Catering for cultural and linguistic diversity: Using teacher created information texts

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ABSTRACT

Teachers in the Pacific region have often signalled the need for more locally produced information texts in both the vernacular and English, to engage their readers with local content and to support literacy development across the curriculum. The Information Text Awareness Project (ITAP), initially informed by the work of Nea Stewart-Dore, has provided a means to address this need through supporting local teachers to write their own information texts. This article reports on the impact of an ITAP workshop carried out in Nadi, Fiji, in 2012. Nine teacher volunteers from the project trialled the use of the texts in their classrooms with positive results in relation to student learning and belief in themselves as writers.

Introduction

This paper examines the use of teacher created information texts in Fijian primary school classrooms. Texts were produced during a two-day writing workshop which was designed to support Fijian teachers to create culturally appropriate information texts in both the vernacular and English. The workshop, known as the Information Text Awareness Project (ITAP), took place during August, 2012, with 18 educators attending from across the Nadi Education district (Carss & Exley, 2013). The authors, members of the International Development in Oceania committee (IDOC), facilitated the workshop, a long standing project that has been delivered and modified through a range of iterations in various Pacific nations since 2000.

While participant feedback relating to the value of ITAP has been effusive, it has not previously been possible to evaluate outcomes for teachers and student learners, as the books are utilised within classroom programs. Consequently, the goal of this research project was to interview workshop participants to establish the teachers' accounts of the value of authoring information texts and the contributions the texts made to student learning in regards to language development, knowledge of Fijian culture, learning across the curriculum and the reading of information text types.

IDOC is one of seven regional development committees of the International Literacy Association (ILA, formerly known as the International Reading Association) and is charged with supporting the development of literacy throughout the Pacific region. The committee, at the time of writing, consists of two elected representatives from each of the international affiliates of ILA, the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) and the New Zealand Literacy Association (NZLA), in addition to representation from the Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue and Samoa. Wendy (Author 1) has been a NZLA representative since 2004 and IDOC Chair from 2012 to 2015, Apolonia (Author 2) has been the Fijian representative since 2012, and Beryl (Author 3) has been the ALEA representative since 2005 and is the incoming IDOC chair. An ILA grant for literacy projects in countries with developing economies, awarded in 2013, has enabled the research to be undertaken.

Early beginnings

ITAP evolved following the success of the 'Book Flood' program established in eight rural Fijian schools in the early 1980s. Students experienced significant growth in the use of English when high interest story books were introduced using the shared reading approach and daily silent reading (Elley, Cutting, Mangubhai & Hugo, 1996). Subsequently, in an effort to provide more widespread support for effective literacy pedagogy, IDOC supported personnel from the University of the South Pacific with the development of the South Pacific Literacy Education Course (SPLEC), a series of ten professional learning units designed to encourage Pacific teachers to understand 'the nature and importance of literacy learning and relate these understandings to the development of literacy programs that relate to different language needs' (Moore, n.d., p. 25). SPLEC, implemented during the 1990s, included guidelines for using non-fiction texts in classrooms developed by Nea Stewart-Dore (2001), who was chair of IDOC from 1998 to 2001. The guidelines were based on earlier observations by Morris and Stewart-Dore (1984), noting that reading programs focused predominantly on the use of fiction texts and did not necessarily prepare students for the demands of comprehending reading materials across curriculum areas.

Concern grew amongst Pacific Island teachers that a lack of non-fiction texts, particularly in the vernacular, was prohibiting such learning from occurring and as a result the rationale for a Non-fiction Book Flood was proposed (Peirce, 2007). This morphed into what IDOC members considered a more accurate title 'The Information Text Awareness Project: A workshop approach'. The first ITAP, resourced with suitable non-fiction texts from New Zealand publishers, was facilitated in Kiribati in 2000 by IDOC members Barbara Moore (Fiji), Temanori Tiree (Kiribati) and Robin Peirce (New Zealand). This was closely followed by a second in Niue in 2002. In 2005, the project was revised, becoming a three-day workshop involving the study and application of information texts and associated text structures and then writing texts in both the vernacular and English. Since then, workshops have been held in the Cook Islands in 2004, 2007, 2008 and 2010, Fiji in 2006, 2012 and 2014, and Samoa in 2010 (Goodwin & Carss, 2010).

