Vugalei: A Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Model for Teacher Education in Fijian Schools

Aue Te Ava
The University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji

Introduction

Fijian values provide students an opportunity to engage in their culture by working together with their teachers and community to make teacher education a lifelong learning experience. This chapter investigates how Fijian cultural values could be employed in culturally responsive pedagogy in Fijian schools. Nabobo-Baba (1996, p. 23) suggests that:

Fijian cultural values are significant to teacher education. They should not abandon their cultural value in favour of the western education. They should work together to appreciate western education but to hold on to their cultural identity as a pinnacle to teacher education. It does not mean that Fijians should go back to the past but instead they should pursue stability between cultural identity and pride. It is important that Fijians must look for innovative ways of learning.

Te Ava and Page (2018) recommended that Fijians should appreciate their cultural values of the past not to stay there, but rather to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow and into the future. This chapter seeks to contribute to the dynamic by exploring ways in which culturally responsive pedagogy could be used by teacher education in Fijian secondary schools.

This chapter draws on Vugalei research as an evidence from a multi-faceted research study into culturally responsive pedagogy, which supports and affirms existing protocols of relationships, ceremony, and knowledge acquisition. This ensures that Vugalei research is about Fijian people and that the love they bring, and the support and resources given by the Fijians are appropriately reciprocated. The Vugalei research assured that no harm is done to the Fijian culture, which means that all information is carefully checked to ensure that which might be unsettling or have the potential to damage relationships is not made public. This seeks to further understanding of what indigenous itaukei education and the conversion of educational theory into practices that support positive futures for indigenous peoples. More narrowly, the research explores culturally responsive pedagogy in a specific context, that of Fiji. This chapter is particularly concerned with a conceptual investigation of culturally responsive pedagogy in Fijian schools.

Pedagogy

The term pedagogy is a Western concept, from Greek origins, that draws attention to the process of teaching (Te Ava and Page 2018). Pedagogy is a term that refers to the method of how teachers
teach, in theory and in practice. According to Nabobo-Baba (2005), pedagogy is formed by an educator’s teaching beliefs and concerns the interplay between culture and different ways of learning. This was echoed by Lingam (2015), which suggests that pedagogy refers to the study of teaching approaches and how that affects learners. Though there is no Fijian term for “pedagogy,” there are forms of teaching and learning which inform pedagogy in the Fijian teacher education curriculum (TEC). This is valiant in the teaching and learning of Fijian context. Nabobo-Baba (2006) identified five methods of teaching and learning in Fiji Vugalei culture: custom and ceremonial talk, genealogical expositions, tautau, metaphors, and persistent monologues, and humor and banter were benevolent, repetitive, and consistent on the part of the learner. Children learn by being told things explicitly and by emulating adults. This is Vugalei pedagogy at its best. On this, Vugalei elder Timo Vonosese said:

if we keep telling children their roles in the vanua, and all that is important for them to know . . . they will hear. They will follow and emulate what is required of them . . . they have to be told repetitively.

There were other forms of pedagogy which are relevant to traditional Fijian culture. These were relevant to learning with the mind, heart and soul, talanoa, sensory practice, and quasi-experimental experiences. These forms of learning function in a powerful way of conceptualizing a relationship between teaching and values in Fijian educational settings.

While the concept of pedagogy draws attention to the process of knowledge production and the intentionality of the teaching act, the importance of values is frequently overlooked. To not consider values is to risk marginalizing indigenous knowledge and its continuation, and to limit children’s learning to Western practices and curriculum (Meyers 2003). The question remains: how might we understand values in order to teach in culturally responsive ways?

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Fijian cultural values shape indigenous peoples ways of knowing and being, and represent the elements of a society which are valued for creating and sustainable community (Te Ava and Page 2018). It has been suggested that cultural values are foundational to teacher education in Vugalei Fijian communities (Nabobo-Baba 2006). Eight interconnected values in Fijian cultural values identified in teaching are vuku (wisdom), vakabauta (faith), yalomalumalumu (patience), bula levu (life), duvata (oneness or unity), kavatamata (humility), bulagalala (freedom), and loloma (love) (Nabobo-Baba 2006). Culturally responsive pedagogy will integrate such cultural values which are also enacted by the community. These cultural values are pertinent in Fijian teacher education curriculum. As Hattie (2009) suggests he reviewed over 800 meta-analyses of research into pedagogy approaches for student learning, he found that the impact of teacher education levels on student outcomes is relatively neglected compared to other papers on the quality of teaching; however, the pedagogy strategies used and the quality of teacher student relationship need to be examined since this provides an opportunity for cultural values and practices to be initiated in education classroom (Sayed 2011).

