

Looking towards the source: A consideration of (cultural) context in teacher education

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ABSTRACT

I received the education of a Tongan woman. My early education, almost exclusively through the medium of the Tongan language, was focused upon membership of a large extended family in a small Polynesian island kingdom. I subsequently entered the foreign cultures of New Zealand and the United States of America primarily through their educational institutions but also, in 1970, through marriage to an American. These new systems and the insights they provided were very different from my own. Thus I am a product of both Tongan and western emphases: what Horton (1967) refers to as 'closed' and 'open' predicaments because I operate sometimes in one and sometimes in the other: the experience has often been painful. What I have to say about teacher education has been shaped by my experiences as student-teacher, teacher, teacher-educator and researcher.

Introduction

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From student-teacher to teacher-educator

As a student teacher in New Zealand, I was exposed to several theories of teaching and learning, many of which centred on the importance of the individual child. Texts about child development discussed important stages in a person's development, much of which did not seem meaningful to me, although I had to learn it and try to apply it to classroom practice. There seemed to be little opportunity then to openly question the theories and associated assumptions concerning child development suggested in the textbooks, although I had a lot of questions inside my head. I decided to accept most of what I learned at teachers' college: after all, my tutors were learned people, with

several years' experience in classroom teaching. I spent much of my time in college making teaching aids, because I realised even then, that once I was back teaching in Tonga, I would have very little spare time in which to do this.

Time spent teaching in high school in Tonga was characterised by conflicts and compromises. At first, I had to revise some of the ideas I had learned about teaching and learning. For example, public praising (in class) was supposed to be positive reinforcement, but I knew deep down that because such a technique would cause embarrassment to my students, it would be better to do so through written comments on their papers. I also knew that just as I had responded positively to teachers that took a personal interest in my welfare, my students would do the same to me if I showed interest in what they considered important to them. I therefore went about cultivating relationships with my students that extended to the sports field and other non-academic contexts. For this aspect of my task, I had to rely on my early upbringing as my teachers' college experiences did not offer much: there I had simply learned how to impart knowledge and skills in my special subjects.

As a postgraduate student in California in the early 1970s I was again exposed to a variety of educational styles and viewpoints. In the area of curriculum studies, my tutors introduced me to the worlds of Bloom, Tyler, Dewey and Taha. I learned many things about the curriculum process and curriculum development. I learned about the rational as opposed to the *ad hoc* method of developing a curriculum.

I also learned that the sources of important/necessary knowledge and understanding for curriculum development lay in the disciplines of psychology, sociology and philosophy from which several viewpoints and theories were analysed and evaluated; and this time I was able to ask questions. My thesis, a critical analysis of the Tongan social studies curriculum, suggested a framework for teaching social studies based on a problem-solving model. I presented the Ministry of Education with a copy. As expected, there was no reaction from the Ministry about my various suggestions, except that a close friend working there later wrote and said, 'Kanai, you don't really believe that teachers here would be able to do the kinds of things you're suggesting? They don't share the kinds of beliefs that you have'.

My friend's words were to remain with me for a long time, and resurfaced in the early 1980s when I was in Tonga to work on a curriculum project. I had been visiting teachers in various high schools who were trialing new social science materials. During one of these visits, I observed that the teacher had written a lot of things on the blackboard, and students were busy copying these into their notebooks. Upon closer examination, I discovered that the notes were actually taken from the teacher's guide and included several words, which, in my view, Form 2 students would find difficult. At the end of the period, I tactfully asked the teacher why he had given the students the notes which were meant for the teachers.

'You see', he said, 'the students need notes, otherwise they might feel that social studies is not important'.

'But what about the level of English? There are words there that are too difficult for them' I reminded him.

'That's all right', he assured me; 'I'll explain everything to them tomorrow . . . in Tongan.'

I came away having learnt an important lesson; the need to know what teachers (and students for that matter) consider to be important, for them. As a Tongan, I had some idea of the kinds of things which Tongan people believe to be important, and which might influence their collective behaviours I had worked with many teachers on various projects and noticed the difference in their responses when I spoke to them in Tongan instead of English, or when I referred to something they were familiar with in order to illustrate an idea. I decided to make Tongan teachers the focus of my doctoral study.

Belief systems and people's behaviour

On the completion of my study, I was convinced that many of the difficulties relating to teaching and learning in Tonga are derived largely from the kinds of conflicts that arise in the process of translating foreign ideas and the difficulty of conceptualising these ideas. I also realised that the study itself constituted an educational process, because what I had written moulded my view of education at the same time as I expressed it.

