

Fijian Education, The Community and the Teacher

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The issue of Fijian education has been the subject of many vigorous and often heated discussions among teachers, parents, politicians, reporters and other members of the community in rural and urban areas. I would like to consider the issue from a new and innovative angle devoid of the subjectivity and the emotionalism of previous discussions. I would also like to offer solutions which at first consideration might seem impractical but are valid and thought-provoking. Although in this issue the ethnic Fijian student as a child and adolescent should be the focal point of study, I feel that some emphasis should be placed on teachers and the community as they play a significant role in facilitating a love of learning in young Fijians. There are stereotyped views acting as stifling barriers to learning that need to be removed once and for all. I shall pinpoint some of these misconceptions.

Parental misconceptions of education

For many Fijian parents the academic success of the child is seen mainly in relation to how this will provide benefits or security for them later. Education is not viewed as something intrinsic in itself for the child's own intellectual development. Yet here again confusion remains in many parents, for outwardly they display attitudes of enlightenment that embrace the two viewpoints (i.e. education for their security and education for the child's own development) but they are half-hearted in their practical approach to the latter.

I suspect that the polarization of views is due to fear and insecurity. On one hand, they want conservative traditional attitudes in their educated children and on the other hand expect them to be highly educated and acquire more of the white man's goods. I suspect that some teachers have not helped clarify the issue for fear that this might mean a drop in the school roll. I have met many Fijian parents who have said time and again that they do not believe in formal education. "Look at the number of youths joining the ranks of the unemployed. Look at jobless graduates. My sons would be better off planting yaqona."

Talk like this worries some teachers, especially Principals and Vice-Principals. They know that a rise in the school roll under the present

system means a big jump in salary scales with many thousands of dollars difference. A decrease in the roll would mean lower pay.

Religious misconceptions

Some Fijians have a stereotyped distrust of education which is deeply rooted in Christianity. Sometimes they see too much education as making their children disrespectful and showing a disregard for the traditional values of elders with their store of empirical wisdom. They also see education as causing dissension in the clan. With their fundamental religious outlook they reinforce these beliefs with biblical passages such as: "And I gave my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived also that this is vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief and he that increaseth knowledge increases sorrow." (*Gideon International Bible*, Ecclesiastes, Chap. 1, Verse 17-18.)

Some Fijians have used their education to defraud simple village people. There is also a tendency for rural Fijians to see people with too much education as being swollen-headed and those with little education as dangerous. Some Fijians unfortunately do not place a greater priority on education because there is security in their land. One frequently hears Fijians saying "Noqu Kalou, Noqu Vanua," (My God, my country) which is very good. But it would be appropriate too in these economical hard times if they placed greater emphasis on education and said: "Noqu Kalou, Noqu Vuli" (My God, my education).

Low self-esteem

Low self-esteem seems to be the great plight of Fijian learners. However, the concept of self-esteem should be considered from a historical perspective. Generally, Fijians place no abstract value on high or low self-esteem. Individual "being" or "consciousness" is often of secondary importance to the collective conscience. Their perception of esteem in terms of application in cognitive pursuits tends to follow the mainstream view held by the group. The seemingly confused perception of self-esteem seems to me to be caused by the narrowness of behavioural objectives in the classrooms. This has caused many Fijians to lack competition and sometimes to attribute success or failure to outside factors.

Cultural conditioning too has made Fijians view life in terms of *co-*

operative interaction and not as a highly individualistic pursuit. At times there is no urgency in life, hence the complacent attitude. However, this is not to suggest that Fijian learners lack innovation or cherish idleness. Fijians can be made to be competitive and ambitious by conditioning in the classroom. Subjects that have narrow behavioural objectives should be widened in scope to have a number of objectives, some of which the learners could reject outright. This might have the effect of stimulating and challenging the students into greater intellectual activity.

Teachers' roles

The teacher's role should be greater. He should not just have high expectations of Fijian learners. He must display greater personal and pedagogical skills in order to inspire and facilitate a love of learning in them. A very outdated attitude I find in some teachers is that they want children to treat them like demi-Gods, as if they were repositories of knowledge. They believe education begins and ends with them. Many of these teachers mask their inferiority complexes, caused by their lack of reading, research or extension studies, with behaviour which is highly detrimental to learners.

Learning should be a co-operative effort where the teacher encourages young people to learn by self-discovery and research. I am not ashamed to learn from my students and to appreciate their innovations.