Te Ava and Page (2018) suggested that values in education are important not only for traditional links but also for contemporary considerations about the lives and cultures of peoples living in diverse societies. This proposes an expanded understanding of education which cultural traditions and multiculturalism play an important role in helping students from various backgrounds to express their thinking to other students and to become culturally engaged in each other’s learning practices (Nieto 2004). How then might culturally responsive pedagogy be conceptualized in ways that attend to values, learning, and contemporary life in Fijian schools?
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Why “Culturally Responsive Pedagogy”?  
Culturally responsive pedagogy is multidimensional in that it encompasses curriculum content, learning, context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments (Gay 2002). As such, while mindful of these dimensions, culturally responsive pedagogy is broadly defined as teaching in purposeful ways that integrate the values and culture in the community (Gay 2002). In this sense, culturally responsive pedagogy is about the individual and the collective.

New Zealand education researchers have found that culturally responsive pedagogy is vital to learning by Pasifika school children. From a Pasifika perspective, it is important to establish an understanding of culturally appropriate pedagogies. This may require defining what pedagogy means in a learning institution (Coxon et al. 2002). Some have argued that for pedagogy for Pasifika students to be correctly defined, it should reflect the cultural values of Pasifika peoples and be attuned to context (Mara 2006; Samu 2006). There is a need to develop classroom instruction that is both culturally orientated and responsive to Pasifika students (Airini et al. 2007).

It remains however that investigations into culturally responsive pedagogy are yet to be undertaken in Fiji. This chapter seeks to address this gap to enable teachers to adjust their practices to improve education outcomes through attention to the cultural attributes of the student.

In Fijian context, culturally responsive pedagogy came from three pillars, and how these pillars support five concepts to make up one whole method of learning is discussed next.

Vugalei a Fijian Model: Conceptualizing Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Fijian Schools

The metaphor of the Vugalei was proposed as a possible model for conceptualizing culturally responsive pedagogy in Fijian schools (Nabobo-Baba 2006). This would underpin teacher education (Te Ava and Page 2018), if it is used in a culturally responsive way. In this research, however, the application of the Vugalei could locate culturally responsive pedagogy within the Fijian curriculum. This pays attention to the values that are important for incorporating into Fijian teacher education pedagogy. Nabobo-Baba (2006) indicates that Vugalei comprises three key values: lagi (heavens), varuvura (the earth) and bulu (underworld or spirit world). These concepts are historically and holistically a place where all “god origins,” called kalou vu (ancestral spirits and other land, forest and water spirits), exist. In Vugalei, everything that happened has a spiritual significance. For example, Varuvura comes from the base word vura (to appear/arrive/be/emerge). Varuvura is the secular world of people, plants, water, animals, and spirits. On the other hand, Bulu is the underworld, the afterlife. This is where those that have passed on live, and where other spirits reside (Fig. 1).

Although Vugalei pointed out three values earlier in this chapter, however for the purpose of this argument, Vugalei highlighted five core principles such as lomavata (connectedness), na vanua relationships, mataqali tamata vakacava (belongings), cakacakavata (cooperative), and caulotu (physical and spiritual wellbeing), which could be aligned with Fijian health and physical education curriculum (Te Ava and Page 2018). These were explained below:
1. **Lomavata (Connectedness)**