It was Combs (1969) who claimed that the system of belief that "help providers" hold about people was a crucial variable in their effectiveness with clients. Seaberg (1974: 9) also maintained that both the goals and roles of the teacher need to emerge from a belief system about people and that the teacher's roles need to be congruent with his goals'. As most of you know, much of the content as well as the methods of our formal education systems have been and continue to be based on mainly western rather than indigenous belief systems. Let me refer to three of these.

The first is Freudianism. Based on data from the emotionally disturbed, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) drew attention to the unconscious mind and its influence on human behaviour. The prime emphasis of this view was on the early influences and life's direction was to be determined at a very early stage (about 5 years of age). This subjective and deterministic approach viewed both learner and teacher as being controlled basically by unconscious drives. Repressed desires and unfulfilled needs lead to conflicts which are resolved through insight which is usually gained through therapy. This theory suggests that people are motivated to fulfil unmet needs buried in their unconscious (Seaberg, 1974: 9).

The second viewpoint is Behaviourism. Also deterministic, this view emerged in the 1900s in an effort to make the study of people objective and scientific. Rejecting the subjectivity of Freudianism, behaviourists asserted that personality can be viewed only as a sum of outward, observable actions. Skinner, a Harvard psychologist, popularised behaviourism, which suggests that a person is not free, and ethics, values and morals are relative and are learned as a result of conditioning influences in the environment.

In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, Skinner (1971) advocates that a person should not be freed from control but that the kinds of control to which he is exposed should be analysed and changed. Good classrooms would therefore be those where the teacher decides what behaviours and values are good for children and for society and through reinforcing these behaviours, produce a person who will behave well towards himself and others.

The third view is sometimes referred to as the Third Force or Humanistic Psychology. A combination or blending of existential philosophy, phenomenology and 'growth' psychology, this view has led to what is often referred to as the Human Potential Movement, and has heavily influenced many educationists including some here at this university. This view, centred on the individual's needs, goals, achievements and successes, is often associated with names like Maslow, Rogers, Fromm, Allport and Combs. A contributing view to the Third Force is the phenomenological one which views behaviour as determined by the person's phenomenological field: the external environment together with the acting person. In this area, perception is the key to understanding individual behaviour and motivation.

My study of Tongan teachers partly reflected a phenomenological viewpoint. However, I also made some assumptions which were similar to those made by cognitive anthropologists, namely: that culture is central to understanding human beings; that a cultural group has a unique system of perceiving and organising the world around them; that most of the cultural knowledge of a group is reflected in its language, especially in meaning; that it is more important to find out what is regarded as appropriate behaviour than to concentrate only on observable behaviour; and finally, that it is useful to see parts of a culture as they are conceptualised by members of that culture.

Tongan teachers' role perceptions

I wish now to briefly summarise my doctoral findings about Tongan teachers' perceptions of their role as these relate to Tongan cultural values and notions of education. In doing this, I wish to acknowledge and emphasise the importance of knowledge and understanding of indigenous belief systems not only in the contexts of teacher education in the Pacific Islands, but also in furthering our understanding of formal education processes, their evolution, and especially the people who are involved in them. It is my view that if we accept the definition of education as worthwhile learning, then at every point in our teaching and learning, we need to ask questions about the relevance of what we are doing in relation to the cultural contexts in which we find ourselves.

In my study of Tongan teachers, I found that the majority of them regarded their role primarily in moral, social and intellectual terms, in that order. The most important thing for a teacher was to be a good example for pupils, a role model. This was seen to be in line with a general concern for appropriate behaviour in the contexts of Tongan culture and reflected in the Tongan notion of *poto* (knowing what to do and how to do it). The significance of learning to be Tongan motivated by cultural expectations and later by an introduced religion, was reinforced by the idea that to be *poto* or educated is to be able to usefully apply *ilo* (knowledge) for the collective good.

The purpose of *aka* or formal education, therefore, was to become *poto*. Intellectual concerns exemplified in the teaching and learning of new and what often seemed meaningless subjects, were important insofar as they provided the knowledge (*ilo*) necessary for becoming successful in school. Such success was seen as necessary for gaining employment and thereby fulfilling one's *fatongia* or obligations to one's family, country and God. Such an utilitarian view of education has implications for what we are doing in teacher education.

Tongan teachers' perceptions of their role and their emphases on the social and moral aspects of it, may be explained by what I identified as major valued contexts of Tongan thinking: in other words, certain emphases which may be said to characterise the behaviour of Tongan people as a group. These include: respect for rank and authority, conformity to rules, concern for specifics rather than generalities: emphases on kinship and interpersonal relationships, importance of the supernatural, *'ofa* (compassion), and restraint behaviour.