The workshop program

ITAP facilitators share the responsibility for the workshops with the local IDOC member who plays a fundamental role in the program's success, allowing materials and activities to be tailored to meet the professional content knowledge and pedagogical backgrounds of participants, and ensuring cultural and social congruence. This approach also provides for sustainability of the project, with the local person then able to facilitate future workshops. This has occurred in Niue where a large range of texts has been written to support the Science curriculum and in the Cook Islands, where one particular text, *Kakera the whale*, has been published in the New Zealand *School Journal* (Goodwin, 2008). Table 1 illustrates the typical progression of activities within the workshop.

Aligned with the current vision of literacy as a multimodal process of making and creating meaning, digital composition encourages participants to utilise additional skills and strategies to those typically used to create meaning on paper (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear & Leu, 2008). The digital competence of those attending varies and the workshop often promotes new learning as teachers upload and insert images and consider layout involving the relationship between graphic features and text.

As proposed by Exley, Carss and Tamata (in press), this workshop structure can be viewed as fusion of:

1. a functional approach to language whereby the social purposes of texts are examined and provide frameworks for composition (Derewianka, 1990), and
2. the process writing approach promoted by Graves (1983), whereby writers create texts through a recursive sequence of planning, drafting, revising and publishing.

Table 1. The workshop sequence

Day 1	Introduction: • a formal welcome observing local protocols; introductions are made; • objectives and expectations are shared; • participants share an artefact of cultural or environmental significance.
	Developing and refining shared understanding and a metalanguage for the subsequent construction of texts: • exploration of information text genre: report, explanation, exposition, recount and procedure; • participants engage in a series of collaborative reading and writing activities.
Day 2 (and Day 3 when time allows)	• links to potential writing themes and genre are discussed; • topic choice and focus genre are identified; • participants plan and write in pairs or individually; • participants take control with facilitators engaging in conferencing and support as required; • the remainder of the workshop encompasses digital composition, revision and illustration of texts incorporating either sketching or photography; • texts are published in both the vernacular and English.

The facilitators work alongside participants during these stages, providing assistance as required. Peer interaction and support occur spontaneously and the integration of opportunities for sharing and feedback promote authorship of texts. While considerably shorter in duration and confined to the production of information texts, ITAP mirrors elements of international teacher workshop programs such as the National Writing Project in the United States and similar initiatives in England and New Zealand (Locke, Whitehead & Dix, 2013), through the provision of a medium for teachers to collaborate, write and share within a positive and sensitive environment.

Information texts in vernacular and English

As mentioned, the foci of the SPLEC program and Stewart-Dore's early work were instrumental in highlighting the need for authentic and contextualised information texts in schools throughout the Pacific to facilitate literacy learning across the curriculum. Current international research concurs with this focus, with researchers such as Dymock and Nicholson (2010) and Fisher and Frey (2014) offering support to enhance comprehension of information texts. Students need to 'know that there are resources they can learn from that reflect the physical, biological, and social world around them' (Fisher & Frey, 2014, p. 222).

While ITAP participants write in both the vernacular and English, concern for instructional texts in the latter is of prime importance. This was signalled by Moore (1986), who wrote that 'books are needed in the children's own languages and about their own lives. The main need is for books for early reading as this will do more than anything else to [raise literacy levels]' (p. 8). Lumelume and Todd (1996) reiterated these thoughts in evaluating the Fijian based *Pacific Ready to Read Project*. More recently, Lagi (2012), when interviewing teachers in a semi-urban Fijian school, found that locating appropriate vernacular texts and resources was a major concern. Besides developing first language competence, the inclusion of such materials enables students to more effectively blend home and classroom cultures. This means that their local culture is acknowledged and affirmed, thus strengthening engagement in learning and their sense of cultural identity (Berryman, 2013; Feger, 2006).

The Fiji National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 2013) requires that Fijian students learn English and either Fijian (also known as iTaukei language), Hindi or Urdu. While many students are bilingual or multilingual in social contexts, the expectations are clearly conveyed for high levels of literacy across all areas of the curriculum with expected competence using 'written and oral conventions associated with different purposes, audience and context' (p. 42). The framework

also acknowledges the critical need for competence in one's first language to enable proficiency in additional languages. From Class 3 where children are aged eight years, the languages of English and Fijian, Hindi or Urdu are now compulsory subjects; hence there is a need for teachers with no formal training in teaching Fijian to upskill and relevant resources are needed to support the teaching of these languages. Reading materials for Hindi and Urdu can be sourced from other countries; however, this is not possible for Fijian texts (A. Tamata, personal communication, July 14, 2014).

