Pacific Postgraduate Research in Education Done at the University of the South Pacific:

Another Site For Rethinking Pacific Education

Greg Burnett and Govinda Ishwar Lingam

Abstract

Most Pacific postgraduate students in education are experienced mid to late career teachers and administrators who know their education communities intimately and, after study, return to contribute, often in more influential ways. This paper examines the flow of new educational thinking back into Pacific communities over several decades to the present as a result of postgraduate research done by students at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Fiji. Some comparison with Pacific students completing MAs and PhDs in New Zealand's universities are also made. The paper reports on analyses of the USP library's thesis collection. Basic trends such as what aspects of education are being researched and where in the region new thinking about Pacific education is going are identified. More importantly, however, the paper identifies trends in how Pacific education is being theorised by returning educators; that is, Guba & Lincoln's (1998) "matters of faith" about how the Pacific world should be. It is educational research thinking at this fundamental level that impacts most on Pacific education systems once postgraduate students return to their respective workplaces.

Introduction

Postgraduate research in education done by Pacific students has for several decades been a significant site for re-thinking education in the Pacific region. Education postgraduate students are generally experienced mid-career educationalists bringing to their research intimate knowledge of their home countries' education, social, economic, and cultural contexts. On completion of their research, their return to their education sectors represents a conduit for new knowledge, more developed theoretical perspectives on Pacific education issues, and potential for change (Mullins & Kiley, 2002). What then are the educational ideas at the *paradigmatic* level flowing into education communities after research completion? Paradigmatic thinking is the worldview that students possess or adopt to guide their research and emerges from researchers' beliefs about "the nature of the world, [their] place in it and the range of possible relationships" (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p.107) in that world. Students'

beliefs concerning education are challenged and changed in complex ways by the academic supervision relationship (Manathunga, 2009). Nevertheless, these "matters of faith" (Guba & Lincoln, 1998) form the basis of research questions that can be legitimately asked and the methodologies mobilised to generate new knowledge.

Basic Research Trends

Forty two education-related postgraduate research theses (four PhDs & 38 MAs) produced at the University of the South Pacific (USP) between its establishment in 1968 and 2009were found in USP's library at the time of the study. Most have been completed within what is currently known as the School of Education, with one completed in the School of Language, Arts and Media (Robie, 2003). Growth in postgraduate education research has been considerable since 1968: from 1970 to 1979 only one thesis was produced; from 1980 to 1989 there were five, from 1990 to 1999 there were 11, and from 2000 to 2009 at least 25.

Analysis of thesis titles, abstracts, acknowledgements, contents pages, and references indicates that over 75 percent of research focuses on Fijian education, and most appear to have been completed by Fijian students who have returned to work in some capacity within the Fijian education sector. The Fijian research bias possibly reflects the greater stake Fiji has in USP: economically, in terms of financial contribution; physically, in terms of location in Fiji's capital; and numerically, in terms of the largest enrolment (Crocombe, 2001). Research focus ranges across primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors and targets diverse issues with some concentrations in literacy, vocational education, and human resource planning.

Changes in postgraduate supervision trends are significant. In the early decades many supervisors were expatriates on short term contracts at USP (see Bennett, 1974, p. vii) and the supervisory pool appeared diverse, with supervisors responsible for only one or two postgraduate supervisions. From the 1990s however, the supervisory pool narrowed, comprising long term Pacific academics, four of whom have supervised more than 50percent of the overall total. While postgraduate students researching in an environment familiar with Pacific education issues might logically have an advantage over students who are supervised outside of these discourses, this may not necessarily be more beneficial in terms of outcomes. Based on Singh's (2005) model of international students studying in the *inter-cultural contact zone* for *global citizenship* local Pacific educational challenges may be more advantageously researched and supervised outside of designated Pacific research frameworks.

Paradigm positioning and transformative potential

At the paradigmatic level, Lather's (2006) four part framework for theorising research – positivism, interpretivism, emancipationism, and deconstructivism– is a useful tool for analysing research in a Pacific context. The framework provides a nuanced means

of thinking about research fundamentals beyond what Lather argues are "tired binaries of a monolithic West and some innocent indigenous culture" (Lather, 2006, p.42). Lather is 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 nations, cultures, and identities. It might also be added 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.

