to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experience among individuals responsible for curriculum reform and teacher education. The study indicates that MEHA's CAPS program (MEHA, 2016) needs to be strengthened where

teachers, parents, and are made more aware of school and home cultures and aid cultural inclusivity of the formal teaching and learning environment through meaningful communication with their children. Thaman (2013) asserted that all students require teachers who are not just professionally qualified but also culturally competent. This is particularly true for teachers of indigenous students, who must strike a balance between classroom demands and their home customs. The study's findings are in accordance with this. According to the participants, cultural democracy, CRT, and culturally inclusive teaching are novel concepts that require careful consideration. Primary education lays the groundwork for formal education by empowering children to be inventors and active knowledge constructors.

Conclusion

The study showed that culturally democratic classrooms, culturally responsive pedagogies, and skills for enhancing the usefulness of cultural knowledge are significantly lacking in Fiji classrooms. Effective learning occurs when instructors leverage students' knowledge and expertise from their home cultures in formal learning environments and then purposefully employ those skills to consolidate their 'resource bank' to make sense of their learning.

Democratic and culturally relevant classrooms necessitate a shift from the traditional colonial learning environment toward one that values cultural diversity, acknowledges multiple perceptions and diverse paradigms, and values critical thinking and social and cultural responsibility - a process necessary for decolonising classroom practices and curriculum.

To achieve SDG 4.7, and more precisely, an appreciation of cultural diversity and culture's contribution to sustainable development for all learners, a paradigm shift is required. This shift must be towards a culturally democratic, relevant, and responsive teaching and learning environment. As a result, the core curriculum must be revised to include the selection of the finest of cultures and appreciate cultural diversity and culture's contribution to sustainable development. This necessitates a paradigm shift toward a more democratic, relevant, responsive teaching and learning environment.

This study recommends that stakeholders have a common goal and the drive to proactively achieve that objective. The MEHA should re-look at the Fiji primary school curriculum (MEHA, 2007) and make it more culturally inclusive for teachers and students. Culturally competent advisers and curriculum development officers proficient at writing culturally responsive and inclusive curricula should be engaged. The content, teaching, and assessment methods must be contextualised, and a vernacular language policy must be fully developed and implemented. More scholarships, especially in higher education for postgraduate studies, should be awarded to those willing to continue studying the language and culture in indigenous education. Greater collaborative work and synergies between teacher training institutions and curriculum development units should also be developed. The study also suggests that teacher education institutions integrate cultural

democracy, culturally relevant teaching, and culturally inclusive pedagogies and resources into courses, as well as training of lecturers for its implementation, and add more compulsory vernacular courses to their programs.

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