

English Is Not Our First Language: Reconsidering Literacy and Numeracy Expectations in Fiji's Education System Within a Multilingual and Postcolonial Context

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ABSTRACT

Concerns regarding declining literacy and numeracy outcomes have become increasingly prominent within educational policy discussions in Fiji and across the Pacific region. These concerns are frequently framed as evidence of declining educational quality, inadequate teaching, curriculum shortcomings, or poor student performance. However, such interpretations often overlook a critical contextual reality: for the majority of students in Fiji, English is not their first language. Despite this, literacy and numeracy achievement is commonly assessed using benchmarks, standards, and expectations derived largely from English-speaking educational systems, particularly those of Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and other developed nations. This raises an important question: Are literacy and numeracy challenges in Fiji solely indicators of educational underperformance, or do they also reflect deeper linguistic, cultural, historical, and structural inequities embedded within assessment systems and educational policy frameworks?

This paper critically examines literacy and numeracy expectations in Fiji through a multilingual and postcolonial lens. Drawing upon literature from comparative education, language policy, sociolinguistics, postcolonial theory, literacy studies, and educational assessment, the paper argues that dominant deficit-based narratives often fail to acknowledge the complex realities of multilingual learning environments. It contends that literacy assessments may inadvertently measure English language proficiency as much as, or even more than, literacy itself, thereby disadvantaging learners whose primary languages differ from the language of assessment. Furthermore, the paper explores how colonial legacies continue to shape educational structures, curriculum frameworks, language hierarchies, and conceptions of academic success within Pacific education systems.

The analysis highlights the tensions between global educational benchmarking and local educational realities, questioning the appropriateness of comparing literacy and numeracy outcomes in Fiji directly with those of predominantly English-speaking nations. The paper argues that such comparisons risk obscuring important contextual factors, including linguistic diversity, socio-economic inequalities, cultural differences, educational resource disparities, and varying historical trajectories. Rather than viewing multilingualism as a deficit, the paper positions linguistic diversity as a potential educational asset that should be recognized and integrated into teaching, learning, and assessment practices.

The paper concludes that improving literacy and numeracy outcomes in Fiji requires a shift from deficit-oriented approaches toward more contextually responsive, culturally grounded, and linguistically inclusive educational policies. It advocates for the development of assessment systems and educational frameworks that better reflect Fiji's multilingual realities while maintaining high academic standards. Ultimately, the paper contributes to emerging debates on educational equity, language justice, decolonizing education, and the meaning of educational success within multilingual and postcolonial societies. In doing so, it calls for a reconsideration of how literacy and numeracy are conceptualized, measured, and interpreted in Fiji and other Pacific Island nations.

Keywords: Literacy; Numeracy; Multilingual Education; English as a Second Language; Educational Assessment; Language Policy; Postcolonial Education; Educational Equity; Fiji;; Comparative Education; Language Justice; Decolonizing Education; Educational Reform; Cultural Context.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy and numeracy are widely recognized as foundational

pillars of educational success, lifelong learning, economic participation, and social development. Across the world, governments and educational institutions invest significant resources in improving literacy and numeracy

outcomes because these competencies are frequently viewed as essential prerequisites for academic achievement, workforce participation, and national development (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2023). Consequently, concerns regarding low literacy and numeracy achievement often trigger public debate, policy reform initiatives, curriculum reviews, teacher training interventions, and educational accountability measures.

In Fiji, concerns regarding literacy and numeracy performance have become increasingly prominent in educational discourse. Reports from policymakers, educators, school leaders, and the wider public frequently highlight perceived declines in students' literacy and numeracy capabilities, often attributing these outcomes to shortcomings in teaching quality, curriculum implementation, school leadership, parental involvement, or student motivation. Such concerns are not unique to Fiji; similar debates are evident across many Pacific Island nations and other developing countries seeking to improve educational quality and strengthen human capital development (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022; UNESCO, 2023).

However, beneath these discussions lies a fundamental question that has received comparatively limited scholarly attention: What exactly do literacy and numeracy assessments measure in multilingual societies such as Fiji? More specifically, to what extent do concerns regarding literacy and numeracy outcomes reflect genuine educational deficiencies, and to what extent might they reflect the challenges associated with assessing students through a language that is not their first language?

Fiji presents a particularly complex educational context. The country is characterized by significant linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity. Indigenous iTaukei communities, Indo-Fijian populations, Rotuman communities, and other ethnic groups contribute to a multilingual social environment in which multiple languages coexist and interact. While English serves as the principal language of instruction and administration within the education system, many students enter school speaking iTaukei, Fiji Hindi, Rotuman, or other community languages as their primary means of communication (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Mangubhai & Mugler, 2006). For a substantial proportion of learners, English functions as a second, third, or even fourth language rather than a native language.

This linguistic reality raises important questions regarding educational expectations and assessment practices. Internationally, literacy and numeracy benchmarks are often developed within contexts where English is the dominant first language for the majority of learners. Countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States typically assess literacy within educational environments where students possess extensive exposure to

English from early childhood (OECD, 2019). In contrast, students in Fiji frequently navigate complex multilingual environments in which English may not be the language most commonly spoken at home or within their communities.

Consequently, direct comparisons between literacy outcomes in Fiji and those of predominantly English-speaking countries may overlook important contextual differences. Such comparisons often assume equivalence in linguistic exposure, educational resources, socio-economic conditions, and cultural experiences, despite substantial disparities across these dimensions. As a result, literacy and numeracy achievement data may be interpreted without adequate consideration of the broader contexts in which learning occurs.

The issue becomes even more significant when viewed through the lens of educational equity. Educational systems generally operate on the principle that all learners should have fair opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities. However, when assessments are conducted in a language that differs from students' primary language, learners may face additional cognitive and linguistic demands that influence their performance (Cummins, 2000). In such cases, assessments may inadvertently measure language proficiency alongside, or even instead of, the intended academic competencies.

This challenge is particularly relevant in literacy assessment. Reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, written communication, and critical interpretation are deeply influenced by linguistic competence. Students who are still developing proficiency in the language of instruction may therefore encounter barriers unrelated to their cognitive abilities or conceptual understanding. A learner may possess strong reasoning skills, cultural knowledge, and problem-solving capabilities yet struggle to demonstrate these competencies within assessment environments that privilege a language in which they are not fully proficient (Cummins, 2000; García & Wei, 2014).

Even numeracy assessments, often perceived as linguistically neutral, are influenced by language. Mathematical problem-solving frequently requires students to interpret complex instructions, understand specialized vocabulary, and apply reasoning processes communicated through language. Research increasingly demonstrates that language proficiency can significantly influence numeracy outcomes, particularly when assessments involve word problems, analytical reasoning, and contextualized mathematical tasks (Moschkovich, 2015). Consequently, concerns regarding numeracy performance cannot be fully separated from broader questions of language and communication.

The situation in Fiji must also be understood within its

historical context. The contemporary education system emerged from colonial structures that privileged English as the language of administration, governance, and formal schooling. Like many former colonies, Fiji inherited educational institutions and assessment frameworks heavily influenced by British educational traditions (Nabobo-Baba, 2006). While English has provided important opportunities for international engagement, higher education, and economic participation, its dominance within formal education has also contributed to enduring language hierarchies that often position local languages as secondary or less academically valuable.

Postcolonial scholars argue that educational systems in many developing countries continue to reflect colonial assumptions regarding language, knowledge, and educational success (Tikly, 2004). Within such systems, proficiency in the colonial language frequently becomes synonymous with intelligence, academic achievement, and social mobility. This dynamic can inadvertently marginalize indigenous knowledge systems, local languages, and culturally grounded forms of learning. Consequently, educational underachievement may be interpreted through deficit-oriented perspectives that focus on students and communities rather than examining the structural and historical factors shaping educational outcomes.

