
Fijian Children's achievement

Fijian children and their families in Hampshire schools – a position paper

Analyses of Hampshire data over a number of years show that children from a Fijian heritage under-attain in a range of key benchmarks across key phases. EMTAS continues to identify creative ways in which to address under-attainment for potentially vulnerable communities, including training initiatives to meet the needs of more advanced EAL learners (which would include Fijian-heritage children) and seeking funding for targeted projects.

This paper has precipitated itself from an engagement project funded by the Ministry of Defence (MOD Education Support Fund) in the 2017-2018 academic year. Based upon a collaborative literacy-based project across two schools in the Marchwood area, the final outcomes led to the publication of a dual-language (Fijian:English) book about Rugby in print and electronic format. It also enabled an EMTAS keyworker to forge a closer working relationship with the schools and specific individuals within the Fijian community.

The Project

Methodology

As a result of this project an EMTAS teacher was able to interview a senior member of staff at the infant school and a Fijian parent (who also works at the same school). The aim of these follow-up interviews was to try and establish/clarify some general information about the Fijian community as well as garner perceptions from both school and family perspectives about potential barriers to educational attainment for Fijian-heritage children. These interviews have highlighted a number of threads that could form interesting areas for future research. However, it is important to understand that narratives gleaned from these type of interviews are a snapshot in time and very anecdotal in nature. Moreover, we should be careful to avoid stereotyping communities as well as being sensitive to some of the more contentious issues that often associate with conversations around linguistic and cultural diversity.

What the data say

It is difficult to make firm conclusions from the data as these relate to relatively small numbers of children. From 2017 provisional data there were 153 pupils on roll (nursery to year 13) recorded as coming from a household where Fijian is an influencing language. There are two main Fijian communities in Hampshire linked to army bases in Aldershot and Marchwood, although there are pockets of Fijian heritage children attending schools in other areas such as Fareham and Andover.

For 2017 provisional data, at end of Foundation Stage, there is very little difference between Fijian heritage children and all of Hampshire pupils in the EYFS benchmark standards for those achieving or exceeding a *Good Level of Development (GLD)*. However, this was not the case for the previous two years where Fijian heritage children did appreciably worse.

End of Key Stage 1 data for 2016 and 2017 (where comparable measures are possible) show that Fijian heritage children underperform against all pupils in Hampshire in reading, writing and mathematics combined – this is the case for those reaching *Expected Standard (EXP)* as well as *Greater Depth than Expected Standard (GDS)*. There is a similar correlation at end of KS2 across the board for these two years.

An interesting finding, borne out across the last three years of data is that Fijian numbers drop significantly between Year 6 and Year 7. Between 2015 and 2016 the population decreased by approximately 30% (13 to 9) and between 2016 and 2017 (14 to 6) it decreased by 58%. A similar but less significant pattern is seen between Year 2 and 3 for the last 2 years of data. Whilst the numbers of individuals within the data are very small they do raise an interesting question as to where these children have gone and why? This mobility is probably linked to one or other parent serving in the armed forces who take the opportunity to assume a new posting at opportune moments in their child's schooling. Although it is interesting to note that were this effect being mirrored across the country then all things being equal net movement might be predicted to be near or close to zero, rather than the net movement being away from Hampshire schools.

The UK context for Fijian children and their families

Fijian families tend to be close-knit with the community very much revolving around the church (mainly of Christian denomination). Fijian children may have been born outside the UK but some are British born and it has been suggested that family size may be larger than the UK average. Whilst the community may be strong it could be the case that families have less extended families (such as grandparents) from which to draw down support.



It is probable that most Fijian families in Hampshire have connections with the MOD. With military families it is possible that both parents work locally but it is also likely that one parent is away from home on a posting for a significant period of time. Anecdotally, it has been suggested that Fijian personnel actively seek postings (*‘they get bored if they have to stay on base too long’*) and this might mean they are posted proportionately more than other communities. A parent away from home for long periods may put additional pressures on families and affect children in a variety of emotional ways. Mobility is also an issue as families may move at regular intervals when a parent is posted somewhere new.

Limited evidence from two schools suggests Fijian parents are highly aspirational for their children and very supportive of schools. The behaviour and attitudes to learning of Fijian children is usually extremely good. Children attend school at least comparably to peers although punctuality has been raised as an issue in the past. This year punctuality has improved in both schools. However, it has been mentioned more than once that Fijians work to their own time (*‘they are on Fijian time’*) and whilst there may be substance to this observation, such a stereotype might impact the expectations that educationalists have of Fijian children and their families. Parents are always willing to help in schools and attend school events very well (in the 2 schools polled). The family learning events associated with this project were also very well attended.

The concept of race, particularly the notion of colour, was touched upon in the interviews. This is an extremely sensitive and difficult area to explore with both parents and school staff. Could there be barriers within the education system that are discriminatory to children and families from BME backgrounds and particularly those that could be described as ‘black’? This is relevant as historically there is evidence nationally and locally that children from specific census categories who may fall within this description, under-attain. Perceptions around attainment and attitudes to learning by educational stakeholders might be associated with certain groups leading to lowered expectations and possible inappropriate provision. It should be noted that EMTAS currently runs a Black Achievement Project.