The current lack of contextualised instructional reading materials in both Fijian and English is substantiated by Burnett and Lingman (2013) in reporting on the social construction of urban Fijian childhoods. Their analysis of the Waka series, produced for Pacific nations from the 1980s until 2003, suggested the 53 Fijian titles (28 English, 20 Fijian, 2 Hindi, 3 Urdu), related predominantly to oral stories from rural contexts rather than to contemporary Fijian life. They concluded that closer alignment between home and school was required in future publications. An additional caution is expressed by May (2011) and this substantiates the value of local authors. May explains that 'multicultural literature has not necessarily been written by those who have actually lived the represented experiences' (p. 29). She continues by highlighting that such material should 'represent[s] the lived complexity of cultural insiders' (p. 29). These themes validate the goals of ITAP and signal the urgency for such publications to be available for use in schools.

Research context and design

Eighteen educators from a mix of urban, semi-urban and rural schools across the Nadi district accepted the invitation from the iTaukei Trust Fund Board and IDOC to participate in the two day ITAP workshop, facilitated by Beryl and Wendy during August, 2012. The sequence of activities proceeded as outlined earlier and participants worked singly or in pairs to research and produce a range of non-fiction texts in both Fijian and English. Completed texts in both languages included: a recount of the art of flower arranging, 'Na Tuva Senikau', and information reports about: the local mangrove environment, 'Na Dogo'; the coconut tree, 'Na Vuniniu'; Kava, a Fijian ceremonial beverage, 'Na Yaqona'; and the cultural significance of the whale's tooth, 'Na Tabua'.

A collaborative action research project was subsequently designed with the Fijian teachers as curriculum and pedagogical experts who shared experiences of their own classroom practices around the use of the information texts. The research process unfolded as follows:

- Three months after the workshop, Apolonia met with the teachers in Nadi to undertake final editing of the texts and to invite them to participate in the research project.
- Ten teachers gave verbal consent to trial the texts during the first term of 2013 and to engage in interviews to report on their experiences after this time.
- Apolonia and the teachers collaborated on the selection of appropriate texts to trial and 11 were chosen for use. Both Fijian and English versions of three titles were selected and Fijian versions of five other titles.
- Multiple copies of each text were then printed and distributed to enable the trial of texts to begin in teachers' classrooms.
- Apolonia returned to Nadi in June to conduct the semi-structured interviews with each of nine teachers. The tenth teacher was not interviewed due to geographical distance.
- Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the best fit for the information sought. While providing a framework for discussion it was possible to probe for elaboration and justification in relation to the research focus.
- The audio-taped interviews were carried out in Fijian with questions designed to elicit information relating to:
  - the teaching and learning context;

- how the information texts were utilised within the classroom reading program to support learning in both vernacular and English;
- outcomes in terms of student learning across curriculum domains;
- the reaction of colleagues and students to the teacher created texts.
- Interview transcripts were translated from Fijian into English by Apolonia and a competent translator, both fluent in the two languages.

The pattern and depth of responses varied between individuals but comparison of equivalent answers across the group was enabled while still taking into account additional or unforeseen information (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). Johansson-Fua (2009) states the importance of ethical guidelines prescribed in accordance with the context being studied and as such the project was cognisant of preserving cultural and linguistic integrity with Apolonia, a Fijian citizen and fluent speaker of Fijian, leading the final editing and selection of texts, the interviewing of the participants and overseeing subsequent translation from Fijian into English.

Details about the participants in the project are shown in Table 2. The nine teachers who engaged in the trialling of the texts and subsequent interviews were all of Fijian background and represented a mix of gender with three males and six females. Schools varied in size, location and ethnic mix with just over half set in a semi-urban location and six participants reporting over 50% of students from a Fijian background.

