Postgraduate research in Pacific education: Interpretivism and other trends

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Abstract   This article examines research by postgraduate students in education at the University of the South Pacific (USP) between 1968 and 2009. These experienced educators, who later return to their original education sector to influence policy and practice in some way, are producing new knowledge intimately connected to Pacific education systems. The article identifies broad trends in supervision, growth in completed degrees, research area, and national focus, and makes some comparisons with similar research in New Zealand. The article also focuses on how students position their research theoretically, using Lather's research paradigm typology. The analysis indicates that many of these projects are positioned within an interpretivist paradigm, a few within positivist and emancipationist paradigms, and none at all within deconstructivist paradigms. The authors suggest that a Pacific education system underpinned by socially-critical theoretical perspectives, particularly deconstructive ones, can better respond to the twin challenges of creating universal and equitable access to education and arresting the loss of language, culture, identity, and life skills via rapid globalization.

Keywords   Interpretivism · Access to education · Equity · Cultural maintenance · Cultural identity · Pacific education · Research paradigms · Postgraduate education · Theoretical perspectives

The University of the South Pacific (USP), established in 1968, is the leading Pacific regional university, and serves students from 12 nation-states. The main campus and the

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School of Education are in Suva, Fiji. To begin this study, we identified 42 education-related postgraduate research theses produced at USP between 1968 and 2009, based on an examination of those shelved in the institution's library at the time of the study. All but one of these theses were completed within what is currently known as the School of Education. The only exception, a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in journalism education (Robie 2003), was completed in what is now called the School of Language, Arts, and Media. Of the 42 theses, four are for Ph.D.s and 38 for Master of Arts degrees (M.A.s).

An analysis of this body of research is significant for several reasons. Postgraduate students in Pacific education at USP are generally experienced mid-career educationalists returning to study after many years working in the education sectors of their own countries. They bring to their postgraduate research an intimate knowledge of the educational, social, economic, and cultural contexts in their home countries. After completing their degrees, they often return to their previous employment situations in higher level positions where they can share their increased expertise across schools and school systems. The return to work represents a conduit for new knowledge and more developed theoretical perspectives on Pacific education issues. Postgraduate research certainly has its concrete outcomes in the ubiquitous bound thesis but it is in the individual researchers returning to the workplace that the greatest potential for change is found (Mullins and Kiley 2002).

What then are the educational ideas, particularly at the paradigmatic level, flowing into Pacific education communities after educators complete their research? Paradigmatic thinking is the worldview that students possess or adopt to guide their research. Guba and Lincoln (1998) maintain that research paradigm thinking emerges out of researchers' beliefs about "the nature of the world, [their] place in it and the range of possible relationships" (p. 107) in that world. These matters of faith (Guba and Lincoln 1998) form the basis of research decisions regarding the questions that can be legitimately asked and the methodologies that can be mobilized to generate new knowledge, in this case about Pacific education in individual countries across the region. While students may bring a set of beliefs about education to their postgraduate research, the academic supervision relationship challenges and changes these beliefs in complex ways (Manathunga 2009).

Basic research trends

Postgraduate research in education has grown significantly since the university's inception in 1968. In the decade from 1970 to 1979 only one thesis was produced, compared to five in the 1980s and 11 in the 1990s; 25 were completed between 2000 and 2009. Factors contributing to this growth include the close linkages between educational development in Pacific Island states and national development plans in the post-independence period (Puamau 2005b). In most cases, students are sponsored to undertake postgraduate research according to national development needs. Quite often, third-party postgraduate study sponsorship from Australia, New Zealand, and other countries is also linked to these same development agendas.

Our analysis of the research titles, abstracts, acknowledgement pages, contents, and reference lists of these theses indicates that over 75 % of theses focus on Fijian educational issues. Further investigation is needed to verify this, but it is probable that most, if not all, were completed by Fijian students who have returned to work in some capacity within the

returned to work in the Fijian education sector. Other Pacific countries and their education sectors have been the focus of very little research. For example, Samoa and the Solomon Islands are each represented in 5 % of the total output, and Kiribati, the Cook Islands, Vanuatu, and Tonga are each the focus of just one piece of research. Other countries among the USP member countries that contribute financially to its operations are not represented at all in educational research, for example, Nauru, Tuvalu, Tokelau, and the recently affiliated Marshall Islands.