Connectedness plays an important role in bringing together a shared passion and love for learning. Being connected has an important practical dimension when learning within a community group striving to achieve shared objectives on being connected with others. Connectedness involves both time and inspiration bringing together personal learning and development. In culturally responsive pedagogy, teacher and student connectedness is vital. This is an important part of Fijian culture. Being connected to earthly matters is forces that govern all human life. For example, ceremonial, and Christian god, other god spirits or spirit figures, people on earth and *na veika bula kece ga* (all things alive), demonstrating how Fijians in Vugalei do not separate the world and the heavens and the afterlife. All are *duavata* (oneness/unity). These cultural connectedness are part of daily discourses and are remembered, especially as special occasions like weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies. As Mereani Buikata Rasa pointed out:

O keda ta semasematevata na ka maka na. Na yavu, na vanua, na tamata, na lotu, na viwekani, na viwekani, na Kalou . . . E dredre vi keda na bula me ta wasa tu na vi ka bibi va qoi . . . We are a people who like to link up all things of value and importance. The vanua, the relationships we have, custom, God and spirituality . . . We find it hard to separate or keep as separate parts the things we consider as important. (p. 39)

Mereani Buikata Rasa similarly noted the importance of linking up all things that are valuable and important. To enable for vanua to work, we cannot separate ourselves away from *lotu* (spirituality) and God. We all need to be connected.

Being connected to Fijian culture is *duavata* (connected to oneness or unity). In teaching and learning perspective, Nabobo-Baba (2006) applauded why connectedness is important to culturally responsive pedagogy and how this is integral to students’ learning as they possess a unique respect and awareness of cultural background. Culturally responsive pedagogy encourages respect for the needs of all learners and allow every voice to be heard.

2. **Na Vanua (Relationship)**

Nabobo-Baba (2006) suggests that *Vugalei* is a form of relationship in respecting the knowledge of others. In this sense, the *Vugalei* becomes a useful metaphor for explaining, structuring, and acknowledging various relationships in the Fijian culture. The ultimate process of *Vugalei* is to blend relationships with traditional cultural values and connect *Vugalei* to outside world. Te Ava et al. (2011) relationship is a lifelong experience between the teacher and the learner. It is a reciprocal practice to which both the teacher and the learner contribute to the learning situation. Likewise, in the Fijian context, relationship initially starts in the family then grows out into the community. It is particularly depicted in teaching and learning that relationship is integral to the learning of history and genealogy (Te Ava and Page 2018). A process of relationship develops over a period of time such as spiritual matters, observation, demonstration, listening, practicing, analyzing, experimenting, and reviewing. Practical scaffolding has a significant role in this learning process (Te Ava and Rubie-Davis 2016), which is an example how culturally responsive pedagogy maintains a share value in the community.

3. **Cakacakavata (Cooperative)**

Cooperation is a valued formality to develop reciprocity abilities in teaching and learning. In the Fijian world, *duavata* (oneness/unity), *cakacakavata* (working together), *lomavata* (unity of will), and *yalovata* (unity of spirit) are important ideals. Nabobo-Baba (2006) indicates that in practice, villagers work together as a group. Everyone is expected to participate in communal work, although, of course, there were people who maintain aggression to stay on top. Every person within an extended family was expected to do their part for the group, and neglectful behavior by members of the clan was commented upon, with village discourses anticipating punishment. In schooling context, students turn up to school with the right attitude of ready to learn. They possess a unique respect for the teacher and awareness of others’ cultural background. Respect for the learner is a critical
component of effective teaching. In addition to pedagogical and subject matter knowledge, competent teaching relates well to their students and possesses dispositions such as companionship, fairness, integrity, and respect for diversity. Teaching that is respectful and learner focused will naturally involve individual accommodations. Good teachers not only learn from but learn about their students. Learning about the cultures and languages of individual students provides a foundation for implementing effective accommodations that facilitate learning. Learning about students involves listening to them, interacting with them, and modeling for them. The concepts of cooperative are intertwined with each rather than singly separated; therefore, learning experiences are viewed as similarly structured. These values of quality, accessibility, and equity could be relevant in developing a culturally responsive pedagogy to support and encourage students to learn and to respect their peers by being connected with their families and community so that the students had a better understanding of others. Culturally responsive pedagogy encourages respect for the needs of all learners and allowing every voice to be heard.