The persistence of deficit narratives represents one of the most significant challenges in contemporary educational policy. Discussions surrounding literacy and numeracy often frame low achievement as evidence of student failure, ineffective teaching, inadequate parenting, or weak school performance. While these factors may contribute to educational outcomes, such explanations frequently overlook broader systemic issues, including language policy, assessment design, resource disparities, socio-economic inequalities, and historical legacies. Deficit narratives risk simplifying complex educational realities and may lead to policy responses that fail to address underlying causes.

Moreover, the increasing globalization of education has intensified pressures on countries to align their educational systems with international benchmarks and standards. Large-scale assessments, global rankings, and comparative performance indicators increasingly shape educational policy decisions worldwide (Sellar & Lingard, 2018). While these frameworks provide valuable insights, they can also encourage the adoption of standardized measures that may not fully capture the realities of diverse educational contexts. For multilingual and postcolonial societies such as Fiji, this raises important questions regarding whose knowledge, language, and standards are being prioritized within educational evaluation processes.

This paper argues that concerns regarding literacy and numeracy in Fiji should be examined through a multilingual and postcolonial lens. It contends that literacy and numeracy

outcomes cannot be understood solely as indicators of educational quality or student ability. Rather, they must be interpreted within the broader contexts of language, culture, history, educational policy, and social equity. The paper challenges simplistic comparisons between Fiji and predominantly English-speaking nations and calls for a more nuanced understanding of educational achievement in multilingual societies.

Specifically, the paper seeks to critically explore the relationship between language, assessment, and educational expectations within Fiji's education system. It examines how multilingualism influences literacy and numeracy achievement, how colonial legacies continue to shape educational structures and language hierarchies, and how global educational benchmarks may obscure local realities. By doing so, the paper contributes to broader debates concerning educational equity, language justice, culturally responsive assessment, and the decolonization of education.

Ultimately, the paper argues that multilingualism should not be viewed as an educational deficit but as a valuable cultural and cognitive resource. Rather than asking why Fijian students are not performing at the same level as students in countries where English is the first language, policymakers and educators should ask whether current assessment systems adequately recognize the linguistic realities within which learning occurs. Addressing this question is essential not only for improving literacy and numeracy outcomes but also for creating a more equitable, inclusive, and contextually responsive education system capable of meeting the diverse needs of all learners in Fiji.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Literacy and numeracy are universally regarded as foundational competencies that underpin educational achievement, social participation, economic productivity, and lifelong learning. International organizations such as the OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank consistently identify literacy and numeracy as critical indicators of educational quality and national development (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2018). Consequently, countries across the world invest significant resources in improving literacy and numeracy outcomes, often viewing them as essential prerequisites for participation in increasingly knowledge-based economies.

Despite widespread agreement regarding their importance, literacy and numeracy remain highly contested concepts. Their meanings, measurement, and interpretation vary across cultural, linguistic, historical, and political contexts. In multilingual and postcolonial

societies such as Fiji, literacy and numeracy achievement cannot be understood solely as technical educational outcomes. Rather, they are influenced by broader issues of language policy, cultural identity, educational equity, colonial legacies, socio-economic conditions, and assessment practices (Cummins, 2000; García & Wei, 2014; Tikly, 2004).

This literature review critically examines existing scholarship relating to literacy and numeracy within multilingual and postcolonial educational contexts. It explores six major themes: (1) the global discourse on literacy and numeracy, (2) multilingualism and educational achievement, (3) language and assessment, (4) postcolonial perspectives on education, (5) literacy and numeracy in Fiji and the Pacific, and (6) global benchmarking and educational comparisons.

The Global Literacy and Numeracy Agenda

Over the past three decades, literacy and numeracy have become central components of global educational reform. International frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), UNESCO's Education for All agenda, and OECD educational initiatives emphasize literacy and numeracy as key indicators of educational progress and social development (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2023).

Traditionally, literacy was defined as the ability to read and write. However, contemporary understandings have expanded considerably. UNESCO (2023) defines literacy as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and use printed and written materials in diverse contexts. Similarly, numeracy extends beyond basic arithmetic to encompass the capacity to apply mathematical reasoning, problem-solving, and quantitative understanding in everyday situations (Goos et al., 2014).

The rise of knowledge economies and technological societies has further expanded expectations surrounding literacy and numeracy. Modern learners are increasingly expected to demonstrate digital literacy, critical literacy, information literacy, financial literacy, and data literacy alongside traditional competencies (OECD, 2019). As a result, literacy and numeracy are no longer viewed merely as academic skills but as essential life competencies.

However, critics argue that global literacy and numeracy frameworks often reflect Western assumptions regarding learning, language, and educational success (Tikly, 2016). Standardized measures may not adequately account for

linguistic diversity, cultural variation, or differing educational realities, particularly within developing and postcolonial contexts.

Multilingualism and Educational Achievement

A substantial body of research highlights the relationship between language and educational achievement. Cummins (1979, 2000) argues that learners perform best when educational systems recognize and build upon their first language competencies. According to Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis, proficiency in a learner's first language supports the development of additional languages and contributes positively to academic achievement.

Research consistently demonstrates that children learn most effectively when early education occurs in their mother tongue (UNESCO, 2023). Mother-tongue-based multilingual education promotes comprehension, participation, cognitive development, cultural identity, and long-term academic success (Benson, 2004; García & Wei, 2014).

Nevertheless, many countries continue to utilize colonial or international languages as the primary medium of instruction. In such contexts, students often face the dual challenge of learning academic content while simultaneously acquiring proficiency in the language of instruction (Cummins, 2000). This situation may disadvantage learners and contribute to lower academic performance.

Multilingualism should not be viewed as a deficit. Research increasingly suggests that multilingual learners often demonstrate enhanced cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness, problem-solving abilities, and intercultural competence (Bialystok, 2001; García & Wei, 2014). However, educational systems frequently fail to capitalize on these strengths because assessments and curricula remain dominated by monolingual assumptions.

Within Fiji, multilingualism represents the norm rather than the exception. Students frequently navigate multiple languages including English, iTaukei, Fiji Hindi, Rotuman, and other community languages. Consequently, educational outcomes must be interpreted within this multilingual context.

Table 1: Multilingual Educational Contexts and Potential Implications for Literacy and Numeracy Achievement

Educational Factor	Monolingual Context	Multilingual Context (Fiji)	Potential Impact on Literacy and Numeracy
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Home Language	Same as school language	Often different from school language	Additional language learning demands
Language of Instruction	Familiar from early childhood	Frequently second or third language	Reduced comprehension during early learning
Literacy Development	Occurs in primary language	Occurs through multiple languages	Slower acquisition of academic literacy
Assessment Language	Familiar language	May differ from home language	Assessment may measure language proficiency
Vocabulary Exposure	Consistent language environment	Multiple linguistic environments	Variable academic language development
Cultural References	Generally aligned with assessment context	May differ from assessment context	Possible misunderstanding of assessment tasks
Cognitive Demand	Single language processing	Simultaneous language and content processing	Increased learning complexity
Educational Outcome Interpretation	More direct interpretation of achievement	Influenced by language proficiency and context	Requires contextual analysis

Source: Adapted from Cummins (1979, 2000), Benson (2004), García and Wei (2014), UNESCO (2023), and Mangubhai and Mugler (2006).

Language and Educational Assessment

The relationship between language and assessment has received considerable scholarly attention. Researchers increasingly argue that academic assessments often measure language proficiency alongside subject knowledge (Abedi, 2002; Shohamy, 2001).