These skewed trends in education research reflect the low-level but long-running tensions between Fiji, the host nation, and the other 11 national stakeholders in the university (see Crocombe 2001). The Fijian bias in output reflects the greater stake that Fiji has in USP: economically in terms of its financial contributions, physically in terms of the main campus' location in Fiji's capital, and numerically in terms of Fiji's larger share of the total enrolment. Despite its political fragility, Fiji has a more buoyant economy compared to other Pacific nations and thus has the capacity both to support more students in postgraduate study and to re-absorb graduates at higher salary levels after they complete degrees. In recent years a number of affirmative action plans to address the imbalance between indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian participation in tertiary study (MOE 2000) have added to the number of Fijians who complete postgraduate programmes.

The research foci in the 42 theses examined range across the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors and target diverse issues such as teacher training, policy, achievement, special education, aid, and truancy. Some of the research is concentrated in the areas of literacy, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and human resource planning. We offer tentative reasons for this, only to suggest areas for further investigation. The higher number of literacy studies is consistent with trends in postgraduate research in New Zealand. However, USP literacy research is more focussed on the English language whereas New Zealand literacy research focuses on bilingualism and the maintenance of Pacific vernaculars (Burnett 2011). This trend represents the different language ecologies of the two different Pacific contexts. In New Zealand, Pacific vernacular research emerges out of diasporic concerns about loss of culture and identity (McCaffery and McFall-McCaffery 2010). In the Pacific region, however, the emphasis on English language research is perhaps necessitated by increased concern over greater Pacific participation in the global marketplace. The focus on TVET may be a legacy of the community schooling movement in the early Pacific post-independence period when it was recognized that colonial systems of schooling that focus on academic knowledge were not relevant in developing contexts (see, for example, Hindson 1985). A number of these vocational education initiatives continue in the region in one form or another. The concentration of education research in human resource planning may be attributable to supervisory specialization: all the examples over a 10-year period were supervised by the same academic staff member. The human resource focus is also consistent with the influence of the national development agendas mentioned previously.

Significant changes can be seen in postgraduate supervision trends. In the early decades, thesis acknowledgement pages indicate that many supervisors were European expatriates on short-term contracts at USP (see, for example, Bennett 1974, p. vii). The supervisory pool during this time appeared diverse, with individual academics responsible for supervising only one or two postgraduate theses. From the 1990s, however, the supervisory pool narrowed, and is now made up of long-term Pacific academics, of whom four have

Pacific postgraduate research to 2008. At the University of Auckland, up to that time, 50 % of supervision of Pacific postgraduate research in education was undertaken by only two academic staff members (Burnett 2011). Further investigation and debate are required to ascertain the advantages of these arrangements. Postgraduate students conducting research in an environment where research experience is concentrated in Pacific communities and where the community is familiar with Pacific education issues might logically have an advantage over students conducting research outside of these discourses. However, Pacific experience and familiarity may not necessarily be more beneficial to the research outcomes. Singh's (2005) model of international students studying in the inter-cultural contact zone for global citizenship indicates that local Pacific educational challenges may be more advantageously researched and supervised outside of designated Pacific research frameworks and practices.

Equity, access, and cultural maintenance

The Pacific Education Development Framework (PEDF) was published in 2009 by the Forum Education Ministers who have met annually since 2001 as an adjunct to the Pacific Forum meeting, where heads of government discuss socio-economic issues facing the Pacific region. The framework makes recommendations in the Pacific region across all education sectors. Of particular significance for this analysis are the educational discourses inherent in the strategic goals to achieve universal access and equity and the challenge to stem the loss of culture, identity, and values as a result of globalization (Forum Education Ministers 2009)—representing discourses of equity and culture respectively. These discourses, or ways of framing educational purpose, are indicative of wider movements and trends in the way education is conducted in the Pacific region. Discourse here is used in its poststructural sense, that is, as language that socially constructs the worlds (see, for example, MacLure 2003) of Pacific education in specific ways for specific purposes.