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 analyses of collected data which are used to make truth statements about children, their learning, teaching approaches, assessment and so on. Positivist research assumes knowledge is attainable through the rigorous application of empirical data collecting methods. There is little concession made to the wider Pacific social and historical context within which the phenomena being researched is set, nor the uneven power relations between subjects, either Pacific or non-Pacific, to which the other paradigms concede in varying degrees.

Interpretivism And Understanding

Interpretivist research asks what can be understood about the social world. There is a concession to multiple realities; that is, a Pacific sociality based on unique epistemologies, ways of knowing, pedagogy, and often a non-Pacific sociality based on oppositional characteristics. Research within this paradigm makes cultural difference its starting point and seeks to create a space whereby that which has been lost through colonisation and its "modern manifestation", globalisation (Thaman, 2002, p. 234), might be re-asserted. Ethnography and phenomenology are the methodological means toward highlighting difference; however, it is difference often along culturalist, ethnicist, or nationalist lines only. Unlike emancipationist research, discussed below, there is little concession to an uneven distribution of privilege as a result of historical and contemporary differences *within* colonial and Pacific systems of education.

Emancipationism And Transforming

Emancipationist research asks what is just and what can be done to transform. Subjectivity becomes politicised once research moves from interpretivism to emancipationism. Such research is concerned with critical social theory, power, equity, and social justice. This article argues that where this research is manifest in postgraduate education research, it is in critiques of the uneven power relationships inherent in 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. There

is, however, little emancipationist research that casts a critical gaze *within* Pac education systems.

Deconstructionism and critiquing

Deconstructionist research draws on post-foundational ideas (Ninnes & Burr 2004) to ask how truths are constructed and analyses or deconstructs meta-narrat that purport to explain social conditions. In Pacific education research it invo questioning the taken-for-granted truths about schooling, knowledge, and so on is research that is concerned with disrupting the simple binaries of dominance oppression, Pacific and the West, and attributes a degree of agency to Pacific s jectivities. Deconstructive educational research in the Pacific would question only Western and colonial education practices and beliefs but also Pacific educatic practices and the culturalism that underpins many of the recent rethinking Pac education debates and initiatives.

There are some important cautions, however, in considering research within s a framework. The first concerns a necessary resistance to categorising research rigidly. The framework certainly provides a useful means of thinking about rese; but it must not be used reductively. Those who author, supervise, and const research need to find a careful balance between a "longing for" and a "wariness o paradigmatic home (Lather, 2006, p. 40). The second concerns resisting a teleo ical approach to thinking about the paradigm types. Movement across the spect: is not a developmental progression in terms of sophistication, capacity to explair rigour and validity. As mentioned before, the categories represent instead Gul Lincoln's (1998) matters of faith about how the world of research and, indeed, Pa education is generally perceived.

To determine the paradigm positioning of each research project with a reason: level of accuracy, a simple discourse analysis of the research intent statements in th abstracts was undertaken according to Lather's (2006) four part model. Based similar research into theoretical perspectives used in comparative education (Nir & Burnett, 2004), assertions about research intent were also supported by key th rists identified in thesis reference lists. Where research intentions did not ma well with the theorists cited a more nuanced approach was taken with the us in-between categories of paradigm positioning. It was possible for a project to ap; positivistic in its intent stated in the abstract but to have listed some reference interpretivist theoristsfor support. Similarly, the boundaries were sometimes blu between interpretivist and emancipationist projects. This slippage is consistent v Lather's (2006) cautions (above) and does not detract from the intention to ider

Interpretivism and seeking to understand

The overall results indicated in Table 1 suggest that 37 of the 42 theses examined 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 involved in that problem.