Table 2. Teacher participant profiles

Teacher (pseudo-nyms)	Level of teacher training	Language L1	Nature of teaching position			
			Class level/size	Responsibility for teaching Fijian language	School roll	Location
Bereta	Diploma of Education	Fijian	Class 2/3 43 students	Own class	619 Indian school 50% Fijian	Rural
Buna	Diploma of Education	Fijian	Class 5 40 students	All of Class 5	390 90% Fijian	Semi-urban
Dokai (male)	Diploma of Education	Fijian	Class 5 28 students	Own class	240 Fijian chn	Semi-urban
Jokapeli	Diploma of Education	Fijian	Class 5 31 students	Fijian chn from 2 classes	500 Multiracial	Semi-urban
Kodro (male)	Diploma of Education	Fijian	Class 7 31 students	Own class	610 Fijian	Urban
Omati	Diploma of Education	Fijian	Class 6 35 students	Class 5 (69) and 6 (50)	941 Multi-racial	Semi-urban
Sigani	Diploma of Education	Fijian	Class 7 31 students	Own class	Indian school but multiracial	Rural
Unisi	Diploma of Education; studying towards B.Ed	Fijian	Class 1	Class 1/2	98 Majority Fijian	Rural
Wame (male)	Diploma of Education; studying towards B.Ed	Fijian	Class 7/8 23 students	Own class	89 Fijian	Semi-urban

Findings

Thematic analysis was utilised to make meaning from the translated data and to identify recurrent patterns in terms of similarities, differences and complexities in relation to the research focus (Braun & Clarke, 2006, Menter et al., 2011). Emerging themes can be grouped into five sections:

- supporting learning across the curriculum;
- strengthening development of both English and vernacular language;
- teachers as writers;
- reflecting on writing;
- future directions.

Each of the five sections is detailed below, supported with data from the teacher participants. The author of the transcribed and translated interview data is shown in rounded brackets after the interview transcript. Further explanations are shown in square brackets.

Supporting learning across the curriculum

Teachers referred to the potential of the texts to support learning across the curriculum in areas such as social studies and science and all nine teachers elaborated on ways in which they either provided a foundation for creating new knowledge around environmental and cultural artefacts, or enabled existing knowledge and understandings to be extended. In Buna's class several students from the inland regions of the island knew very little about mangroves and the creatures that inhabit them. For students in this class and in Wame's school, where questions were raised about the design process for tapa cloth using the mangrove sap, reading and discussion prompted visits to the mangroves to extend initial understanding:

> The following week, the teacher thought to take them to the mangroves. That just builds up from discussions of the book. They went just to have a walk on it. They witnessed the reality of it. The information in the book to the reality … there were lots of questions and they were willing to learn. (Wame)

Similarly 'Na Yaqona' was used to highlight both the cultural significance for the Fijian people and the dangers of overuse of kava:

> First of all … the traditional Fijian way of life is totally different from other cultures, especially the preparation of kava. It eases the communication, most of the things are easier when kava is used. It's one way of settling misunderstandings because most of our students live in town with a lot of new church denominations that bring new influence which is not Fijian influence and that is one of the downfalls for the students. So, the culture needs to stay; it needs to be different iTaukei culture. Associate together with the kava. But only the proper use of the kava. (Kodro)

Dokai, one of the co-authors of the text, focused on the overuse of kava with his students:

> In the book about kava for instance, about the things kava causes, such as skin disease, family conflicts, when children read it, they know very well what it relates to. One question they ask me, 'Master, were you intoxicated with kava in that picture?' I had to say that no, that we took the picture for the purpose of the book. But with the skin disease, we found that on the older man in the village; they are like maps on their skin. That is what one gets when they take too much kava, as well as laziness and family break ups. If people buy kava and cigarettes but cannot pay their children's school fees, and stationery, it will only cause problems in the family. (Dokai)

Reading of the text 'Na Dogo' sparked critical debate regarding environmental issues with the redevelopment and subsequent elimination of local mangrove areas:

> The mangroves in Nadi, there's nearly none left, [they're] about to all go. Rightfully we should have records so students can see at one time mangroves were useful in Nadi. There has been a lot of reclamation happening, misunderstandings. Our discussions [with the students] were of two different views, some say to keep the mangroves, but most say to redevelop for building new hotels. (Kodro)

Strengthening English and vernacular language

In addition to discussion around the themes evident in the texts, five teachers spoke about ways in which the texts strengthened development of both Fijian and English vocabulary and for more senior classes provided opportunities for translation.