4. Mataqali Tamata Vakacava (Belongings)

In the Fijian psyche there is a sense of belongings that belongs somewhere. Everyone in Vugalei belongs to a piece of earth, some land, a place they call home. This they own with their relatives; they are guardians of it and their kawa (future generations of the same clan) will live on and from it. There is a clear distinction between a native or indigenous person and a non-indigenous person (Nabobo-Baba 2006). Notwithstanding all other groups one joins in life, the clan group is the ultimate base to which all Fijians belong. The clan disciplines and nurtures its members. It ensures that all members play their various roles and reprimands individuals if they show disrespect to the clan. All things that happen in life are understood through the clan’s nature, its history, its social structures, its mana, its strength, and its weaknesses. From a teaching and learning point view, Te Ava and Devi (2019) suggested that teacher’s perspective is based on constructing knowledge incrementally, complementing personal growth and development. This is a culturally responsive pedagogy shared vision because it represents the values of duavata (oneness and unity), duavata or lumavata (respect, unity), yalomalumalumu (patience), and kawatamata (humility). It is a reciprocal practice to which both the teacher and the learner contribute to the vitality of learning. Appreciating each other in a shared vision portrays gratitude which enables teacher and student to discuss the outcome of any knowledge gained. If Vugalei has a shared vision which sparks of godliness to every Fijian, culturally responsive pedagogy should be respected and cared for in Fijian communities.

5. Caulotu (Physical and Spiritual Wellbeing)

The physical and spiritual world brings multiple realities to the Vugalei model. Understanding the wellbeing of the physical signifies good health. From a Samoan perspective, Te Ava and Rubie-Davis (2016) suggested that physical and spiritual wellbeing was the focal point of learning to participate in various cultural practices. Understanding physical and spiritual wellbeing could help students to become self-reliant and to take responsibility for what was offered in the learning environment and to share the knowledge with others. In physical education, the physical education teacher and students need to be attached together to enable learning to be constructive and meaningful to be able to develop physical and spiritual wellbeing in students.

In Cook Islands context, Cook Islands Ministry of Education (2004) indicates that physical and spiritual wellbeing is anchored to an environment to be able to live the life in the way people choose. In the mother’s womb a child is fed from their environment by way of the pito (umbilical cord). Outside the womb, people are nourished, influenced, and developed – in other words “fed” – by the variety of environments they find themselves in, throughout their lifetime. Our pito represents our center of balance through the
physical and spiritual dimensions of wellbeing which are interconnected. We need to stay anchored and balanced – our strength of body, mind, and soul, along with the strength of the relationships we have with our spiritual, helps us to be resilient. In terms of investigating culturally responsive pedagogy curriculum in physical education for Fijian schools, the purpose of the curriculum is the philosophy of *pitoenua* representing physical and spiritual wellbeing. The concept of *pitoenua* or wellbeing recognizes the influence of environment on individuals. This is the concept that Fijian schools could integrate in their teacher education curriculum.

**Vugalei Approach in Fijian Teacher Education Curriculum**

To date, the Fijian teacher education curriculum (TEC) is undervalued. Teacher education involve the social, spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical dimensions the society had on the environment, which is constantly limited. One reason that teacher education curriculum in schools is limited is because curriculum development at the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts may not be culturally responsive to the needs of the schools. What is needed is in order to develop a culturally responsive pedagogy for teacher education curriculum, the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and motivation to make effective decisions that contribute to general wellbeing is necessary. In order to develop learning skills, students must know their emotional, health, and physical wellbeing.

*Vugalei* model could be supportive in association with the Fijian curriculum of teacher education program in secondary schools. The *Vugalei* model contextualizes the aims of the teacher education curriculum within Fijian values. As shown in Fig. 2, each aim, when interpreted through the model, becomes the nation, the people, and the language history. As a metaphor, the completion of the shared task of the *Vugalei* could also be the shared responsibility for providing teaching and learning to enable all Fijian children to reach their potential.

*Vugalei* connectedness is fundamental to Mother Nature (Nabobo-Baba 2006). One person may be making connections with the outdoor influences. Subsequently, agreement with the design to be crafted and respected by those taking part (including leaders) reveals the shared project vision. Similarly, when a student is learning in the Fijian context, the *Vugalei* model suggests teacher education should be based on values of *lomavata* (connectedness), *na vanua* relationships, *mataqali tamata vakacava* (belongings), *cakacakavata* (cooperative), and *caulotu* (physical and spiritual wellbeing).