Table 1: Postgraduate research by broad paradigm position – USP (1968-2009)

Paradigm positioning	Number of theses
Positivist	4
Positivist/interpretivist	5
Interpretivist	22
Interpretivist/emancipationist	10
Emancipationist	1
Emancipationist/deconstructivist	0
Deconstructivist	0

Of the 37 projects containing interpretivist elements, most contained research aims such as to "provide an historical overview" (Kapavai, 2006); "to attempt to understand" (Aveau, 2003); "to investigate the effects" (Lee-Hang, 2002); or "to examine the effectiveness" (Maebuta, 2003). Some projects also made their interpretivist framework explicit; for example, "adopting a phenomenological perspective" (Aveau, 2003) and "this is an ethnographic study" (Likuseniuwa, 1999). In all of these projects semi-structured interviews and observations were the main data collecting methods. Common to all of these projects is an almost complete lack of socially critical theorists used to help with the analyses. Instead they employ a range of similar studies in other Pacific or non-Pacific contexts as well as research methodology texts such as Wiersma (1986), Burgess (1985), Cohen & Manion (1980), Denzin (1978), Burns (1990), Bogdan & Biklen (1982) – or later editions of these texts– to support the qualitative framework employed.

Robie's (2003) journalism PhD, investigating links between the way journalism is taught and the journalistic outcomes that result when graduates are working within media organisations in the Pacific region, is the only project that could be classified as being undertaken within an emancipationist paradigm. Explicit goals of the 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 a South Pacific democracy" (Robie, 2003, p. x). Critical theorists employed include Habermas (1989) and Hall (1982). A further 10 projects

contain emancipationist elements, marked by the identifiably critical theorists us
in the analysis of data. These include: Koya-Vaka'uta's (2002) use of Freire (197
to explore cultural identity in Fijian youth; Nabobo's (1996) use of Apple (197
1983), Freire (1972), and Fanon (1967) to critique development theory in Fiji
higher education; Suluma's (2005) use of Ball (1992) to critique Fijian special edu
tion policy; and Thaman's (1988) PhD research using Apple (1979, 1983), Fre
(1972) and Giroux (1983) to investigate Tongan epistemologies. Positivist resear
examples are also few in number – four before 1994, with a further five containi
positivist elements before 1997. These projects are largely concerned with measuri
competence and making comparisons in aspects of literacy education (see Fujiol
Kern, 1994) and achievement (see Kishor, 1981).

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that 22 examples of interpretivist postgraduate educati
research and a further 15 containing interpretivist elements were completed at U
up until 2009. From a total of 42 postgraduate research projects this suggests a lai
flow of *interpretive* ideas and understandings back into Pacific regional education co
munities as a result of that research. Reasons for interpretivism in the postgradu:
research experience demand further investigation in areas such as: USP's institutioi
capacity and the areas of expertise it makes available for postgraduate supervisic
the kinds of pedagogical relationships that develop between supervisor and stude
the historical trajectories of knowledge production and research emphases genera
in the Pacific; and the lingering discourses of colonialism that shape contempora
schooling as well as the research that informs that schooling. This interpretivist fl
of educational thought, with the emphasis on understanding educational phenoi
ena, may not be immediately conducive to educational and social transformation.

There has only been a slight tendency toward emancipatory thinking abc
Pacific education, beginning with Thaman's (1988) PhD research into Tongan epis
mology. It is research, or rather the worldview of key individuals, positioned with
such frameworks that enables the greater possibility of social transformation in Paci
communities marked by unique climatic, political, and social challenges. Thama
(1988) example clearly describes the transformative potential of such researc
emphasising the capacity to bring about change via a return to education wo
after completion. Thaman's writing, teaching, and educational consultancy ai
advisory work with international bodies such as UNESCO and regional initiativ
such as the *Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative* over more than 20 years have be
extensive. The socially critical perspectives emerging from this research that cont

Pacific rim. Fifty percent of education theses completed at USP after 1990, regardless of paradigmatic positioning, cite Thaman's research.

