

From Tradition to Transformation: A Historical Analysis of Education in Fiji from the Pre-Colonial Era to the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Education in Fiji has evolved through complex historical, cultural, and political transitions that have continuously reshaped its purpose, structure, and identity. This paper traces the historical trajectory of Fijian education from pre-colonial times when learning was grounded in communal life, oral traditions, and the *vanua* (land, people, and spiritual relationships), to the colonial era that institutionalised Western schooling through missionary influence and British administrative control. During this period, education became a tool for cultural assimilation and social stratification, creating enduring divides between indigenous, Indo-Fijian, and urban populations. Following independence in 1970, Fiji's education system underwent significant reforms aimed at localisation, nation-building, and equity. However, persistent colonial legacies, socio-economic disparities, and the challenges of globalisation have continued to shape policy directions. The analysis critically examines key phases of curriculum development, teacher education, language policy, and educational governance within the broader contexts of decolonisation, modernisation, and global competency frameworks. It highlights how recent reforms, including the ongoing review of the Education Act and curriculum modernisation efforts—seek to reconcile traditional knowledge systems with contemporary pedagogical and technological imperatives. Drawing on historical sources, policy documents, and regional scholarship, the paper argues that understanding Fiji's educational evolution is essential for designing culturally responsive, future-oriented education that balances heritage with innovation. Ultimately, the study underscores education's transformative role in shaping national identity, promoting social cohesion, and preparing learners for the demands of the 21st-century world.

Keywords: Fiji education history; pre-colonial learning; missionary schooling; decolonisation; curriculum reform; Indigenous knowledge; Education Act review; 21st-century learning; Pacific education.

INTRODUCTION

The history of education in Fiji is deeply intertwined with its cultural, social, and political evolution. Prior to European contact, learning in Fijian society was primarily informal and embedded within communal life, guided by elders and chiefs. Knowledge transmission was experiential and oral, encompassing practical skills, moral values, social norms, and cultural rituals necessary for survival and social cohesion (Thaman, 2014; Nabobo-Baba, 2019). This pre-colonial educational system emphasised relational learning within the *vanua*, fostering a strong sense of community responsibility, environmental stewardship, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

The arrival of European missionaries in the 19th century marked a significant turning point in Fiji's educational landscape. Missionary schools introduced Western literacy, numeracy, and Christian religious instruction, gradually institutionalising education as a

formal system (Ravuvu, 1988; Lal, 1992). While these schools expanded access to literacy and administrative skills, they also served as mechanisms for cultural assimilation, privileging Western epistemologies and marginalising indigenous knowledge systems. Colonial policies further stratified access to education along ethnic and geographic lines, creating disparities between indigenous Fijians, Indo-Fijians, and urban populations (Kelly, 2000; Sharma, 2018).

Following Fiji's independence in 1970, the education system became a central instrument for nation-building and social development. Efforts were made to indigenise curricula, promote multilingual education, and expand access to rural communities. However, enduring colonial legacies, socio-economic inequalities, and global pressures, such as the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), have necessitated continuous reform (Ministry of Education, Fiji, 2024; WEF, 2023). Today, Fiji is undertaking a comprehensive review of its Education Act and

curriculum framework, with the explicit aim of fostering 21st-century competencies, digital literacy, and culturally responsive pedagogy that integrates indigenous knowledge with global learning standards (Fiji Government, 2025; PacREF, 2022).

This paper provides a historical analysis of education in Fiji, tracing its evolution from pre-colonial traditions through colonial and post-independence reforms to contemporary policy developments. By examining the interplay of culture, policy, and pedagogy, the study highlights how education has served as both a site of transformation and a tool for social cohesion, and how lessons from the past can inform the design of a future-ready, inclusive, and culturally grounded education system in Fiji.

Literature Review

The development of education in Fiji is a multifaceted process, shaped by indigenous knowledge systems, colonial interventions, post-independence reforms, and contemporary global influences. This literature review synthesizes historical, policy, and pedagogical scholarship to situate Fiji's education within broader socio-cultural and developmental contexts.