The desire for greater access to and equity in education has often been subservient to what could be considered competing desires to re-indigenize the way schooling is offered in the Pacific. The PEDF's statements on access and equity are rare policy statements compared to those of research advocacy groups such as the Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative (RPEI) which advocates a return to unique Pacific epistemologies and paradigms (Maka et al. 2006; Quanchi 2004; Thaman 2000, 2003). Similarly, those in RPEI call for pedagogies of Pacific cultural difference (Puamau 2002, 2005a; Teaero 2002; Thaman 2002), based on unique Pacific ways of knowing to better meet the needs of learners and address the unique challenges that Pacific peoples face. Advocacy for indigenous Pacific epistemologies can also be found in New Zealand (Airini and Milâ-Schaaf 2008; Anae 2007; Tongati'o 2009). The call to reclaim research agendas is understandably a political Pacific response to current and historically dominant European beliefs, purposes, and practices concerning research and uneven flows of research benefits to Indigenous people generally (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999). Similarly, the culturalist discourse in Pacific schooling debates emerges from experiences of globalization and feelings about the loss of cultural autonomy as well as in response to a range of political, economic, and environmental fragilities in the region.

We see several reasons why culturalist discourse tends to silence discourses of access

democratic ideals and at odds with Pacific beliefs about adult-child relationships and gendered roles (Jalal 2006; Qarase 2004). Second, since right after independence, Pacific social analysts have tended to reject Marxist critiques for similar reasons (Burnett 2009; Hau'ofa 1993; Petaia 1980). In Pacific societies, social class is simply not emphasized as a significant axis of difference, as much as it is in socially transformative initiatives in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and others around the Pacific rim. As a result initiatives promoting greater equity and access sit uneasily alongside Pacific social systems, which tend to be gerontocratic and paternal. This phenomenon has also been offered as a reason why socially critical forms of literacy (see, for example, Luke 2000) and pedagogy (see, for example, Giroux 1997) are not taken up in Pacific primary education curricula (Burnett 2009). As we will show, postgraduate research in Pacific education, where it is socially transformative, reflects similar tensions between these two main educational desires: for access and equity on the one hand, and for cultural maintenance as expressed in the PEDF, on the other.

Paradigm positioning and transformative potential

At the paradigmatic level, Lather's (2006) framework for theorizing research—as examples of either *positivism, interpretivism, emancipationism,* or *deconstructivism*—is a useful tool for analysing research in a context like USP. The framework provides a much more nuanced means of thinking about research fundamentals beyond what Lather argues are "tired binaries of a monolithic West and some innocent indigenous culture" (p. 42). Lather is certainly sceptical of Eurocentric research traditions but at the same time argues that research theory and practice need to move beyond simple cultural essentialisms that link authority to research with specific cultures and identities. We might add that the framework, briefly described below, moves research thinking beyond other binaries including the qualitative/quantitative methodologism that dominates social inquiry, particularly postgraduate research training, which is often structured along these lines.

Positivism and knowing

Educational research conducted within a positivist paradigm primarily asks what is true and what can be known. It most often involves statistical approaches to collecting data which are used to make truth statements about children, their learning, teaching approaches, assessment, and so on. Positivist research assumes that knowledge can be attained through the rigorous application of empirical data-collecting methods. It makes little to no concession to the wider Pacific social and historical context surrounding the phenomena being researched, nor to the uneven power relations between subjects, either Pacific or non-Pacific. In contrast, Lather's other three paradigms do concede to that context and those relations, to varying degrees.

Interpretivism and understanding

Interpretivist research asks what can be understood about the social world. It makes some concession to multiple realities, that is, to a Pacific sociality based on unique epistemol-

through colonization and what Thaman (2002) calls its "modern manifestation" (p. 234): globalization. Ethnography and phenomenology are the methodological means for highlighting this difference; however, this difference is often seen only along culturalist, ethnicist, or nationalist lines. Unlike emancipationist research, discussed below, this approach makes little allowance for the uneven distribution of privilege that results from historical and contemporary differences within colonial and Pacific systems of education.