Some cultures seem to be better understood than others and have a long tradition within the UK education system of being ‘celebrated’ on particular days or being woven into the curriculum through specific topics. Perhaps the culture has strong links with a religion, easily understood cultural events, specific cuisine or artistic tradition. Others, particularly those heavily influenced by British culture might be harder to define. A walk around schools with a significant Fijian population would be interesting in terms of understanding how Fijian culture is represented within the learning environment. Similarly, it may be easy to find heroes from specific arenas such as rugby players but where might be the visual representation and stories of heroes from other lifestyles?



Fijian languages and Fiji education system

'Fiji has three official languages under the 1997 constitution (and not revoked by the 2013 Constitution): English, Fijian and Hindi. Fijian is spoken either as a first or second language by indigenous Fijians who make up around 54% of the population. Fijians of Indian descent make up a further 37%, mainly speaking a local variant of Hindi, known as Fiji Hindi. English, a remnant of British colonial rule over the islands, was the sole official language until 1997 and is widely used in government, business, and education as a lingua franca...' Wikipedia, (2018).

Bauan is the standard Fijian language although there are various other Fijian languages in existence. All Fijians understand *Bauan* and may use an additional community Fijian language as well. In the mid 1800's *Bauan* Fijian was codified into a writing system based on the Latin alphabet.

The language of instruction in Fijian schools is English. All children learn *Bauan* Fijian at primary level but tend to drop this as a subject upon transfer to secondary level although literacy rates are reportedly still high for the adult population.

The EAL factor surrounding pupils of Fijian heritage

The government definition of an EAL learner includes anyone who has been exposed to a language other than English during early *childhood 'and continues to be exposed to this language in the home or in the community'*, British Council Nexus Project (2018).

Some Fijian children are UK born, whilst others were born in Fiji or another country, usually because of a service posting through the MOD. High mobility, place of birth and linguistic decisions taken by families all contribute to the acquisition of languages other than English, including 'Fijian' language(s). The extent to which Fijian children use and actively learn their first language (L1) at home and use it as a tool for learning in school, will obviously vary between families, schools and even different localities around the UK. However, anecdotally it seems to be the case within Hampshire schools that first language is not robustly used or learned within the home setting or used as a tool for learning at school. Children will generally converse with parents and each other in English. Parents may talk between themselves in one or more Fijian languages, as well as English, and may also ask their children questions in this/these language(s), although the children will often answer in English. Fijian children appear to have better oral receptive skills than expressive skills. Most children do not seem to robustly learn to read and write *Bauan* Fijian and there



does not appear to be a tradition of attending community language classes, as is often the case for some other languages used by communities in the UK. The main contact with Fijian writing would be through the church and reading the Bible.

Whilst Fijian children appear not to be heavily influenced by their first language they must still be considered to be learning EAL. In addition to being touched by Fijian language(s), other factors are relevant including English proficiency of parents and the dialects/registers that are typically used by children and adults within the community. Families may from time to time make visits back home to Fiji. There are also cultural factors to consider. Finally, as already discussed, there may be some mobility issues (such as families moving for work) and stresses upon the family due to one parent/carer being away for long periods on active duty. Whilst some families may not have the support of near family (such as grandparents) the Fijian community is close-knit and very supportive. Lack of robust learning of first language may be an important element in the complex story of educational attainment of Fijian children. There is unequivocal evidence that gaining age appropriate literacy in first language aids acquisition of English and other additional languages; a useful summary of research can be accessed online e.g. ERIC Digest - ED329130, Lewelling (1991). Factors that are known to influence the active and continued learning of first language(s) by UK children include:

- First language literacy rates of parents
- Clear understanding of the benefits of multilingualism
- Time and desire to promote first language learning
- Availability of tutors and/or local community language schools
- Access to authentic materials in first language

Fijian children beyond early years (and potentially including some at this phase) would typically be described as more advanced EAL learners. This term is hard to define but advanced learners have been described as *'...pupils who have had all or most of their school education in the UK and whose oral proficiency in English is usually indistinguishable from that of pupils with English as a first language but whose writing may still show distinctive features related to their language background.'*, Ofsted 2005

Between 2017 and 2018, in the January census, the DfE required schools to submit data on the English proficiency of all EAL learners according to a 5 point scale from A (New to English) through to E (Fluent). In most cases Fijian children at KS 1 and beyond will be working within bands C (Developing Confidence) and D (Competent). The requirement for schools to submit English proficiency to the DfE in the January census has been dropped from 2019. In 2017, The BELL Foundation took this 5 point A-E EAL summative assessment categorisation and developed it into an EAL formative assessment





framework that is now being applied by Hampshire EMTAS across all its maintained schools and academies.

Some possible ways forward

1. The appointment of a Fijian-heritage home:school keyworker to the EMTAS team.
2. A renewed focus on 'Advanced EAL Learner' training/projects with a specific focus on schools that have a significant Fijian population.
3. Attempt to establish Fijian language schools in key areas such as the New Forest and Rushmoor.
4. Work to develop topics/schemes of work that have elements of non-stereotypical Fijian representation and celebration of Fijian heroes from all walks of life – this could involve Hampshire's Rights and Diversity Education Centre (RADE).

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July 2018