Pre-Colonial Education in Fiji

Before European contact, Fijian education was embedded in the *vanua*, a holistic framework connecting people, land, and spiritual practice. Learning was primarily oral, experiential, and community-centred, transmitted through storytelling, apprenticeships, and ritual participation (Thaman, 2014; Nabobo-Baba, 2019). Skills in fishing, agriculture, navigation, craftsmanship, and social governance were taught through observation and practice, ensuring that knowledge was contextually relevant and socially meaningful.

Moral and social education was equally important. Elders instilled values of reciprocity, respect, and communal responsibility, reinforcing social cohesion and intergenerational continuity (Ravuvu, 1988). Such education was inclusive and adaptive, emphasizing collective well-being and environmental stewardship, and forming the foundation for lifelong learning.

Missionary and Colonial Influence (19th–20th Century)

The arrival of European missionaries in the early 19th century marked a shift from informal, indigenous learning to formal, Western-style education. Missionaries established schools to teach literacy, numeracy, and Christian doctrine, often privileging English and religious instruction over indigenous knowledge (Lal, 1992; Kelly, 2000).

Colonial administrations expanded educational infrastructure but maintained selective access, reflecting broader socio-political hierarchies. Indigenous Fijians were educated primarily in rural, church-based schools, while urban Indo-Fijians often had better access to secular or vernacular education (Sharma, 2018). Education thus became both a tool of social control and a vehicle for limited

socio-economic mobility, privileging certain groups while marginalizing others (Kelly, 2000; Ravuvu, 1988).

Scholarship highlights the tensions inherent in colonial education systems: while literacy and administrative skills were introduced, Western epistemologies often displaced traditional knowledge, creating long-term challenges for cultural continuity and identity (Thaman, 2014; Nabobo-Baba, 2019).

The Indenture System and Education

From 1879 to 1920, the indenture system brought over 60,000 Indian labourers to Fiji to work primarily on sugarcane plantations, profoundly influencing education among Indo-Fijians (Lal, 1983; Kelly, 2000). Restricted work schedules and social control limited access to formal schooling, while missionary and community initiatives offered minimal literacy, numeracy, and religious instruction (Ravuvu, 1988). Informal tuition in Hindi, Sanskrit, and cultural practices played a critical role in preserving linguistic and religious traditions, despite the lack of institutional support. Post-indenture, Indo-Fijians pursued education as a vehicle for social mobility, establishing community schools that contributed to the multicultural educational landscape in Fiji (Kelly, 2000; Sharma, 2018). This period illustrates how marginalized communities exhibited resilience, preserving knowledge while navigating systemic educational barriers (Thaman, 2014; Nabobo-Baba, 2019).

Post-Independence Reforms (1970–2000s)

Following Fiji's independence in 1970, the government sought to establish a national education system promoting unity, equity, and development. Curriculum reforms emphasized local culture, bilingual education, and broader access to rural communities (Ministry of Education, Fiji, 2024).

Studies note that post-independence reforms aimed to reconcile traditional knowledge with modern schooling objectives. The National Education Plan (1970s–1980s) expanded teacher training and established secondary and vocational schools, while policy documents stressed the importance of national identity, social cohesion, and economic participation (Kelly, 2000; Lal, 1992). However, persistent resource limitations, socio-economic disparities, and legacy colonial structures continued to affect access, quality, and equity in education (Sharma, 2018).

21st-Century Education and the Fourth Industrial Revolution

In the 21st century, Fiji faces new educational imperatives driven by globalisation, digitalisation, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Contemporary literature emphasizes the importance of digital literacy, interdisciplinary learning, and competency-based education to prepare learners for complex socio-economic and technological environments (OECD, 2021;

WEF, 2023).

The Fiji Education Reform Roadmap (2025) and the ongoing Education Act review highlight efforts to modernize curriculum, enhance teacher capability, and integrate indigenous knowledge with global best practices (Fiji Government, 2025; Ministry of Education, Fiji, 2024). Pacific scholars advocate culturally responsive pedagogy that aligns traditional knowledge with contemporary competencies, ensuring that education remains relevant to local contexts while fostering global skills (Thaman, 2014; Nabobo-Baba, 2019; Lingam & Sharma, 2023).