In some Fijian junior secondary and secondary schools there are teachers who are not as well read as expected. They lack articulateness and are sadly out of touch with the aesthetic requirements of education. As an example, I. Cokanasiga wrote:

I am afraid that many of us lost out on quality education simply because the system of education which produced us did not interest itself in quality education. I remember certain physically tough teachers forcing me and some of my contemporaries at school to cram page after page of facts and statistical data.¹

Education should not be thought of as something for Asians and foreigners. Teachers should promote education outside the classroom, around the yaqona bowl, in PTA meetings, on radio programmes and through their students. Education should be viewed as beneficial in these hard times.

Sports and school work

Some teachers have commented on how well Fijians do in sports. Could this type of enthusiasm be channelled to school work? Certainly, but it would require a radical departure from the current methods of teaching where the teacher talks most of the time and drums facts, figures and knowledge into the learners. Students must not remain passive, memorising facts for examinations. They must find school work mentally challenging by self-inquiry, Socratic-type questioning and research. They must find the work challenging enough to expend the energy required to achieve their educational goals.

Proficiency in reading and writing

A prerequisite for high academic achievement is the ability to speak and write one's own language or the second language one uses in studying well. When one is able to express oneself lucidly and think rationally one can break barriers that often hinder learning. Proficiency in a language can be achieved by reading quality books. Some teachers are under the illusion that reading, any reading, is educational. Most teachers read mainly comics, detective novels, thrillers and salacious romances in the vein of Harold Robbins. (The teacher often reads these books because he faces many work pressures and therefore must relax with light reading matter.) The problem is that the teacher unconsciously inculcates in his students this feeling for ephemeral literature.

Most books in the school library, like the Enid Blyton series, Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys and Biggles, depict black people not only as villains but as idiotic too. (A highly placed officer in a large Government book-distributing department expressed grave concern to me at the amount of garbage that was being shelled out to Fijian school libraries just to create an impression of efficiency.) In comics like Tarzan and Phantom (which Fijian children are addicted to) where the white protagonists are clad in gaudy underwear and fight evil, the villains are invariably bumbling black idiots or have the mentality of animals. The young Fijian should be forgiven if he thinks he is genetically inferior to the Caucasian in regards to Western education.²

The factor of *negative book accessibility* in rural Fijian schools means that they are often the dumping grounds for books donated by well-meaning

organisations like the Jaycees or the Asia Foundation. Books that are too provincial, too difficult to comprehend or irrelevant to the curriculum are often included, due to poor distribution systems of these organisations. A solution would be for the Fijian Affairs Board through its education budget to purchase more quality local and overseas books and involve Fijian librarians in the selection process. Or, the Library Services of Fiji could have more *Target schools* in rural areas so that high calibre fiction and non-fiction books can be made available to more Fijian students.

Junior secondary schools

I have written elsewhere against Junior secondary schools and how they seem to undermine Fijian education. Many of the points I raised have also been raised by others and as a result some changes and improvements have been carried out by the Ministry of Education.

The problem of Fijian schools being understaffed has been corrected. Though one sometimes wonders how a Fijian school fully staffed with at least twenty percent 'Grant-in-Aid' teachers with few qualifications in education, or experience, can be positive. Away from the watchful eyes of education officers, some of these teachers do shoddy work. All Grant-in-Aid teachers should take six monthly tests on teaching skills, including their roles as motivators of learning and cognitive development.

Education officers rarely make visits to rural schools especially those with poor shipping schedules or bus transport. When they do make visits they tend to be more impressed with the *yaqona* root they are offered than analysing the roots of school problems. Even qualified teachers feel resentment when they compare their greater work load in a boarding school, for which they receive no additional monetary rewards, to their counterparts in day schools.

All qualified teachers should furnish up to date schemes of work and teaching aids. These would be based on criteria of excellence to be set by the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU). Every two years, teachers should take excellence tests to alleviate complacency and shoddy work. Although teachers would not be penalised for doing poorly, all posts of responsibility should be given to those who do well in these tests. In other words, laggards remain at the bottom and don't rise if they don't work. The past practice where assistant teachers had their increments doubled if they

performed well in the classroom should be reinstated.

Merit, not seniority, should be the important force in teaching. Because of their inaccessibility or remoteness, many junior secondary schools cannot keep in touch or keep pace with innovative educational developments. Even CDU circulars tend to get *lost* in the mail. Professional journals should be disseminated widely. Short in-service courses should be carried out at regular intervals. The Fijian Teachers' Association branches could hold more seminars and workshops.

There is a problem of poor equipment in science laboratories, and a lack of appropriate library books, readers, textbooks and furniture. But this could be improved with better planning and budgeting by school management.