Literacy assessments are particularly vulnerable to linguistic bias because language itself constitutes the object of assessment. However, even numeracy assessments may disadvantage multilingual learners when mathematical concepts are presented through unfamiliar vocabulary, complex sentence structures, or culturally specific contexts (Moschkovich, 2015).

Abedi (2002) found that English language learners often underperform on standardized assessments not because of limited conceptual understanding but because of difficulties interpreting assessment language. Similar findings have emerged across diverse educational settings, suggesting that language proficiency significantly influences academic outcomes.

This issue raises important concerns regarding educational equity. If assessment results are influenced by language proficiency, then literacy and numeracy outcomes may not accurately reflect students' underlying capabilities. Instead, they may partially reflect the linguistic demands embedded within assessment instruments.

Within multilingual societies, this creates a significant challenge. Policymakers may interpret low achievement

scores as evidence of educational failure when they may also reflect language-related barriers. Consequently, educational interventions focusing solely on curriculum or pedagogy may fail to address underlying linguistic issues.

Postcolonial Perspectives on Education and Language

Postcolonial theory provides an important lens for understanding language and education in former colonial societies. Scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), Tikly (2004), and Smith (2021) argue that colonial educational systems frequently privileged European languages while marginalizing indigenous languages and knowledge systems.

In many former colonies, English became associated with social mobility, economic opportunity, educational success, and political power. As a result, colonial languages often continue to occupy dominant positions within education systems long after independence (Tikly, 2004). This linguistic hierarchy can create tensions between local identities and educational expectations. Students may be expected to demonstrate academic competence through a language that differs from their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Such expectations may inadvertently disadvantage learners while reinforcing perceptions that local languages are less valuable or less capable of supporting academic learning.

Postcolonial scholars argue that educational success should not be defined exclusively through standards

derived from former colonial powers. Instead, educational systems should recognize local languages, indigenous knowledge systems, and culturally relevant forms of learning (Smith, 2021).

Within Fiji, English continues to occupy a dominant position in formal education despite the country's linguistic diversity. While English provides access to global opportunities, its privileged status also raises important questions regarding educational equity and language justice.

Literacy and Numeracy in Fiji and the Pacific

Research on literacy and numeracy in Fiji and the Pacific highlights both significant achievements and persistent challenges. Educational reforms throughout the region have increasingly focused on improving literacy, numeracy, teacher quality, curriculum relevance, and educational access (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022).

However, Pacific education systems face unique challenges including geographic isolation, limited resources, infrastructure constraints, teacher shortages, socio-economic disparities, and linguistic diversity (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2009).

Several studies suggest that literacy outcomes in Pacific Island countries are influenced by language-of-instruction policies. Students often transition from home languages to English-medium education at relatively early stages, creating potential barriers to comprehension and academic engagement (Mangubhai & Mugler, 2006).

Nabobo-Baba (2006) argues that educational systems in Fiji must balance global educational demands with local cultural realities. Similarly, Thaman (2009) emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive education that reflects Pacific values, indigenous knowledge, and community perspectives.

Despite these insights, public discourse frequently frames literacy and numeracy concerns in terms of student deficits, teacher inadequacies, or curriculum weaknesses. Relatively little attention is given to the role of language, multilingualism, or postcolonial educational structures in shaping achievement outcomes.

Global Benchmarking and the Politics of Educational Comparison

The globalization of education has led to increasing reliance on international assessments, performance indicators, and comparative benchmarking exercises (Sellar & Lingard, 2018).

Large-scale assessments such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have significantly influenced educational policymaking worldwide. Governments increasingly compare their educational

performance against international standards and rankings.

While benchmarking can provide useful insights, critics argue that such comparisons often ignore contextual differences relating to language, culture, history, socio-economic development, and educational resources (Tikly, 2016). Educational outcomes are frequently interpreted as indicators of national success or failure without adequate consideration of local realities.

For multilingual societies such as Fiji, direct comparisons with countries where English is the dominant first language may be problematic. Such comparisons assume equivalent linguistic environments despite substantial differences in language exposure, educational resources, and historical development.

Consequently, benchmarking practices may contribute to deficit narratives that portray multilingual learners as underperforming when they may simply be operating within different linguistic and cultural contexts.

Language Justice and Educational Equity

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes language justice as a critical dimension of educational equity (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Language justice refers to the principle that learners should have equitable opportunities to access, participate in, and succeed within educational systems regardless of their linguistic backgrounds.

Language justice challenges assumptions that multilingual learners must conform to monolingual norms in order to demonstrate competence. Instead, it advocates educational policies that recognize linguistic diversity as an asset rather than a problem.

From this perspective, literacy and numeracy assessments should be designed in ways that minimize unnecessary linguistic barriers while accurately measuring intended competencies. Educational success should be evaluated in relation to learners' contexts, opportunities, and experiences rather than solely through standardized benchmarks derived from dominant linguistic groups.

For Fiji, language justice offers a potentially transformative framework for rethinking literacy and numeracy policy. It encourages educational systems to recognize multilingualism as a resource and to develop more inclusive approaches to teaching, learning, and assessment⁴

LITERATURE GAPS

Despite extensive scholarship on literacy, numeracy, multilingual education, language policy, and educational assessment, several important gaps remain.

Gap 1: Limited Research on Literacy and Numeracy Through a Multilingual Lens in Fiji

Most studies examining literacy and numeracy outcomes in Fiji focus on educational performance, curriculum implementation, teacher quality, or school effectiveness. Comparatively little research critically examines how multilingualism itself influences literacy and numeracy achievement.

Gap 2: Lack of Integration Between Literacy Research and Postcolonial Theory

Existing research often treats literacy and numeracy as technical educational issues rather than socio-political phenomena shaped by colonial histories and language hierarchies. There remains limited scholarship integrating postcolonial theory with literacy and numeracy studies in Fiji and the Pacific.

Gap 3: Insufficient Examination of Assessment Validity

Few studies investigate whether literacy and numeracy assessments in Fiji accurately measure intended competencies or whether they also reflect English language proficiency. The distinction between literacy achievement and English proficiency remains underexplored.

Gap 4: Overreliance on Deficit Narratives

Much of the public and policy discourse assumes that low literacy and numeracy outcomes reflect student, teacher, or school deficiencies. Limited research critically interrogates these assumptions or examines broader structural and linguistic influences on achievement.

Gap 5: Limited Pacific-Focused Scholarship

The majority of multilingual education research originates from North America, Europe, Australia, and parts of Asia. Pacific Island nations remain significantly underrepresented in international discussions concerning language, literacy, assessment, and educational equity.

Gap 6: Inadequate Consideration of Language Justice

The emerging concept of language justice has received little attention within Pacific educational research. There is a need for studies examining how educational policies, assessment systems, and literacy frameworks can better reflect linguistic diversity and educational equity.

Gap 7: Limited Critique of International Benchmarking

Few studies critically examine the appropriateness of comparing literacy and numeracy outcomes in Fiji directly with those of predominantly English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United Kingdom. More research is needed to explore the implications of such comparisons for educational policy and public perceptions of

achievement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is informed by **Sociocultural Theory**, **Postcolonial Theory**, and **Language Justice Theory**. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for understanding how language, culture, history, and power influence literacy and numeracy outcomes in Fiji's education system.

Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural Theory, developed by Lev Vygotsky (1978), argues that learning is fundamentally shaped by social interaction, language, culture, and the environment in which learners are situated. Knowledge is not acquired in isolation but is constructed through participation in social and cultural contexts.