Emancipationism and changing

Emancipationist research asks what is just and what can be done to transform society. Subjectivity becomes politicized once research moves from interpretivism to emancipationism. Such research is concerned with critical social theory and issues of power, equity, social justice, and change. Looking at Pacific education research, we argue that where such research is conducted, it tends to be largely in critiques of the uneven power relationships inherent in the colonial systems of education imposed on the region and the resultant benefits for non-Pacific people and the erasure of Pacific knowledge and teaching systems. However, little of the emancipationist research directs the critical gaze within Pacific education systems.

Deconstructionism and critiquing

Deconstructionist research asks how truths are constructed and analyses or deconstructs meta-narratives or grand stories that purport to explain social conditions. Deconstructionism draws on post-foundational ideas, that is, postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism (Ninnes and Burnett 2004). In Pacific education research it involves questioning the taken-for-granted truths about schooling, knowledge, and so on. It is research that is concerned with disrupting simple binaries like dominance and oppression, and the Pacific and the West, and it attributes a degree of agency to Pacific subjectivities. Deconstructive educational research in the Pacific would question not only Western and colonial education practices and beliefs but also Pacific educational practices and the culturalism that underpins many of the recent debates and initiatives that are rethinking Pacific education.

Positioning postgraduate education research

However, some important cautions apply to conceptualising research within such a framework. The first concerns what Lather (2006) terms a necessary resistance to categorizing research too rigidly. Her framework certainly provides a useful vehicle for thinking about research but it must not be used reductively. Those who author, supervise, and consume research need to find a careful balance between a "longing for" and a "wariness of" a paradigmatic home (Lather 2006, p. 40). The second caution is to resist a teleological approach to thinking about the paradigm types. As we emphasize later, knowledge production is certainly becoming more politicized from the positivist end of the spectrum through to the deconstructivist end, particularly as research moves from interpretivism to emancipationism. However, movement across the spectrum is not a developmental progression in terms of sophistication, or the capacity to explain, or the

To determine the broad paradigm positioning of each research project with a reasonable level of accuracy, we undertook a simple discourse analysis of the statements of research intent in the abstracts of each thesis included in the study, using Lather's (2006) categories of positivist, interpretivist, emancipationist, and deconstructionist as a classification tool. Based on similar research into the theoretical perspectives used in the field of comparative education (Ninnes and Burnett 2004), we supported the assertions about research intent by examining the key theorists included in the thesis reference lists. Where the research intentions did not match well with the theorists cited, we took a more nuanced approach, developing in-between categories of paradigm positioning. For example, a thesis project might appear positivistic based on the intent stated in the abstract but the author might have listed some references to interpretivist theorists to support his or her arguments. Similarly, in some cases we found the boundaries were blurred between interpretivist and emancipationist projects. This slippage is consistent with Lather's (2006) caution about both yearning for and resisting a paradigmatic home, and does not detract from the goal of identifying broad trends in the ways that these students are researching their Pacific education worlds and then returning to them after completing their studies.

Interpretivism and seeking to understand

The overall results of our analysis, summarized in Table 1, suggest that the majority of these theses contain elements of interpretivist research; that is, their main goal is to understand a specific pedagogical or educational problem, most often from the relativist perspective of participants directly involved in that problem. Tagicakiverata's (2003) investigation of truancy in Fiji provides an example. This researcher, through his own experience as a teacher, identified a pressing problem: truancy among indigenous male students in a Fijian secondary school. To identify the factors leading to these students' higher truancy rates, he interviewed teachers and other stakeholders. His findings suggest the students' families do not provide sufficient support in terms of paying school fees, providing uniforms and other school resources, and generally encouraging the boys to be disciplined about their study and their futures. The researcher takes the participants' views at face value and makes no attempt to generalize the results to a wider population. He does not investigate the wider social context that might lead parents to neglect their children's education, which might be done by a researcher using a more critical or deconstructivist approach to the same educational problem. The thesis reference list includes a range of studies using a similarly interpretive approach to youth at risk in contexts outside of Fiji, and several research methodology texts used to support the study's interpretive design.