It may be interesting to note that primary and secondary teachers differed in the relative weight they gave to the importance of learning social and moral values as opposed to school subjects. Perhaps with time, more teachers will tend to view their roles in less diffuse ways, tending to resemble those of more industrialised nations as reported by researchers such as Musgrove and Taylor (1969). It is likely that as Tongan society becomes more westernised and commercialised, with more of the teaching force educated outside of the region, we can expect further changes in teachers' role perceptions.

Implications for teacher education: Culture as a source of solutions

What can be drawn from these findings that may be useful for us as teacher educators? Please permit me to make some suggestions.

We need to re-examine our teacher education curriculum, in order to make sure that we are not denying our students certain knowledge and skills which they would need in order to be effective in their job. We do not need to look too far in order to see the overwhelming emphasis on the teaching of academic subjects and the relegation of areas such as art, music, physical education and cultural and religious studies to 'minor' status. It would appear that some of us might have failed our teachers and their students through our continued over-emphasis on teaching subjects rather than on the preparation of *people* who can meet the challenges of particular contexts.

As people, involved in the preparation of teachers, we need to ask some basic questions of ourselves. We need to question our basic beliefs about human nature and the motivation of

behaviour and ask how these are different from those of the students. We also need to question how our beliefs are acted out in our own teaching role and how our students' beliefs are acted out in their learning role. We should also examine the ways in which our beliefs are reflected in the goals which we have set for ourselves and for our students and ask are these beliefs consistent with those of the cultures from which the students come?

I have no doubt that the answers to these questions would reveal some basic differences among ourselves as well as within ourselves. I suggest that these differences need to be addressed and if possible, resolved. Otherwise we may be denying ourselves as well as our students, knowledge and understanding that might help us teach and/or learn better. I suggest that we look towards the source - our cultures - for some answers to questions about teaching and learning: about content as well as method in teacher education.

When I look towards my cultural source, what I find is the metaphor of *kakala*. The Tongan concept of *kakala* in my view, embodies elements of both western and Tonga notions of education and exemplifies my view of education in general and teacher education in particular.

Kakala simply means fragrant flowers. But *kakala* also has an interesting origin. For Tongans, *kakala* does not mean just fragrant flowers but also fragrant fruits, leaves and wood which have mythical or legendary origins. In the light of this interpretation, *lose* or the rose might not be considered a real *kakala* because of its more recent introduction to Tonga by Christian missionaries.

Kakala is very important in the context of my culture. Not only have they been 'socialised' into the culture but they have been 'ranked' just as people are ranked. Furthermore, when they are strung or woven together into garlands, the end products are themselves ranked. The different ways of stringing *kakala* and the patterns used have been standardised and have remained almost unchanged over the years. There exists a full and sophisticated vocabulary as well as an elaborate etiquette associated with *kakala*.

The relevance of the metaphor of *kakala* to teacher education may be reflected through the three main processes associated with it: namely *toli*, *tui* and *luva*. The first of these is *toli* or the gathering of fragrant flowers/leaves etc. This process demands not only knowledge of the materials with which to fashion the *kakala* but also skill in how to obtain these: for example, how to pick certain flowers without damaging them; how to store them so that they do not lose their fragrance and freshness, etc. The second aspect of *kakala* relates to the actual making of the garland or *tui*. With this too, special knowledge and skills are required. The method used in making a *kakala* often depends on a variety of considerations including the desired type, the occasion for which the *kakala* is to be worn as well as considerations of the maker, bearer or weaver of the *kakala*. The final process is *luva* or the giving (away) of the *kakala* by the wearer or bearer, to somebody else, for *kakala* is never retained or kept indefinitely by the wearer; it is always given away.

In Tongan traditions, especially in music, dance and poetry, *kakala* takes on an added significance - as a symbol of respect (*faka'apa'apa*) as well as 'ofa (compassion or love). The love song or *hiva kakala* is made the occasion for love; for the recognition of the beauty and power in the creator of love. For me, teaching involves gathering (*toli*), making (*tui*) and giving (*luva*) of knowledge, skills and values, motivated by *faka'apa'apa* (respect) and 'ofa (compassion).

Conclusion

As teacher educators we owe it to ourselves and our communities to once more look towards our cultures (the contexts in which the task of educating future generation is carried out), for clues to some of the questions that vex us today. We need to share this cultural knowledge with those who come to help us but who may not yet know us, so that they too would better understand the contexts in which we work and which give us sustenance

for we cannot let our silences

again keep us apart
mortgage our identity
or even sell our pride
we do not want to suffer pain
privately at the end
because we know keep inside
we've only ourselves to blame

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