Jokopeli, author of 'Na Vuniniu' shared the text with her class 5 students:

> When I gave the book to them, they were excited. To me, that's what I first noticed, first time for them to see a book written like this about 'Na Vuniniu', written in Fijian. (Jokapeli)

She discovered that in addition to extending their knowledge of how coconuts were used they also learnt specific Fijian vocabulary:

> 'Madam, what's this? What do you call this?'
> 'Oh, this is the "ioro", normally we know it as "beleti" (belts).'
> She added, 'They then learnt its Fijian wording/translation … they only knew the English name for it.' (Jokapeli)

Using the same text, Unisi elaborated on the benefits for enhancing awareness of standard Fijian as opposed to local dialects commonly used by their students:

> They learn the Standard Fijian (SF) words, as there are words for them in their own dialects which they speak. They learn more about the SF dialect that's used here, as their dialect is different from SF. (Unisi)

Unisi also reported opportunities to discuss the evolving nature of Fijian as a living language with borrowed words such as "aiskrim" (ice cream) and "kouk" (coke).

In addition, teachers found the use of English versions of the texts valuable in scaffolding competence in English:

> [It helps with] vocabulary, tenses and word building … this book [the English version of 'Na Tabua'], it uses simple English, it helps them with their reading. When they are reading, and with my translation, they start to understand some of the English words that they are not familiar with. (Sigani)

Associated with the development and reinforcement of vocabulary in both languages, eight of the nine teachers commented positively on the use of photographs in the texts, rather than sketches as in many of the existing texts. In discussing her text 'Na Tuva Senikau' which links into a required science theme, Omati commented:

> The pictures are something attractive to them [the students], the appearance of the book and the colours … they now see the true flowers, different from those that are drawn … when they are photographed they are really beautiful. (Omati)

Others added that this feature helped to engage readers in making meaning. For example, Jokapeli noted the use of images enabled explanation of the process of creating objects from the coconut tree:

> I can then explain to them, then they know. When it has pictures in that book, then I can point it out to them, this, this, this is done from this, from coconut trunks, the furniture, the tables. (Jokapeli)

Teachers also referred to ways in which the texts provided the foundation for further learning such as independent library research around Tabua and student writing linked to the local environment.

Teachers as writers

A number of the comments made during the interviews related to the writing process engaged in by the teachers and the subsequent audience response as the texts were shared within their school contexts. All nine teachers elaborated on the ways in which their published texts were received by others. Such positive feedback from both colleagues and students strengthened ownership and a sense of pride in their work. Wame's comments were representative of feedback from students who in two classes actually fought over rights to continue reading:

The first question [the students] asked was, when was this published, as some teachers' names are written on it. I then advised that it was done during the school break. Classes 1, 2 got a shock that my name was written on that book (laughing) … after that reading lesson, just after the teacher's explanations, they squashed up on me. Just to ask me questions, 'Is it really you Master Drakele wrote that book?' (Wame)

For Omati's students, the books provided aspiration for a future author:

Madam, one day I'll be like you. I'm really interested in writing. (Omati)

Five participants reported effusive praise from teaching colleagues, including Head Teachers and Assistant Principals. For Bereta, teaching in a large rural school, this involved public acknowledgement via the notice board:

'Congratulations Mrs Natoko for the first publication of a book.' It was a joyful thing for me, it's true it is only a first step, the writing of this book, but I am really happy about my joining this association for writing information text. (Bereta)

Bereta also described showing her books to a visiting Head Teacher looking for support with teaching of the vernacular:

He asked to take the books. I said that these were my copies to teach my kids. He saw them and he liked them. I said that when there are some more, I will share with them to teach their kids. (Bereta)

Reflecting on writing

Having used the trial texts with their classes, five teachers spoke of the need for further editing to better suit the needs of their students. These comments related predominantly to providing sufficient information to enable meaning to be made by the readers. For example, Kodro felt that 'Na Yaqona' required additional procedural information to demonstrate how kava was prepared, he also felt 'Na Dogo' which referred to elusive creatures that live in the mangroves, should include a photo of the small toto [crabs]. The addition of a glossary for some of the specialist Fijian vocabulary was suggested by Unisi as a useful text feature to support development of language competence in both English and vernacular.