Without diminishing the importance of such research it is important, however, to issue a caution. Emancipatory oriented postgraduate research, where it does exist, tends toward cultural difference analyses only. As previously mentioned, this has emerged in response to perceptions of loss and erasure via what Teaero (2007) terms "exogenous" education and knowledge systems. The resulting advocacy for Indigenous Pacific epistemologies in both education and research tends to ignore an educational discourse concerning equity and access in Pacific education as articulated in the recent *Pacific Education Development Framework* (Forum Ministers, 2009). A body of criticism informed by poststructuralist, postcolonial, and critical anthropological theories has emerged that questions the culturalist assumptions of a simple re-indigenisation of Pacific education and the research that informs it (see, for example, Burnett, 2007; Ninnes, 1998). These are the very theoretical perspectives that comprise Lather's (2006) deconstructivist research paradigm, which are yet to influence postgraduate research in education at USP and feature only minimally in Pacific higher degree education research in New Zealand (Burnett,2011). This criticism suggests that emancipatory theorising at times tends toward the anti-colonial rather than the postcolonial (Hickling-Hudson, 1998). Anti-colonial approaches to educational research often employ over-determined categories of difference between Pacific and non-Pacific epistemologies and pedagogies. Such approaches do not often consider the uneven distribution of privilege within *imagined* groups such as "the Pacific" or a Pacific ethnicity, for example "Fijian", as a result of educational practice.

Postcolonial approaches to educational research have greater explanatory potential to account for increasingly complex Pacific social conditions, where, as Chow (1993) maintains, people simply refuse to stay in their frames. There is in such research a concession to Pacific peoples' agency, for example, in terms of appropriating *imagined* non-Pacific knowledge and pedagogies rather than having their minds colonised by them as some Pacific educators have argued (Puamau, 2005a). 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 colonising experience" (Hickling-Hudson, 1998). Pacific education's role in seeking solutions to Pacific environmental, political, and economic problems are perhaps more likely to be achieved as a result of emancipatory and deconstructive rather than interpretivist and positivist approaches to education research. The flow of socially critical perspectives back into Pacific regional communities, and the creation of links between education and Pacific problems have the most transformative potential. However, potential for change is more likely where approaches to education are directed beyond the often reductive colonial binary of Pacific and non-Pacific, and extended to include processes of social marginalisation at multiple levels, including those *within* Pacific communities.

References

Apple, M. (1979) *Ideology and curriculum.* London: Routledge & Paul.

Apple, M. (1983). *Ideology and practive in schooling.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Aveau, B. (2003). *Management of technical and vocational education and training programme (TVET) in Samoan post-secondary schools: A case study.* USP.

Bennett, M. (1974). *Some predictors and determinants of educational performances in Fiji.* USP.

Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (1982). *Qualitative research for education.* New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Burgess, R. (1985). *Strategies of educational research: Qualitative research for education.* Philadelphia: Palmer Press.

Burnett, G. (2007). "Culture isn't what It used to be": Problematising pedagogies of cultural difference in Pacific education. *Social and Economic Studies, 56*(1 - 2), 261 - 276.

Burnett, G. (2011). Research paradigm choices made by postgraduate students with Pacific education research interests in New Zealand *Higher Education Research & Development.*

Burns, R. (1990). *Introduction to research methods.* Melbourne: Longman.

Chow, R. (1993). Writing diaspora: Tactics of intervention in contemporary cultural studies. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Cohen, L., & Manion, L. (1980). *Research methods in education.* London: Groom & Helm.

Denzin, N. (1978). *The research act.* New York: McGraw Hill.

Fanon, F. (1967). *Black skin, white masks.* New York: Grove Press.

Forum Education Ministers. (2009). *Pacific Education Development Framework (PEDF) 2009 - 2015.* Suva: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

Freire, P. (1972). *The pedagogy of the oppressed.* London: Penguin.

Fujioka-Kem, Y. (1994). *The effect of first language maintenance on successful English and academic achievement among students in Fiji.* USP.

Giroux, H. (1983). *Critical theory and educational practice.* Melbourne: Deakin University Press.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1998). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 105 - 117). London: Sage.

Habeimas, J. (1989). Structural transformation of the public sphere. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Hall, S. (1982). The rediscovery of "ideology": Return of the repressed in media studies. In M. Gurevitch, T. Bennett, J. Curran & W. J (Eds.), *Culture, society and the media.* London: Methuen.

Hickling-Hudson, A. (1998). When Marxism and Postmodern theories won't do: The potential of postcolonial theory for educational analysis. *Discourse: Studies In The Cultural Politics Of Education, 19*(3), 327 - 339.