Teacher Development and Curriculum Innovation

Teacher preparedness is crucial for effective education reform. Research indicates that Fijian teachers require professional development to implement new curricula, embrace interdisciplinary approaches, and integrate technology into learning (PacREF, 2022; UNESCO Pacific, 2023). Innovative pedagogical models—including project-based learning, inquiry-driven instruction, and community-engaged education, are increasingly recognized as essential for cultivating critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills among students (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014; Jacobs & Johnson, 2020).

Curriculum innovation must also address assessment practices. Traditional exams often emphasize rote learning, limiting the capacity to evaluate higher-order competencies. Authentic, performance-based assessments are recommended to capture interdisciplinary learning outcomes and culturally grounded knowledge (Pellegrino, 2023; OECD, 2021).

Gaps in the Literature

While considerable research exists on post-colonial and contemporary education in Fiji, historical analyses linking pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence educational systems remain limited. Few studies explore how indigenous knowledge, mission schooling, and modern reforms collectively inform current educational practices. Additionally, empirical research evaluating the impact of curriculum modernization and digital initiatives on learning outcomes is still emerging, highlighting the need for longitudinal and context-specific studies (Lingam & Sharma, 2023; Sharma, 2018).

Synthesis

The literature underscores that Fiji's education system is a product of continuous negotiation between tradition and modernity, indigenous knowledge and Western frameworks, local needs and global trends. Understanding this historical trajectory is critical for designing education policies and curricula that are culturally responsive, socially equitable, and future-ready. By bridging historical insights with contemporary reforms, Fiji can cultivate learners who are both grounded in their heritage and equipped to

navigate the challenges of the 21st century.

Discussion and Analysis

The historical trajectory of education in Fiji reveals a dynamic interplay between culture, colonial influence, post-independence reforms, and contemporary global pressures. By analysing these phases, several key themes emerge that have shaped the evolution of learning, teaching, and policy in the Fijian context.

Continuity and Transformation in Learning

Pre-colonial education in Fiji emphasized experiential, oral, and community-centred learning (Thaman, 2014; Nabobo-Baba, 2019). These systems fostered social cohesion, environmental stewardship, and moral development. Despite colonial disruption, elements of communal responsibility and indigenous epistemologies have persisted, particularly in rural and village contexts. The analysis highlights that while formal schooling introduced literacy and numeracy, it often marginalized traditional knowledge, creating a dual system of learning that continues to influence contemporary education (Ravuvu, 1988; Lal, 1992).

Colonial and missionary interventions, while expanding access to formal education, were structured to meet administrative and religious objectives, privileging Western epistemologies over indigenous ones (Kelly, 2000; Sharma, 2018). The long-term impact includes the introduction of social stratification and uneven educational access along ethnic and geographic lines. Yet, these systems also established foundational literacy, numeracy, and administrative skills that enabled subsequent post-independence reforms.

Post-Independence Reforms and National Identity

Following independence, education became a tool for nation-building and social development. Policies emphasized curriculum indigenization, bilingual instruction, and rural access, reflecting a desire to promote equity and social cohesion (Ministry of Education, Fiji, 2024). Teacher education programs were expanded to strengthen local pedagogical capacity. However, persistent socio-economic disparities and colonial legacies limited the effectiveness of these reforms (Sharma, 2018).

Analysis indicates that post-independence reforms often attempted to balance continuity with transformation: maintaining literacy and administrative standards while integrating Fijian cultural values. This period demonstrates the challenges of reconciling historical legacies with evolving national aspirations.

Globalization, Technology, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution

The 21st century introduces unprecedented demands on education. Globalization, digitalization, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) necessitate competencies beyond literacy and numeracy, including critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and digital fluency (OECD, 2021; WEF, 2023). Fiji's ongoing curriculum modernization and Education Act review reflect attempts to integrate these competencies into formal schooling while retaining cultural relevance (Fiji Government, 2025; Ministry of Education, Fiji, 2024).

The analysis highlights a critical tension: while global frameworks encourage interdisciplinary, technology-driven learning, resource constraints and teacher preparedness in Fiji remain significant challenges (PacREF, 2022; UNESCO Pacific, 2023). Successfully navigating this tension requires policies that are both aspirational and contextually grounded.