Within multilingual societies such as Fiji, learners bring diverse linguistic and cultural experiences into the classroom. From a sociocultural perspective, literacy and numeracy development cannot be separated from the languages learners speak, the communities in which they live, and the cultural knowledge they possess. Consequently, educational achievement should be understood within learners' sociocultural realities rather than through universal standards alone.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial Theory provides a critical lens for examining how colonial histories continue to influence contemporary educational systems (Tikly, 2004; Smith, 2021). In many former colonies, including Fiji, English remains the dominant language of education, administration, and assessment despite the existence of multiple indigenous and local languages.

Postcolonial scholars argue that educational systems often privilege colonial languages and Western forms of knowledge while marginalizing local languages, cultural identities, and indigenous knowledge systems. This framework helps explain how literacy and numeracy expectations in Fiji may be influenced by educational models and benchmarks derived from English-speaking countries, creating tensions between local realities and imported standards.

Language Justice Theory

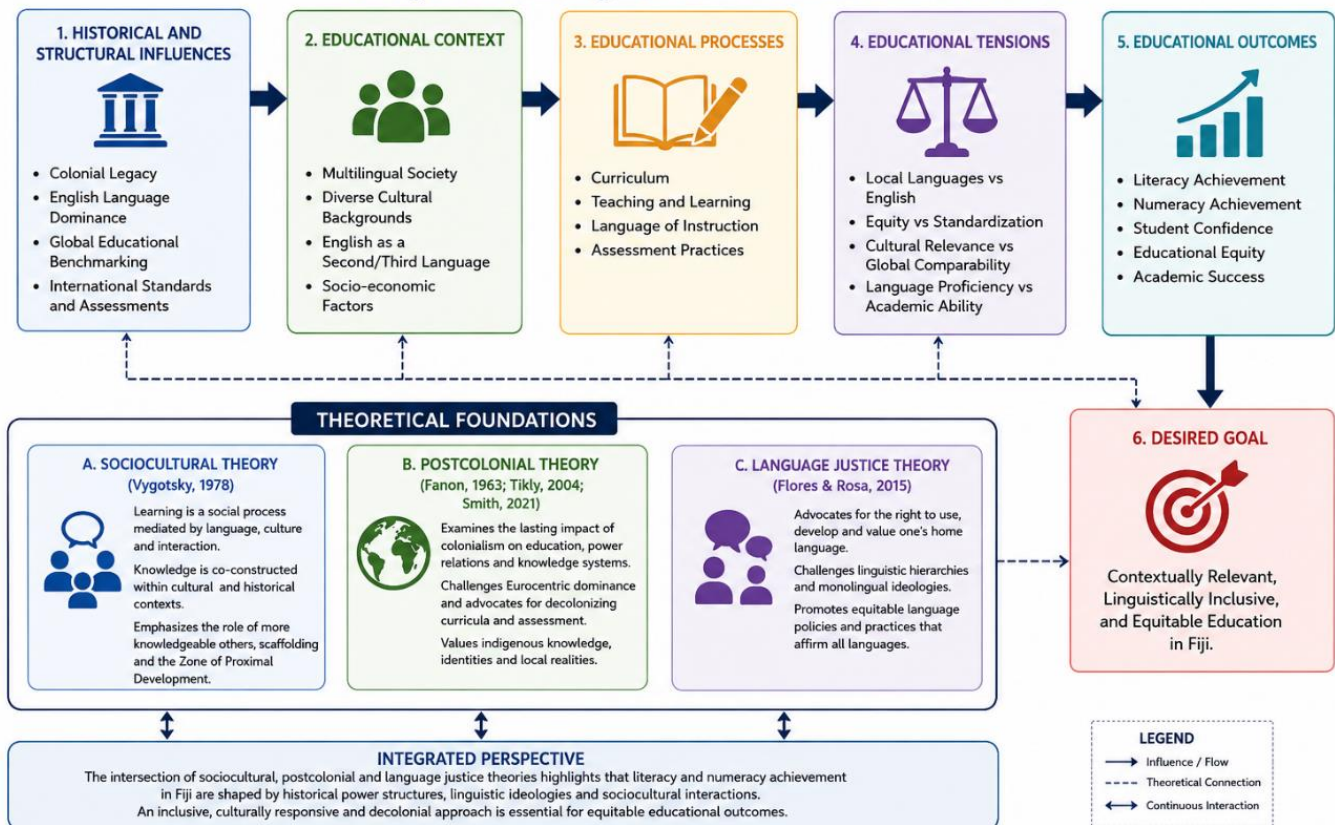
Language Justice Theory emphasizes the right of learners to equitable educational opportunities regardless of their linguistic backgrounds (Flores & Rosa, 2015). The theory challenges educational systems that treat multilingualism

as a deficit and instead views linguistic diversity as a resource and strength.

Applied to this study, Language Justice Theory suggests that literacy and numeracy assessments should recognize the

multilingual realities of learners. Educational success should not be measured solely through standards that privilege native English speakers but should account for the linguistic complexity within which learning occurs.

Conceptual Framework of Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Fiji's Multilingual and Postcolonial Context



Theoretical Proposition

Drawing on these theories, this paper argues that literacy and numeracy outcomes in Fiji are influenced not only by educational quality but also by sociocultural realities, language policies, historical legacies, and assessment practices. Therefore, literacy and numeracy achievement should be interpreted within Fiji's multilingual and postcolonial context rather than solely through comparisons

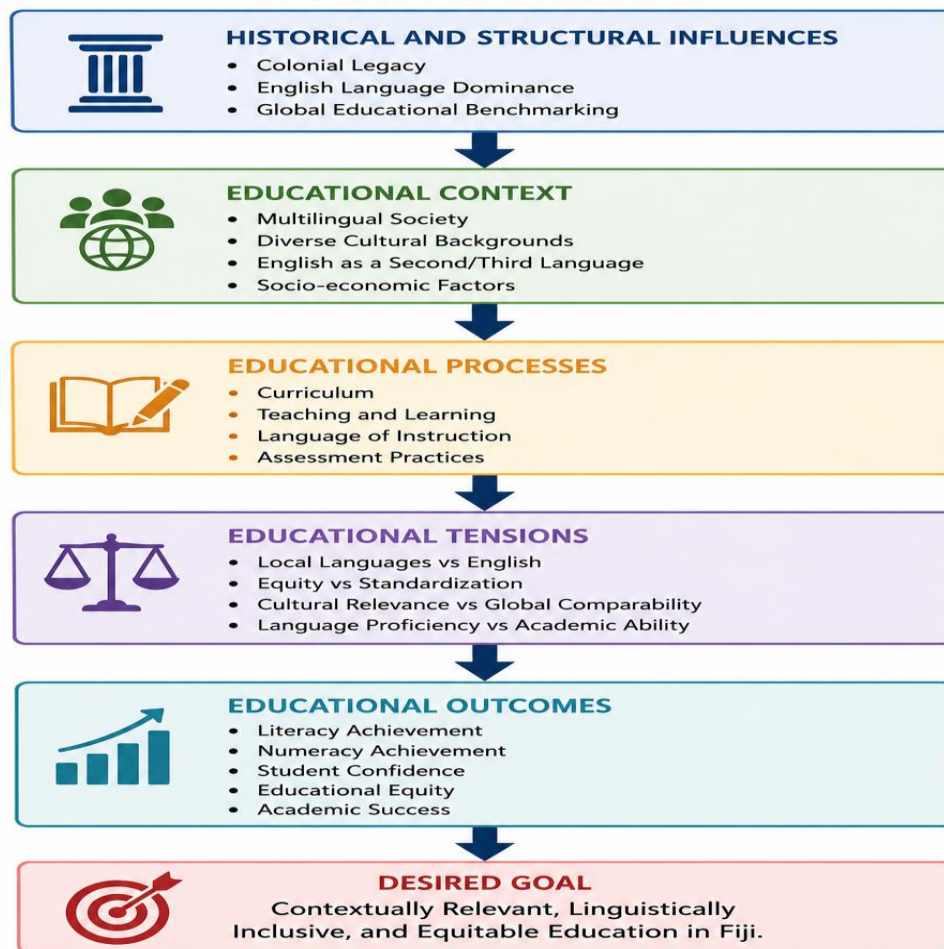
with predominantly English-speaking nations.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework is based on the premise that literacy and numeracy outcomes in Fiji are shaped by the interaction of language, culture, educational structures, and assessment systems.