Hindson, C. (1985). Kiribati: The search for educational alternatives in a Pacific micro-state. *International Journal of Educational Development, 5*(4), 289 - 294.

Kapavai, C. (2006). *Optimising human resource development in the Cook Islands: An exploration in education planning.* USP.

Kishor, N. (1981). *Socio-cultural and motivational influences on academic performance: A cross-cultural study of third form students in Fiji.* USP.

Koya-Vaka'uta, F. (2002). *Developing cultural identities: Multiculturalism in education in Fiji.* USP.

Lather, P. (2006). Paradigm proliferation as a good thing to think with: Teaching research in education as a wild profussion. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies In Education, 19*(1), 35 - 57.

Lee-Hang, D. (2002). *Bilingualism in teaching, learning and assessing science in Samoan secondary schools: Policy and practice.* USP.

Likuseniuwa, K. (1999). *A study of a rural secondary school and its community.* USP.

Maebuta, J. (2003). *Vocational education and training in the Solomon Islands: The case of rural training centres.* USP.

Manathunga, C. (2009). Research as an intercultural 'contact zone'. . *Discourse: Studies In The Cultural Politics Of Education, 30*(2), 165 - 177.

McCaffery, J. J., & Mc-Fall-McCaffery, J. A. T. (2010). O tatou ō aga'iifea?/'Oku tau ō kife?/Where are we heading?: Pasifika languages in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *Alternative: An International Journal Of Indigenous Scholarship, 6*(2), 86 - 121.

Mullins, G., & M, K. (2002). 'It's a PhD, not a Nobel Prize': How experienced examiners assess research theses. *Studies in Higher Education, 27*(4), 369 - 386.

Nabobo, U. (1996). *A century of higher education in Fiji: An examination of establishment and development trends: 1885 - 1995.* USP.

Ninnes, P. (1998). Informal learning strategies in Solomon Islands: Preface. *Directions: Journal of Education Studies, 20*(1), 3 - 33.

Ninnes, P., & Burnett, G. (2004). Comparative education research: Poststructuralist possibilities. *Comparative Education, 39*(3), 279 - 297.

Puamau, P. (2005, May 30 - June 1). *Rethinking educational reform: A Pacific perspective* Paper presented at the Redesigning Pedagogy: Research, Policy, Practice, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Puamau, P. (2005). Principles and processes of educational planning in the Pacific. In P. Puamau & B. Teasdale (Eds.), *Educational Planning In The Pacific: Principles And Guidelines* (pp. 24 - 44). Suva: PRIDE.

Robie, D. (2003). *Journalism education in the South Pacific, 1975 - 2003: Politics, policy and practice.* USP.

Singh, M. (2005). Enabling transnational learning communities: Policies, pedagogies and politics of educational power. In P. Ninnes & M. Hellstén (Eds.), *Internationalising Higher Education: Critical Explorations of Pedagogy and Policy* (pp. 9 - 36). Hong Kong: CERC.

Suluma, E. (2005). *Education policy provisions for access, participation and equity in the education of the underprivileged in Fiji: a ase study on the underpriviledged in a school near Suva.* USP.

Tagicakiverata, I. (2003). *Truancy: Factors that contribute to the truancy of indigenous Fijian male students in an urban secondary school.* Master of Arts (Education), USP.

Teaero, T. (2007). Eutia moa mainanoa: Navigating currents of literacy and numeracy in the Pacific. In P. Puamau & F. Pene (Eds.), *The Basics of Learning: Literacy And Numeracy In The Pacific* (pp. 154 - 176). Suva: IOE.

Thaman, K. H. (1988). *Ako and faiako: Educational concepts, cultural values and teacher role perceptions in Tonga.* USP.

Thaman, K. H. (2002). Towards cultural democracy in Pacific education: An imperative for the 21st Century. In F. Pene, A. M. Taufe'ulungaki & C. Benson (Eds.), *Tree of Opportunity: Re-Thinking Pacific Education* (pp. 21 - 29). Suva: Institute of Education.

Wiersma, W. (1986). *Research methods in education: An introduction.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.