Paradigm positioning	Number of theses
Positivist	4
Positivist/interpretivist	5
Interpretivist	22
Interpretivist/emancipationist	10
Emancipationist	1

Table 1 Postgraduate research by broad paradigm position, USP, 1968–2009

Of the 22 projects we categorized as interpretivist and the further 15 that have interpretivist elements, most contained core research aims along similar lines. For example, these researchers wrote that they aimed to "provide an historical overview" (Kapavai 2006), "attempt to understand" (Aveau 2003), "investigate the effects" (Lee-Hang 2002), "examine the effectiveness" (Maebuta 2003), or "understand parental participation" (Nandlal 2002). Others aimed "to describe and document…views and attitudes" (Ha'amori 2003), to describe "what actually happens" (Sameer 2005), or to offer "a descriptive account" (Munshi 1987). A number of projects also made their interpretivist framework explicit, for example, using phrases like "adopting a phenomenological perspective" (Aveau 2003), "this is an ethnographic study" (Likuseniuwa 1999), and "guided by a phenomenological and qualitative case study" (Onwubolu 2004). All of these projects used semi-structured interviews and observations as their main methods for collecting data. Very few of these students referred to socially critical theorists to help with their analyses. Instead they referred to a range of similar studies in other Pacific or non-Pacific contexts as well as research methodology texts to support the qualitative framework they employed, citing, for example, Wiersma (1986), Burgess (1985), Cohen and Manion (1980), Denzin (1978), Burns (1990), Bogdan and Biklen (1982), or one of the many later editions of these texts.

Far fewer of the research projects were undertaken within an emancipationist tradition. Robie's (2003) Ph.D. study of journalism education is the only project that could be classified as such. Robie investigates links between the way journalism is taught and the kinds of journalistic outcomes that result when graduates are working within media organizations in the Pacific region. Explicit goals for his research include "analysis [of] political economic frameworks" from a "critical political economic perspective" with "outcomes ask[ing] serious questions about the autonomy of journalists in South Pacific democracy" (Robie 2003, p. x), and he cites critical theorists including Habermas (1989) and Hall (1982). However, it must be noted that this research was not completed within the School of Education at USP, nor did academic staff from that department have any input into it.

A further ten projects contain emancipationist elements, marked largely by the identifiably critical theorists used in the analysis of data. For example, Puamau (1991) critiques the alliance government's affirmative action policy in Fiji, and Koya-Vaka'uta (2002) uses Freire (1972) to explore the development of cultural identity in Fijian youth. Nabobo-Baba (1996) uses Apple (1979, 1983), Freire (1972), and Fanon (1967) to critique development theory in Fijian higher education. Suluma (2005) uses Ball (1992) to critique special education policy in Fiji and Thaman (1988), in her Ph.D. study, uses Apple (1979, 1983), Freire (1972) and Giroux (1983), among others, to identify and investigate Tongan epistemologies. Positivist research examples are also fairly scarce, totalling only four before 1994 with a further five containing positivist elements, all undertaken before 1997. Similar to Pacific postgraduate research undertaken in New Zealand, these projects are largely concerned with measuring competence and making comparisons in aspects of literacy and language learning (see, for example, Fujioka-Kern 1994; Manoa 1995) and achievement more generally (see, for example, Kishor 1981; Bennett 1974).

Conclusion

a total of 37 studies out of a total of 42. This suggests a large flow of interpretive ideas and understandings back into Pacific regional education communities as a result of that research. This interpretivist flow of educational thought, with the emphasis on understanding educational phenomena, is not readily conducive to educational and social transformation. Why does the postgraduate research experience stress interpretivism so strongly? This question demands further investigation in several areas. For example, what is USP's institutional capacity and what areas of expertise does it make available for postgraduate supervision? What kinds of pedagogical relationships develop between supervisor and student? And what are the general historical trajectories of knowledge production and research emphases in Pacific contexts and the lingering discourses of colonialism that shape contemporary schooling as well as the research that informs that schooling?