These are reciprocal and shared vision between teachers, students, and community. The challenge is to understand how the *Vugalei* model could be used in the context of teacher education in Fiji. The next section conceptualizes its application to Fijian secondary teacher education.

**Vugalei a Culturally Responsive Model for Fijian Secondary Schools Pedagogy**

The metaphor of *Vugalei* has been suggested as a “holistic” conceptualization framework for teacher education. It conveys an idea of cultural responsiveness and pedagogy in response to the following question: what constitutes culturally responsive pedagogy for Fijian schooling and teacher education?

The *Vugalei* model is organized in various forms highlighted in distinct values, as illustrated in Fig. 2. These Fijian core values were *lomavata* (connectedness), *na vanua* relationships, *mataqali tamata vakacava* (belongings), *cakacakavata* (cooperative), and *caulotu* (physical and spiritual wellbeing).

**Discussion**

*Vugalei* model sits at the pinnacle of *lai* (heavens), *varuvuru* (earth), and *bulu* (afterlife). Also, identified are five pillars: *lomavata* (connectedness), *na vanua* relationships, *mataqali tamata vakacava* (belongings),
cakacakavata (cooperative), and caulotu (physical and spiritual wellbeing), which are central to Fijian culture. There is positivity of values, which Vugalei highlighted in this study. These core values were pertinent to the educational development of culturally responsive teacher education curriculum in Fiji. Vugalei believed that incorporation of the pillars within teacher education policy and practices would benefit and revive some of the cultural knowledge and values that have been lost in Fiji.

The influence of Vugalei model perhaps would spark an interest of students’ learning and culture in teacher education. As Macpherson (2001) recommended the values could also cultivate a sense of identity within culture, school, and community. Thus, Macpherson suggests that promoting Vugalei in the schools would create a strong link in the community. This could help learners develop their self-collective and cultural identity within an environment of pedagogical excellence (Dei 2008). This could also help students gain trust in their peers and eventually achieve their educational goals. The core values identified in the current study could be used to develop a teacher education program that would be culturally responsive to students’ needs in Fiji.

Vugalei could be useful for culturally responsive pedagogy that would provide a meaningful philosophy and framework for teacher education. As such, the Vugalei model relates to cultural inclusivity and provides for ownership of the educational process, whether it is teaching or research or some other educational activity. This would represent students and other community groups come together to learn and appreciate significant means of “nourishing” and accommodating culturally responsive pedagogy if such practice is to remain vital.

**Conclusion**

Vugalei is a conceptualization model seeking to support culturally responsive teaching practices in Fijian culture. The intention is to enable the fulfillment of the curriculum statement through being attentive to the social and cultural needs of Fijian students. This model is intended to assist teachers to approach the dual task of providing time and space for students to be socially and culturally engaged, while also ensuring learning activities enhance students’ academic achievement. Vugalei is collaborative, so too does teacher education in schools involve many people (PE teachers, principals, cultural experts, and government officials from the Fijian Ministry of Education, community elders, language teachers, advisers, academics, policy makers, communities, parents, and students). It is suggested that teacher
education becomes more than qualifications alone. Rather, the curriculum is how our children come to understand the value and essence of culturally responsive pedagogy. Culturally responsive pedagogy, when viewed as values based and context oriented, suggests our work in teacher education supports the whole person (socially, culturally, emotionally, and spiritually). In context, culturally responsive pedagogy is a culturally innovative, creative, and dynamic way of tapping into the learning potential of Fijian students in teacher education. This chapter has sought to recast the familiar account of Vugalei in innovative ways as it relates to the core principles of lomavata (connectedness), na vanua relationships, mataqali tamata vakacava (belongings), cakacakavata (cooperative), and caulotu (physical and spiritual wellbeing). It remains, however, that more is needed to be known how to enable teachers to make meaning of the curriculum through culturally responsive pedagogy and how this could be beneficial in Fijian secondary schools.

References