Conceptual Model

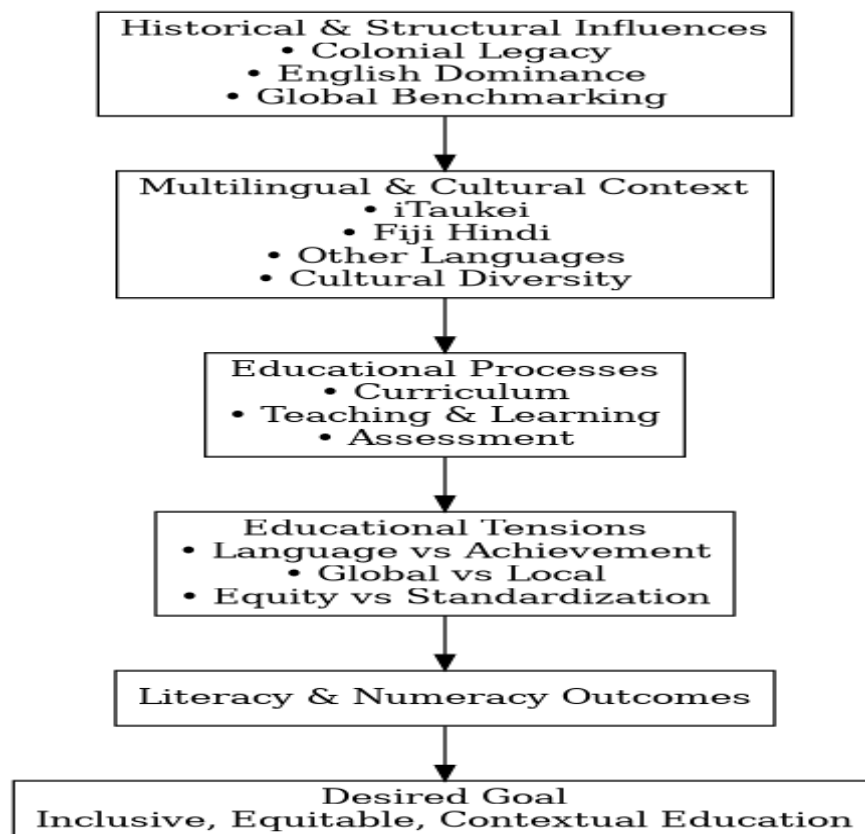
CONCEPTUAL MODEL



Explanation of the Framework

The framework proposes that literacy and numeracy outcomes in Fiji are not determined solely by student ability or teacher effectiveness. Rather, they are influenced by broader historical, linguistic, cultural, and structural factors. Colonial legacies and the continued dominance of English shape educational expectations, curriculum design, and assessment practices. These factors interact with Fiji's multilingual realities to influence student achievement.

The framework further suggests that educational concerns regarding literacy and numeracy should be understood through a lens of equity and context. Rather than viewing multilingualism as a barrier, the framework positions linguistic diversity as a valuable educational resource. Ultimately, the goal is to promote educational systems that are academically rigorous while remaining culturally responsive, linguistically inclusive, and equitable for all learners.



Simple Figure for the Paper

This brief framework is appropriate for a peer-reviewed journal article because it clearly links multilingualism, postcolonialism, language justice, literacy, numeracy, and educational equity without becoming overly theoretical.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

The debate surrounding literacy and numeracy achievement in Fiji has increasingly become a central concern for policymakers, educators, parents, and educational stakeholders. Reports of declining literacy and numeracy outcomes are frequently interpreted as indicators of educational underperformance, inadequate teaching practices, curriculum weaknesses, or declining student capability. Consequently, numerous interventions have focused on curriculum reform, teacher professional development, assessment improvement, and accountability mechanisms aimed at raising educational standards.

While these concerns are important, this paper argues that prevailing discussions often overlook a fundamental contextual reality: Fiji is a multilingual and postcolonial society in which English is not the first language for a significant proportion of learners. As a result, literacy and numeracy outcomes cannot be understood solely as measures of academic competence. Rather, they are

influenced by complex interactions among language, culture, history, educational policy, assessment practices, and socio-economic conditions.

This discussion critically examines the assumptions underpinning literacy and numeracy debates in Fiji and explores how multilingualism and postcolonial educational structures shape educational outcomes. It argues that simplistic comparisons with predominantly English-speaking countries risk obscuring important contextual factors and may contribute to deficit-oriented narratives that misrepresent the realities of learning in Fiji.

The Language Question: Are We Measuring Literacy or English Proficiency?

One of the most significant issues emerging from this study concerns the relationship between literacy assessment and language proficiency. Educational systems frequently assume that literacy assessments measure students' reading, writing, comprehension, and communication skills. However, in multilingual contexts, literacy assessments often measure both literacy and proficiency in the language of assessment simultaneously (Cummins, 2000; García & Wei, 2014).

For many students in Fiji, English is neither the primary language spoken at home nor the dominant language used within community settings. Children often enter school speaking iTaukei, Fiji Hindi, Rotuman, Banaban, or other local languages. Consequently, students may be required to

demonstrate literacy competencies through a language that they are still in the process of acquiring.

This reality raises an important question: when students struggle with literacy assessments conducted in English, are they demonstrating weaknesses in literacy itself, or are they demonstrating challenges associated with second-language acquisition?

Research suggests that language proficiency significantly influences educational achievement. Cummins (2000) distinguishes between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), arguing that learners may appear conversationally fluent in a second language while still lacking the academic language skills necessary for success in formal educational contexts. Academic literacy requires mastery of complex vocabulary, abstract concepts, discipline-specific language, and sophisticated forms of communication that often take many years to develop.

Consequently, assessment results may underestimate students' actual cognitive capabilities. A learner may possess strong reasoning skills, conceptual understanding, and problem-solving abilities but struggle to demonstrate these competencies through a language in which they have limited academic proficiency. This suggests that concerns regarding literacy outcomes in Fiji should be interpreted cautiously and within the broader context of multilingual learning.

Numeracy Is Not Language-Free

A common assumption within educational discourse is that numeracy is less influenced by language than literacy. Mathematics is often viewed as a universal language characterized by symbols, formulas, and logical reasoning. However, research increasingly challenges this assumption (Moschkovich, 2015).

Numeracy assessments require learners to interpret instructions, understand mathematical terminology, comprehend contextual information, and engage with problem-solving tasks communicated through language. Mathematical word problems, in particular, demand significant linguistic competence.

For multilingual learners, the challenge therefore extends beyond mathematics itself. Students must first decode the language of the problem before applying mathematical reasoning. Complex vocabulary, unfamiliar contexts, and sophisticated sentence structures may create barriers that affect performance independently of mathematical understanding.

This has important implications for Fiji. If numeracy

assessments are conducted primarily in English, performance outcomes may reflect both mathematical competence and English language proficiency. Consequently, lower numeracy scores may not necessarily indicate weak mathematical understanding but may instead reflect linguistic challenges associated with the language of assessment.