Teachers of class one and two students proposed a closer link between text and images and a reduction in the number of sentences per page to facilitate processing of the text. Bereta illustrated this when discussing 'Na Vuninui'. The text stated 'the coconut tree is a *tall* tree'; however, the accompanying image shows just the top of the tree with leaves and coconuts, thus failing to provide accurate semantic information to support the reader. In addition to these points Buna suggested further functionality could be achieved by providing enlarged versions of the texts for shared reading.

Future directions

Driven by audience response to these new information texts, the learning that took place and a pride in their own work, six teachers spoke of the desire to continue writing. For example, 'the kids were wanting some more of this type of book because they contain real information, there are also lots of pictures, and the photos support what's written' (Bereta). Three teachers reported further writing already underway; Wame had a draft text 'Na dai ni qari' [Trapping Crabs] and Bereta proposed a text about salt making. In discussing such plans the desire was expressed that writing in Fijian should be of priority and that the group of teachers should continue to meet and support one another:

There should be more information texts, few more workshops, invite more teachers to learn as well, we need more books to be written in Fijian. With English, there are many from overseas. When the kids see something from overseas, it is like …, but when they see something done in Fiji, or when I say that I wrote it, their liking the book is different. (Omati)

Discussion

While findings are derived from a limited data set of nine teachers and one round of interviewing, the value of ITAP, as a means for supplementing existing teaching resources and providing much needed

information texts in both Fijian and English, is signalled through the evidence shared here. Through participating in the workshops, teachers were affirmed that they can use their local environment and culture to create texts in their home languages and English, instead of relying on materials from overseas that are often out of context for local students. The evidence presented demonstrates the extension of student knowledge of their environment, culture and language, as well as discussion and critical debate of issues such as overindulgence in kava consumption. Although participant responses did not include explicit reference to the five information text genres examined prior to writing, the potential for supporting both future learning opportunities and literacy across the curriculum was illuminated.

By engaging in the writing process, involving topic selection, drafting, revision and publication, teachers were empowered as writers and this process continued as texts were shared within their school settings and feedback was received from both students and colleagues over an extended period. Through utilising the texts with their students they were able to critique their work and suggest further revision and editing to enhance learning opportunities. Mention by participants of future writing topics, the need to continue the writing group and to stage further workshops provides evidence that the two day workshop and involvement in the action research project have provided the impetus for future authorship and the sustainability of ITAP. Teachers valued the opportunity to recount and reflect on their practice during the interview process. In addition to supporting teachers in utilising information texts within their classrooms, the findings have also informed a subsequent iteration of ITAP (Suva, August 2014). The previous workshop length of three days was reinstated allowing more attention to scaffolding teacher knowledge of the various purposes of information texts and associated text features prior to engagement in writing. Results of this increased scaffolding were evident in the outputs achieved at the Suva workshop.

There are of course, a number of shortcomings in this project that must be acknowledged. The length of the writing workshop and the scale of the project are obvious areas for contention; however, the authors see this as a starting point. Given the voluntary nature of participation on IDOC and in facilitating ITAP, the use of available funding has allowed the establishment of a foundation with which to explore more comprehensive research opportunities. Already the findings have proved of value.

As signalled by Exley et al. (in press), there are also tensions in 'exporting' both functional and process writing approaches into a Pacific context, opening the potential 'to irreversibly erode or displace local cultural values, and at a more subversive level, raise concerns about the reproduction of traditional colonial hierarchies of power and control, especially when Western facilitators deliver to non-Western participants' (p. 2). However, the project can also be seen as a multinational rather than imperialistic tool, offering opportunities for active and discerning engagement by participants (Exley et al., in press). Findings can be aligned with those of Frank, Carpenter and Smith (2003), who discovered when working with a group of linguistically diverse teachers, that 'by engaging in the process of writing themselves, these teachers begin to regard themselves as active knowledge generators, learning how to create a more culturally relevant curriculum in their own classrooms' (p. 194). ITAP can be seen as a valuable resource for supporting Fijian teachers to provide contextualised instruction towards ensuring, as stated in the Fijian curriculum framework, proficiency in the vernacular and English, and preservation of the country's 'rich cultural diversity' (p. 30).

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