In another paper I asserted that boarding school life appeared to have adverse effects on Fijian students. Life was too impersonal. Even if the environment was conducive to learning it was coercive in nature because of the military-cum reformatory school atmosphere. Punishment and reprimands were part of life as *big brother* watched every move. When one studied it was not out of desire but for fear of being punished. Added to that was the often poor diet and health habits in the school.

Students used each other's towels, underwear and toothbrushes if only to be accepted in the *lala* or peer group. The end result was that the student was either constipated, had stomach complaints or skin diseases and was none the better for his experience. One solution would be for all matters regarding food and cooking in boarding schools to be the responsibility of the National Food and Nutrition Committee.³ Apart from giving short-term training to cooks they should give boarding schools a rating of excellence from A to E based on whether the food being cooked is considered a balanced diet. All schools with a D or E rating should have their school management committees informed. They should be disciplined by having their grants cut and having their schools revert to day schools. Funds could be better used in purchasing punts, outboard motors, oil or fares for transportation.

Another problem is the proper housing of boarders. In many schools the pathetic conditions of the dormitories should be a source for grave concern. Students who live in rotting, leaking or hot dormitories without the benefit of insulation or ceilings cannot be expected to perform well in the classroom. Principals shouldn't vacillate in dealing with committees. If

grants are not forthcoming from the Government, attempts should be made to raise money through bazaars, film nights and other means.

Home environment

Many people assumed that because only 48% of Fijian students live with their parents compared to 89% of Indians, the problems of poor academic achievement would be alleviated by having more Fijian students staying with their parents.⁴

Many Fijian parents with low socio-economic status do not offer much conditioning to their children. These children are often left to their own devices and are not usually supervised or encouraged to allocate time to studying or reading books every day. Rewards for these activities are absent. There is a lack of motivation.

The traditional ceremonies of Fijians are the cause of some financial constraints. School fees are often paid late. This is because greater priority is placed on traditional obligations. Some fathers have no qualms about sending their children to the shop to buy yaqona or to mix yaqona when the children are busy doing academic work. Besides, it seems something of an oddity to have a child studying in a room filled with visitors consuming yaqona and exchanging pleasantries.

Filipe Bole stated:

I believe that the lack of motivation and perseverance often quoted as reasons for unsatisfactory performance of Fijian children in schools is rooted in the indifference of parents and teachers. It is the parents and teachers who must show more concern for the future of the Fijian children. The expression, continuously, of this concern, through parents showing more interest in what their children are doing in schools and how they are progressing...and through teachers' advice on how and why they are teaching Fijian children, should and must provide something for those children to work towards and aspire for.⁵

If one has to choose the lesser of two evils, the boarding school might be better for the Fijian student because being an evolving institution it can be subjected to changes and positive ones at that. (Deep seated parental views require revolutionary changes.)

Principals

Much has been said too about inexperienced principals in Fijian secondary schools. A young principal can only be bad if he is too liberal and lacks administrative skills. With the Ministry and the Public Service Commission thoroughly vetting all appointments, the issue of inexperienced principals can be dismissed.

An older principal can be detrimental if he comes in with preconceived ideas of education and administration which he has learnt from his colonial mentors. He usually lacks innovation and is often too restrictive in leadership style. The autocratic atmosphere he creates causes resentment in Fijian students who fail to achieve or achieve in a *coercive cocoon*. This means that for students to continue succeeding they have to have someone like *big brother* pushing them all the time. Without this they don't have any other motivation to learn. But on the other hand, there are many old principals whose presence in the school is a stabilising factor.

In conclusion, I believe that the teacher can be an influential agent of positive change as regards Fijian education. As Dr. Nandan said: "As teachers, your influence is widespread and pervasive; from the village to the city; from the mind of a child to the mind of a nation. It is therefore your duty both individually and collectively to bring a new awareness into society of the issues that confront us."⁶

Notes

1. Cokanasiga, Isimeli (1983) 'Participation of Teacher Organizations in Education Change in Fiji.' *F.T.U. Journal*, December, p. 41.
2. Veramu, J. (1984) 'The Promotion of a Positive Children's Literature in Fiji.' *Teaching News*, No. 5, August.
3. *Fiji Food and Nutrition Newsletter*, September 1980, No. 8, p. 3.
4. Volatabu, J. (1983) 'A Realistic view of Fijian Education Today.' *F.T.A. Journal*, December, p. 81.
5. Bole, Filipe (1980) 'Motivation and Perseverance.' *Fiji Education* No. 1, January, p. 34.
6. Nandan, Satendra (1983) 'Address' in *F.T.U. Journal*, 11, p. 12.