Pacific education has experienced only a slight tendency toward emancipatory thinking, beginning with Thaman's (1988) Ph.D. study of Tongan epistemology. It is research, or rather the educational worldview of key individuals positioned within such frameworks, that enables the greater possibility of social transformation in Pacific communities marked by a range of climatic, political, and social challenges. Thaman clearly describes, and exemplifies, the transformative potential of such research, emphasizing that students like her who return to work in the educational sector have the capacity to bring about change. Over more than 20 years, she has engaged extensively in writing, teaching, and educational consultancy and advisory work with international bodies such as UNESCO and regional initiatives such as the RPEI. The socially critical perspective emerging from Thaman's higher degree research, which contests lingering colonial discourse in Pacific education, along with her advocacy for Pacific epistemologies, is widely known by Pacific educators and educational researchers around the Pacific rim. Approximately 50 % of education theses completed at USP after 1990, regardless of their paradigmatic positioning, cite Thaman. As mentioned earlier, these ideas have influenced the policy making of the Pacific Forum Education Ministers and the publication of the PEDF (2009–2015).

Without diminishing the importance of Thaman's work, however, it is important to issue a caution. Emancipatory-oriented research such as Thaman's, where it does exist, tends only to analyse cultural difference. As previously mentioned, this trend has emerged in response to perceptions of loss and erasure via "exogenous" education and knowledge systems (Teaero 2007). There is increasing advocacy for Indigenous Pacific epistemologies in both education and research; indeed, one rarely hears arguments for equity and access in Pacific education beyond some policy statements such as the PEDF. A body of criticism has emerged, informed by poststructuralist, postcolonial, and critical anthropological theories, that questions some of the culturalist assumptions of re-indigenizing Pacific education and the research that informs it (see, for example, Burnett 2007; Ninnes 1998). These are the very theoretical perspectives that make up Lather's (2006) deconstructivist research paradigm, which have yet to influence postgraduate research in education at USP and only minimally in Pacific higher degree education research in New Zealand. For example, the index by McFall-McCaffery and Combs (2009) includes only one deconstructivist study in Pacific education and four others with deconstructivist elements out of a total of 170, up to 2008 (Burnett 2011).

This criticism suggests that emancipatory theorizing, such as Thaman's, tends toward the anti-colonial rather than the postcolonial. Anti-colonial approaches to educational

groups such as 'the Pacific' or at best a Pacific ethnicity, for example Fijian, as a result of educational practice.

Alternatively, postcolonial approaches to educational research have greater explanatory potential to account for increasingly complex conditions in Pacific societies, where Rey Chow (1993) maintains that people simply refuse to stay in their frames. Such research makes a concession to Pacific peoples' agency; for example it sees them as appropriating imagined non-Pacific knowledge and pedagogies rather than having their minds colonized by them, as many Pacific educators would argue (see Puamau 2005a for one example). Postcolonial approaches to educational research concede to creative cultural discontinuity and hybridity rather than seeking to "recover an alternative set of cultural origins not contaminated by the colonizing experience" (Hickling-Hudson 1998). Martin Nakata's (2001) advocacy for an Indigenous Australian embrace of the English language through formal schooling serves as an example of a postcolonial education framework. Nakata strongly critiques calls to re-insert indigenous vernaculars into formal schooling, suggesting instead that English is needed to provide a means of understanding how it is that European Australia has been and continues to constitute indigenity. Nakata sees this competence as a prerequisite for Indigenous Australian self-determination rather than a liberal desire to access social mobility based on English language competence or, as anticolonial critics would argue, a case of colonized minds.

Pacific education may better contribute solutions to the region's pressing environmental, political, and economic problems through the use of emancipatory and deconstructive approaches to research, rather than interpretivist and positivist ones. It is the flow of these socially critical perspectives back into Pacific regional communities, and the creation of links between education and these Pacific problems, that has the most transformative potential. However, potential for change is more likely where these approaches to education are directed beyond the often reductive colonial binary of Pacific and non-Pacific, and extended to include processes of social marginalization at multiple levels, including those within Pacific communities.

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