This observation does not diminish the importance of numeracy development. Rather, it highlights the need for more nuanced interpretations of assessment data and greater recognition of the role language plays in mathematical learning.

The Colonial Legacy of Language and Educational Success

The dominance of English within Fiji's education system cannot be understood without considering the country's colonial history. Like many former British colonies, Fiji inherited educational structures that privileged English as the language of administration, governance, higher education, and economic opportunity (Nabobo-Baba, 2006). Colonial education systems were often designed to produce individuals capable of functioning within colonial administrative frameworks. As a result, English became associated with intelligence, academic achievement, social mobility, and professional success. Although Fiji achieved independence in 1970, many of these educational structures remain influential today.

Postcolonial scholars argue that colonial languages frequently continue to occupy privileged positions within former colonies, shaping perceptions of educational quality and academic success (Tikly, 2004; Smith, 2021). In such contexts, proficiency in English is often equated with intelligence, while local languages may be perceived as less academically valuable.

This creates what may be described as a linguistic hierarchy within education. Students who possess strong English language skills are frequently advantaged within assessment systems, while those who are more proficient in indigenous or community languages may be disadvantaged. Consequently, educational success may become linked not only to academic ability but also to linguistic background.

The persistence of these colonial legacies raises important questions regarding educational equity. Should educational achievement be judged primarily through a colonial language? To what extent do existing assessment systems reflect local realities and linguistic diversity? These questions are particularly relevant within Fiji's multicultural and multilingual environment.

Table 2: The Literacy and Numeracy Achievement Paradox in Fiji

Dimension	Educational Assumption	Fiji Reality	Implication
Literacy Assessment	Measures literacy skills	Measures literacy and English proficiency	Results may underestimate learner capability
Numeracy Assessment	Measures mathematical understanding	Measures mathematics and language comprehension	Language may affect mathematical performance
Educational Benchmarking	International standards are universally applicable	Contexts differ significantly	Comparisons may be misleading
English Language Use	Students learn in their first language	Many students learn in a second or third language	Additional cognitive demands exist
Student Performance	Lower scores indicate weaker learning	Scores influenced by linguistic and contextual factors	Achievement should be interpreted cautiously
Educational Equity	Assessment systems are neutral	Assessment systems may privilege English speakers	Equity concerns arise
Educational Reform	Raise standards and accountability	Address language and contextual realities	Broader reform required
Educational Success	Defined by international benchmarks	Should reflect local and global priorities	Context-sensitive evaluation needed

Source: Developed by the author based on Cummins (2000), Nabobo-Baba (2006), Tikly (2004, 2016), Flores and Rosa (2015), OECD (2019), and UNESCO (2023).

The Problem with International Comparisons

Educational policymakers increasingly compare literacy and numeracy outcomes across countries. International benchmarking frameworks, large-scale assessments, and global rankings have become influential tools for evaluating educational performance (OECD, 2019; Sellar & Lingard, 2018).

While such comparisons can provide valuable insights, they also present significant limitations. Comparisons between Fiji and countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, or United Kingdom often fail to account for fundamental contextual differences.

Students in these countries generally operate within environments where English is the dominant first language. They are typically exposed to English from early childhood through family interactions, media, community engagement, and formal education. In contrast, many learners in Fiji experience multilingual environments in which English is only one of several languages used in daily life.

Furthermore, differences in educational resources, socio-economic conditions, parental education levels, access to learning materials, technological infrastructure, and historical development trajectories significantly influence educational outcomes. Direct comparisons may therefore oversimplify complex realities and create unrealistic expectations.

Educational success cannot be understood solely through

rankings and test scores. Context matters. Ignoring context risks producing policy responses that address symptoms rather than underlying causes.

Deficit Narratives and Their Consequences

One of the most problematic aspects of literacy and numeracy debates is the tendency to adopt deficit narratives. Deficit narratives assume that low achievement reflects deficiencies within students, teachers, families, schools, or communities (Valencia, 2010).

Within Fiji, public discussions frequently attribute literacy and numeracy challenges to declining educational standards, ineffective teaching, inadequate parental support, or poor student motivation. While these factors may influence educational outcomes, they do not provide a complete explanation.

Deficit narratives often ignore structural influences such as language policy, colonial legacies, socio-economic inequalities, resource distribution, curriculum relevance, and assessment design. By focusing primarily on perceived shortcomings among learners and educators, deficit perspectives risk obscuring broader systemic issues.

Moreover, deficit narratives can have damaging consequences. They may lower expectations, stigmatize learners, marginalize communities, and undermine confidence among students and teachers. Educational reform based solely on deficit assumptions may therefore

fail to address the underlying factors contributing to achievement gaps.

A more productive approach involves recognizing the strengths and assets learners bring to educational settings, including multilingualism, cultural knowledge, community experiences, and diverse ways of knowing.

Multilingualism as an Educational Asset Rather Than a Deficit

For many years, multilingualism was viewed within educational policy as a challenge that needed to be overcome. Contemporary research, however, increasingly recognizes multilingualism as a valuable cognitive, cultural, and educational resource (Bialystok, 2001; García & Wei, 2014).

Multilingual learners often demonstrate enhanced metalinguistic awareness, cognitive flexibility, perspective-taking abilities, and problem-solving skills. Exposure to multiple languages can strengthen learners' capacity to navigate diverse cultural and social environments.

In Fiji, multilingualism is deeply embedded within everyday life. Rather than treating linguistic diversity as an obstacle to educational success, educational systems could leverage multilingual competencies as strengths. This would require greater recognition of local languages within teaching, learning, and assessment practices.

Viewing multilingualism as an asset aligns with contemporary perspectives on inclusive and culturally responsive education. It also challenges assumptions that educational success must be achieved exclusively through monolingual English-language pathways.

Educational Equity and Language Justice

The concept of language justice provides a useful framework for understanding literacy and numeracy within multilingual societies (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Language justice emphasizes the principle that learners should have equitable opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities regardless of their linguistic backgrounds.

From this perspective, educational systems should not require learners to overcome unnecessary linguistic barriers in order to demonstrate academic competence. Instead, assessments should be designed to measure intended competencies while minimizing linguistic bias wherever possible.

Language justice does not imply lowering standards or reducing expectations. Rather, it involves ensuring that educational opportunities and assessments are fair, inclusive, and contextually appropriate. High academic standards can coexist with culturally responsive and linguistically inclusive educational practices.

For Fiji, language justice may involve rethinking language policies, strengthening multilingual pedagogies, supporting mother-tongue-based learning, and developing assessment approaches that better reflect the country's linguistic realities.

Reframing the Literacy and Numeracy Debate in Fiji

The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that literacy and numeracy challenges in Fiji cannot be understood solely through conventional explanations focusing on teachers, curriculum, schools, or students. While these factors remain important, they operate within a broader context shaped by multilingualism, colonial legacies, language policy, socio-economic conditions, and educational structures.

The central question therefore shifts from "Why are Fiji's students underperforming?" to "Are existing educational expectations, assessment frameworks, and benchmarking practices adequately aligned with Fiji's multilingual realities?"

This reframing represents a significant departure from deficit-oriented approaches. It acknowledges that educational outcomes are socially, culturally, linguistically, and historically situated rather than simply reflections of individual ability.

The challenge facing Fiji is not whether literacy and numeracy should remain educational priorities. They undoubtedly should. Rather, the challenge is ensuring that these priorities are pursued in ways that recognize linguistic diversity, promote educational equity, respect cultural contexts, and provide fair opportunities for all learners to succeed.