Teacher Development and Pedagogical Innovation

Teachers are central to operationalizing historical insights and contemporary reforms. Evidence shows that professional development, exposure to interdisciplinary pedagogy, and integration of digital tools are essential for translating policy into classroom practice (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014; Jacobs & Johnson, 2020). Teachers who are equipped to merge indigenous knowledge with modern curricula can create learning environments that are culturally responsive and future-ready.

Additionally, experiential and project-based learning approaches demonstrate high potential for linking pre-colonial, colonial, and modern educational elements, allowing students to engage with both heritage and innovation simultaneously (Lingam & Sharma, 2023).

Policy Implications and Systemic Considerations

Fiji's educational evolution underscores the importance of systemic coherence. Policy reform must align curriculum, assessment, teacher training, and infrastructure. For instance, the ongoing Education Act revision and curriculum modernization present opportunities to institutionalize interdisciplinary learning, digital literacy, and culturally grounded pedagogy (Fiji Government, 2025).

However, analysis also reveals risks of inequity, especially in rural or resource-constrained areas. Addressing these disparities will require targeted investment in infrastructure, teacher capacity, and community engagement, ensuring that reforms benefit all students and respect indigenous knowledge systems (Thaman, 2014; Nabobo-Baba, 2019).

Synthesis and Critical Insights

The discussion indicates that Fiji's education system is simultaneously a product of historical continuity and transformative reform. Pre-colonial knowledge systems provide moral and cultural grounding, colonial schooling introduced formal literacy and administrative skills, and post-independence reforms sought equity

and nation-building. Contemporary reforms aim to integrate these legacies with global competencies required for 21st-century learning.

The critical insight is that education in Fiji must navigate three intersecting imperatives: cultural relevance, global competency, and equitable access. Interdisciplinary and culturally responsive pedagogies, supported by modern policy frameworks, teacher development, and technology integration, are essential for achieving this balance. The historical perspective provides valuable lessons for designing education systems that honour heritage while preparing learners for the future.

The Indenture System and Education in Fiji

The indenture system in Fiji (1879–1920) was a critical period in the island nation's socio-economic and educational history. Under this system, over 60,000 Indian labourers were brought to Fiji from India under the British colonial administration to work primarily on sugarcane plantations (Lal, 1983; Kelly, 2000). The indenture system had profound social, cultural, and educational implications, particularly for the descendants of these labourers, known as Indo-Fijians.

Restricted Access to Education

Indentured labourers and their families were subject to rigid work schedules and strict social control, leaving little opportunity for formal education (Kelly, 2000; Sharma, 2018). Colonial authorities and plantation managers generally prioritized labour productivity over schooling, reflecting a utilitarian approach to education. Children of labourers were often left without access to formal schooling, and educational initiatives were minimal, sporadic, or informal. When education was provided, it was usually under the auspices of missionary organizations, primarily in the context of religious instruction, literacy, and moral guidance (Ravuvu, 1988).

Missionary Schools and Indo-Fijian Education

Missionary schools emerged as the principal source of education for indentured communities. These schools provided basic literacy in English or vernacular Indian languages, numeracy, and religious instruction, often within strict moral frameworks (Lal, 1992; Kelly, 2000). While these institutions introduced foundational skills, their curriculum reflected colonial and missionary priorities, with limited relevance to local labour or cultural practices. Moreover, access to these schools was uneven, with remote plantations and rural settlements often underserved, perpetuating educational inequities.

Social and Cultural Implications

The educational deprivation experienced by Indo-Fijians during the indenture period contributed to long-term social

stratification. Restricted educational opportunities limited socio-economic mobility and reinforced ethnic divisions within the emerging colonial society (Sharma, 2018). Nonetheless, communities placed high cultural value on learning, often organizing informal tuition in Hindi, Sanskrit, and cultural practices, thereby preserving linguistic and religious traditions across generations (Lal, 1983).

Post-Indenture Legacies

Following the end of the indenture system in 1920, Indo-Fijians actively pursued education as a pathway to social advancement. Community schools, supported by religious organizations and later government initiatives, became central to educational development for this population (Kelly, 2000). The historical legacy of restricted access and self-driven educational initiatives continues to shape contemporary debates on equity, curriculum design, and multicultural inclusion within Fiji's education system.