Concluding Analysis

The discussion demonstrates that literacy and numeracy achievement in Fiji is a far more complex issue than is often portrayed in public discourse. Educational outcomes emerge from the interaction of language, culture, history, policy, assessment, and socio-economic conditions. Simplistic explanations that attribute low achievement solely to students, teachers, or schools fail to capture this complexity.

A multilingual and postcolonial perspective reveals that literacy and numeracy assessments may measure more than academic competence alone. They may also reflect language proficiency, historical inequalities, and structural factors embedded within educational systems. Consequently, concerns regarding literacy and numeracy should be interpreted with caution and contextual sensitivity.

Ultimately, improving literacy and numeracy in Fiji requires more than raising standards or increasing accountability. It requires a deeper understanding of how language, power,

culture, and educational policy interact to shape learning opportunities and outcomes. Only through such an approach can Fiji develop an education system that is academically rigorous, culturally responsive, linguistically inclusive, and genuinely equitable for all learners.

CONCLUSION

The debate surrounding literacy and numeracy achievement in Fiji has become increasingly prominent within educational policy discussions, public discourse, and school improvement initiatives. Concerns regarding declining literacy and numeracy outcomes are often interpreted as evidence of educational underperformance, inadequate teaching, curriculum weaknesses, or insufficient student effort. While these explanations may contain elements of truth, this paper has argued that they provide only a partial understanding of a far more complex educational reality. Literacy and numeracy outcomes in Fiji cannot be adequately understood without considering the broader linguistic, cultural, historical, and structural contexts within which learning occurs.

A central argument of this paper is that Fiji's educational system operates within a multilingual environment where English is not the first language for a substantial proportion of learners. Despite this reality, literacy and numeracy achievement are frequently evaluated using standards, benchmarks, and assessment frameworks that are heavily influenced by educational systems in predominantly English-speaking countries. This creates an inherent tension within educational evaluation because learners are often expected to demonstrate academic competence through a language that may not be their primary language of communication. Consequently, literacy and numeracy outcomes may reflect not only academic ability but also varying levels of English language proficiency, linguistic exposure, and access to language-rich learning environments (Cummins, 2000; García & Wei, 2014).

The analysis presented in this paper highlights the importance of distinguishing between educational achievement and language proficiency. When students perform below expected levels in literacy and numeracy assessments, such outcomes should not automatically be interpreted as indicators of limited intelligence, weak cognitive ability, poor teaching, or educational failure. Rather, they may also reflect the challenges associated with learning, communicating, and demonstrating knowledge in a second or third language. This distinction is critical because educational interventions that fail to recognize linguistic realities may address symptoms rather than underlying causes. Policies focused exclusively on raising standards, increasing testing, or strengthening accountability mechanisms may have limited effectiveness if

they do not simultaneously address issues related to language, assessment, and educational equity.

The paper has also demonstrated that literacy and numeracy debates in Fiji are deeply connected to broader historical and postcolonial dynamics. The dominance of English within the education system is not merely a pedagogical choice but is rooted in colonial histories that continue to influence contemporary educational structures, language hierarchies, and perceptions of academic success (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Tikly, 2004). In many postcolonial societies, colonial languages remain associated with educational achievement, economic mobility, and social status, often creating implicit assumptions that proficiency in these languages is synonymous with intelligence and capability. Such assumptions can marginalize local languages, indigenous knowledge systems, and culturally grounded forms of learning while reinforcing deficit perspectives toward multilingual learners.

Furthermore, this paper has questioned the validity of direct educational comparisons between Fiji and predominantly English-speaking nations. International benchmarking exercises, comparative assessments, and global educational rankings have become influential mechanisms for evaluating educational performance worldwide (OECD, 2019; Sellar & Lingard, 2018). However, these comparisons frequently overlook significant contextual differences relating to language, culture, socio-economic development, educational resources, and historical trajectories. Educational systems do not operate within identical environments, and therefore educational outcomes cannot be interpreted meaningfully without consideration of these contextual factors. Comparing literacy and numeracy outcomes in Fiji directly with those of countries where English is the dominant first language may create unrealistic expectations and obscure the unique realities faced by multilingual learners.

An important contribution of this paper is its challenge to deficit-oriented narratives that often dominate discussions of literacy and numeracy achievement. Deficit narratives typically locate educational problems within students, teachers, families, or communities, emphasizing what learners supposedly lack rather than recognizing the assets they possess (Valencia, 2010). Such perspectives risk oversimplifying complex educational issues and diverting attention away from broader structural influences. By contrast, this paper has argued that multilingualism should be viewed not as a barrier to educational success but as a valuable cognitive, cultural, and social resource. Research increasingly demonstrates that multilingual learners possess strengths including cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness, intercultural competence, and adaptive communication skills that can contribute positively to educational outcomes when appropriately supported

(Bialystok, 2001; García & Wei, 2014).

The concept of language justice provides a particularly useful framework for understanding the challenges and opportunities associated with literacy and numeracy education in Fiji. Language justice emphasizes that all learners should have equitable opportunities to access, participate in, and succeed within educational systems regardless of their linguistic backgrounds (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Applying this principle to Fiji suggests that educational policies, curricula, pedagogies, and assessment systems should be designed in ways that recognize and accommodate linguistic diversity while maintaining rigorous academic expectations. Educational equity does not require lowering standards; rather, it requires ensuring that standards are applied fairly and that learners are provided with genuine opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and capabilities.

The findings of this paper also have significant implications for educational reform. Improving literacy and numeracy outcomes in Fiji will require more than technical adjustments to curriculum content or assessment procedures. Meaningful improvement demands a broader transformation in educational thinking. Policymakers, educators, and stakeholders must move beyond narrow deficit explanations and adopt more holistic understandings of learning that acknowledge the interaction of language, culture, history, identity, and educational structures. Such an approach recognizes that literacy and numeracy are not merely technical competencies but are socially situated practices shaped by complex contextual factors.

Looking ahead, Fiji's education system faces the challenge of balancing global educational expectations with local realities. English proficiency remains important for participation in higher education, employment opportunities, and international engagement. However, this should not come at the expense of recognizing the value of indigenous and community languages, cultural knowledge systems, and multilingual identities. The most effective educational systems are those that successfully integrate global competencies with local relevance, enabling learners to participate confidently in both national and international contexts while remaining connected to their cultural heritage (Thaman, 2009; UNESCO, 2023).

Ultimately, this paper argues that the question facing Fiji is not whether literacy and numeracy should remain educational priorities—they undoubtedly should. Rather, the more important question is whether current educational policies, assessment frameworks, and public expectations adequately reflect the multilingual realities within which learning occurs. Addressing this question is essential for creating a more equitable, inclusive, and contextually responsive education system.

In conclusion, literacy and numeracy achievement in Fiji

should not be viewed solely through the lens of educational performance indicators or international comparisons. Instead, these outcomes must be understood within the broader contexts of multilingualism, cultural diversity, colonial history, educational equity, and language justice. By moving beyond deficit narratives and embracing a more nuanced understanding of learning, Fiji has an opportunity to develop educational policies and practices that are both academically rigorous and socially just. Such an approach offers the greatest potential for improving literacy and numeracy outcomes while ensuring that all learners—regardless of linguistic background—have the opportunity to succeed, contribute, and thrive in an increasingly interconnected world (Cummins, 2000; Flores & Rosa, 2015; García & Wei, 2014; OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2023).

WAY FORWARD

The findings of this paper suggest that improving literacy and numeracy outcomes in Fiji requires a fundamental shift in how educational achievement is conceptualized, measured, and supported. While concerns regarding literacy and numeracy performance are legitimate, addressing these concerns effectively requires moving beyond simplistic deficit explanations and recognizing the complex multilingual, multicultural, and postcolonial realities that characterize Fiji's educational landscape.

The way forward lies not in lowering standards or reducing expectations but in developing educational policies and practices that are contextually relevant, linguistically inclusive, culturally responsive, and educationally equitable. Educational systems must acknowledge that the majority of learners in Fiji engage with literacy and numeracy through a language that is not their first language. Consequently, educational success should not be evaluated solely through frameworks developed in predominantly English-speaking societies without consideration of local realities.

A critical priority involves reconceptualizing multilingualism as an educational asset rather than a barrier. Research consistently demonstrates that multilingual learners possess valuable cognitive, social, and cultural strengths that can enhance learning when appropriately supported (Bialystok, 2001; García & Wei, 2014). Educational policy should therefore move away from deficit-oriented perceptions of multilingual learners and instead embrace linguistic diversity as a resource for educational development.

The future of literacy and numeracy education in Fiji must also involve a stronger commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy. Teaching and learning should be grounded in learners' lived experiences, local knowledge systems, cultural identities, and linguistic backgrounds. Such approaches can improve engagement, comprehension,

motivation, and academic achievement while simultaneously strengthening cultural identity and social cohesion (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2009).

Furthermore, Fiji's education system should pursue a balanced approach that recognizes both global and local educational priorities. While proficiency in English remains important for participation in higher education, employment, and international engagement, educational policies should also support the preservation and development of indigenous and community languages. Achieving this balance is essential for promoting both global competitiveness and cultural sustainability.

Assessment reform represents another critical area for future action. Current approaches to literacy and numeracy assessment should be reviewed to ensure they accurately measure intended competencies while minimizing unnecessary linguistic bias. Assessment systems must be capable of distinguishing between language proficiency challenges and genuine literacy or numeracy difficulties. Without such distinctions, policymakers risk implementing interventions that fail to address the underlying causes of educational disparities.

The way forward also requires greater investment in teacher capacity building. Teachers are at the forefront of literacy and numeracy development and play a critical role in supporting multilingual learners. Professional development programs should equip teachers with knowledge and skills related to multilingual education, language-sensitive pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, differentiated instruction, and inclusive assessment practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

At a broader level, educational policy discussions in Fiji must increasingly embrace the principles of educational equity and language justice. Rather than expecting all learners to conform to educational models designed for different linguistic and cultural contexts, policymakers should seek to create systems that recognize and accommodate diversity while maintaining high academic standards. Such an approach is more likely to promote meaningful and sustainable improvements in literacy and numeracy outcomes.

Ultimately, the future of literacy and numeracy education in Fiji depends upon the development of an education system that values linguistic diversity, respects cultural identity, promotes fairness, and recognizes the unique strengths learners bring to the classroom. By adopting a more contextually informed and equity-oriented approach, Fiji can move beyond deficit narratives and toward a more inclusive vision of educational success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and analysis presented in this paper,

the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers, curriculum developers, teacher educators, educational leaders, schools, and researchers.

Review National Literacy and Numeracy Benchmarks

The Ministry of Education should undertake a comprehensive review of literacy and numeracy benchmarks to ensure that expectations reflect Fiji's multilingual educational context. While maintaining high standards, benchmarks should account for the realities of second-language and multilingual learning environments.

Rationale: Educational standards should be rigorous yet contextually appropriate and equitable.

Strengthen Mother-Tongue and Multilingual Education Approaches

Schools should increase opportunities for learners to develop literacy skills in their first languages while simultaneously strengthening English language proficiency. This may include:

- Mother-tongue-based multilingual education initiatives.
- Bilingual instructional strategies.
- Greater use of local languages in early learning environments.
- Development of multilingual teaching resources.

Rationale: Research indicates that strong first-language foundations support second-language acquisition and overall academic achievement (Cummins, 2000; UNESCO, 2023).

Reform Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Practices

Assessment frameworks should be reviewed to determine the extent to which language proficiency influences literacy and numeracy outcomes.

Specific actions may include:

- Conducting linguistic audits of assessment instruments.
- Simplifying unnecessary language complexity in numeracy assessments.
- Incorporating multiple forms of assessment.
- Using culturally relevant assessment contexts.

Rationale: Assessment should measure intended competencies rather than inadvertently penalizing learners for linguistic differences.

Enhance Teacher Professional Development

Teacher education institutions and professional

development providers should strengthen training in:

- Multilingual education.
- Language-sensitive pedagogy.
- Inclusive classroom practices.
- Differentiated instruction.
- Literacy and numeracy intervention strategies.
- Assessment literacy.

Rationale: Teachers require specialized knowledge and skills to effectively support multilingual learners.

Develop Contextually Relevant Curriculum Resources

Curriculum materials should be revised to better reflect Fiji's cultural, linguistic, and social realities. Resources should:

- Include local examples and contexts.
- Incorporate indigenous knowledge.
- Reflect diverse linguistic backgrounds.
- Promote culturally responsive learning.

Rationale: Learners are more likely to engage with educational content that reflects their experiences and identities.

Promote Language Justice in Educational Policy

Educational policymakers should adopt a language justice framework that recognizes linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a deficit.

Policy initiatives should:

- Protect linguistic rights.
- Support multilingual learners.
- Promote inclusive educational practices.
- Reduce language-related barriers to achievement.

Rationale: Educational equity requires fair opportunities for all learners regardless of linguistic background.

Reduce Overreliance on International Comparisons

Educational performance should not be judged solely through comparisons with predominantly English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, or United Kingdom.

Instead, policymakers should:

- Use contextualized indicators of educational success.
- Consider linguistic and cultural realities.
- Develop locally relevant measures of achievement.

- Balance global benchmarking with local priorities.

Rationale: Educational quality should be evaluated within the realities of Fiji's unique context.

Strengthen Research on Language, Literacy, and Numeracy

Universities and research institutions should prioritize research examining:

- Language-of-instruction policies.
- Literacy development in multilingual settings.
- Numeracy and language interactions.
- Educational equity and language justice.
- Assessment validity in multilingual contexts.
- Pacific perspectives on literacy and numeracy.

Rationale: Evidence-based policymaking requires stronger local research foundations.

Foster Community and Family Partnerships

Schools should strengthen collaboration with families and communities in supporting literacy and numeracy development.

This may include:

- Family literacy programs.
- Community reading initiatives.
- Local language literacy projects.
- Parent engagement strategies.

Rationale: Literacy development extends beyond schools and is strengthened through community participation.

Decolonize Educational Thinking

Educational stakeholders should critically examine assumptions inherited from colonial educational systems regarding language, knowledge, intelligence, and academic success.

This involves:

- Recognizing indigenous knowledge systems.
- Valuing local languages.
- Promoting culturally grounded pedagogies.
- Challenging deficit narratives.

Rationale: Decolonizing education contributes to more equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive educational systems (Smith, 2021; Tikly, 2004).

Final Recommendation

The most important recommendation emerging from this paper is that Fiji should move from a deficit model of literacy and numeracy toward an equity and context model of literacy and numeracy.

The central question should no longer be:

"Why are Fiji's students not performing like students in English-speaking developed countries?"

Instead, educational stakeholders should ask:

"How can literacy and numeracy be taught, assessed, and supported in ways that recognize Fiji's multilingual realities while maintaining high educational standards?"

Answering this question has significant implications not only for literacy and numeracy policy but also for educational equity, language justice, cultural preservation, and the future development of Fiji's education system. A more inclusive and contextually responsive approach offers the greatest potential for improving educational outcomes while respecting the linguistic and cultural diversity that defines Fiji.

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