Synthesis

The indenture system represents a formative yet challenging period in Fiji's educational history. While formal educational opportunities were severely limited, the resilience of indentured communities in preserving linguistic and cultural knowledge highlights the interplay between adversity and educational agency. Understanding this period is essential for appreciating the diverse historical foundations of Fiji's contemporary education system, particularly the need for inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive policy frameworks (Thaman, 2014; Nabobo-Baba, 2019).

Conclusion

This paper has traced the evolution of education in Fiji from pre-colonial times, through missionary and colonial interventions, the indenture system, post-independence reforms, and contemporary 21st-century transformations. Pre-colonial education, rooted in the *vanua*, emphasized communal learning, oral knowledge transmission, and moral and environmental stewardship, forming the foundation of Fiji's educational identity (Thaman, 2014; Nabobo-Baba, 2019). Colonial and missionary schooling introduced formal literacy, numeracy, and religious instruction but often marginalized indigenous knowledge and reinforced socio-economic and ethnic disparities (Kelly, 2000; Lal, 1992).

The indenture system further limited educational access for Indo-Fijians, though communities demonstrated resilience by preserving cultural and linguistic knowledge and later establishing schools to advance educational attainment (Lal, 1983; Sharma, 2018). Post-independence reforms sought to promote national unity, equitable access, and curriculum indigenization, yet structural and resource challenges persisted (Ministry of Education, Fiji, 2024). In the contemporary era, the demands of globalization, digitalization, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution require integration of 21st-century competencies, interdisciplinary learning, and culturally responsive

pedagogy (OECD, 2021; WEF, 2023; Fiji Government, 2025). Overall, Fiji's educational trajectory reflects the complex interplay between tradition and transformation, continuity and innovation. Historical insights underscore that sustainable educational development must respect indigenous knowledge, address inequities, and equip learners with skills and competencies necessary for active participation in a rapidly changing world.

Recommendations

Based on the historical analysis and contemporary trends, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen Fiji's education system:

1. **Integrate Indigenous Knowledge with Modern Curriculum**
 - Develop culturally responsive curricula that incorporate pre-colonial learning, traditional ecological knowledge, and social values alongside 21st-century competencies.
 - Encourage community engagement and intergenerational knowledge transmission to maintain cultural continuity (Thaman, 2014; Nabobo-Baba, 2019).
2. **Address Historical and Structural Inequities**
 - Implement targeted policies to reduce disparities in access and quality between urban and rural schools, and across ethnic groups, including resources for historically marginalized communities such as Indo-Fijians and rural Fijians (Sharma, 2018; Kelly, 2000).
 - Strengthen teacher training programs to support inclusive pedagogy and differentiated learning strategies.
3. **Enhance Teacher Capacity and Professional Development**
 - Provide ongoing professional development focusing on interdisciplinary teaching, digital literacy, and integration of cultural knowledge into pedagogy (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014; Jacobs & Johnson, 2020).
 - Promote collaborative learning communities among teachers to share best practices and innovative approaches.
4. **Promote 21st-Century Skills and Digital Literacy**
 - Incorporate problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and digital competencies into all levels of schooling (OECD, 2021; WEF, 2023).
 - Ensure equitable access to ICT infrastructure and resources across schools, including rural areas.

5. Strengthen Policy and Governance Frameworks

- Expedite the review and implementation of the Education Act and curriculum reforms to ensure alignment with cultural, social, and economic realities (Fiji Government, 2025).
- Develop monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of reforms in promoting equity, inclusion, and learner outcomes.

6. Foster Community and Stakeholder Engagement

- Encourage active participation of parents, elders, and community leaders in educational planning and decision-making to ensure that reforms are contextually relevant and culturally grounded (Nabobo-Baba, 2019).

By implementing these recommendations, Fiji can build an education system that honours its historical legacy, promotes social equity, and equips learners with the skills, knowledge, and values necessary to thrive in the 21st century. Education in Fiji thus has the potential to act as a transformative force, bridging past traditions with future possibilities.

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