

*Unaisi Nabobo*

Most indigenous Pacific islanders would have been brought up with certain cultural values which give them their distinctive Pacific identities. Even the most educated (in the western sense) will readily admit that it is the impact of their early education that allows them to exist and be appropriate and acceptable in their communities.

This paper is an attempt to explore a number of cultural values and their implications for schooling. It is my thesis that most indigenous Pacific cultures emphasize cultural values which are antithetical to schooling.

#### **Communal vs individual aspirations**

Many of our Pacific cultures emphasize community or communal living and work as opposed to individual aspirations for the sake of individual advancement. A close look at the Fijian village for instance will reflect a picture where individual homes are dwarfed by two communally owned buildings; the Church and the community hall. Churches are important because they symbolise reverence to God. In the last century, these would have been in the form of *Bure kalou* or house of worship. The *Bure kalou* was usually the tallest building in a village; its height was meant to take the priests (*bete*) closer to the realm of the supernatural in heaven (*Lagi*). Today, Fijians build churches as big as they can afford and value them greatly. They are also status symbols as one village compares itself to another. Then there is the community hall, which is symbolic of the unity and wealth of the village. Needless to say, these two buildings are expensive, but their building usually take precedence over other items of expenditure.

Because homes are generally small, there is lack of privacy and this affects school children who need a suitable place for evening study. This has been identified by earlier researchers like Tierney (1971); Veramu (1992); Kaye (1984) and Singh

(1992). Since individual needs are not catered for in the home, a possible solution is to use the community hall for study. Under the guidance of elders, students can all be together and do their homework or study.

#### **Competition and the maintenance of good relations**

While the system of ranking children according to their performance in exams has long been discarded in many countries such as Britain, Australia and New Zealand, this system persists in the Pacific. Prize-giving Day is eagerly awaited by the prize-winners and their families, (but only by them). Perhaps the emphasis on competition among individuals should be discarded in the Pacific, too, for the following reason. There is a lack of desire for competition among most indigenous Pacific people. This is not to say that socio-culturally Pacific people are not competitive, but competition is not encouraged if it means the ruining of relationships or the disturbing of peaceful coexistence. To be competing against one's own classmates is not considered good; it actually reflects improper socialisation. There may be competition between two distinctively different groups, however. This may explain, in part, the good performance of indigenous Fijian students in Indian schools. In Solomon Islands, Ninnes (1991) has this to say of competition among Western Province school children that he observed:

... the competition was between teams and not between individuals. This ensured that any one individual's superior skill benefited the team rather than the individual, and helped to maintain good relationships within the group.

(Ninnes 1991: 156-157).

The maintaining of good relationships is a cultural value emphasized amongst Pacific indigenous people. This is of paramount

importance amongst the people of the Western Province in Solomon Islands (Ninnes 1991). Ninnes states that culturally approved behaviours and manners of speech are emphasized so as to promote good relationships among people. In Fiji, to pursue a good life is a key goal in a village. This to a large extent is achieved by the maintenance of good relationships within the community.

There are culturally approved behaviours which help maintain good relationships. The cultural values of respect, humility, sharing, reciprocity and consensus all contribute to the maintaining of good relationships. Respect involves proper behaviour and is particularly expected of children by the older generation and of everyone else by the chief, or of the learner by the teacher or the acknowledged expert. Respect is shown through not being loud in the presence of the respected, the learner has his head bowed, and there is social distance (the learner is considered lower than that of the respected). Between a child and an adult, the child is expected to respect the older by listening and obeying. Ninnes noted further that when questions are asked, they are asked to gain information and advice, there is no probing and no unnecessary questioning or talking by children when adults are around. Some parents even discourage children altogether from asking questions:

... if kids ask questions, parents will say "Sss in no ask" (Shh, don't ask) or if they ask "na vea?" (Why?) the parents will say "pude vegua" (just because or that's the way it is) or iu, no kasem taem fo ask question olsem (the time hasn't yet come for you to ask questions like that..... (Ninnes 1991: 185).

Levin (1978) found the same among the Tubuians, and it is also true of Fijians, as found by Ravuvu (1983). Teaero (1998) also noted it among the I-Kiribati people. This maintaining of good relationships, he says, can actually stop children from asking questions as they may be seen as an affront to the adult or *te-boto* (teacher).

Humility involves not making oneself appear better or higher than others. Humility is also manifest in generosity and sharing.

These cultural values mean that Pacific schoolchildren lack the competitive spirit when it comes to competing against classmates. It goes against the grain for a Pacific Islander brought up to practise respect and humility. Their teachers use the concept of competition to urge the children to work harder, not understanding that good relationships are more important than having to perform at one's best. Ninnes (1991: 59) said that "there is this desire for social cohesion through maintenance of good relationships which takes precedence over individual advancement, or economic and political concerns, and often takes the form of cooperation".

### The supernatural vs positivistic

Positivism by Comte (1798-1857) and in particular modern 20<sup>th</sup> century development of the same, is concerned with linguistic analysis and the verification of empirical statements by observation. Much of what happens in the classroom is based on this or is related to this. The Fijian world on the other hand is filled with the belief in the supernatural; man's association with nature and the spirit world. Life on earth (*vuravura*) is not only secular; it is closely tied to spiritualism, nature, the heavens and so on. Thus, when someone falls ill, Fijians may explain it to be the result of the person's inappropriate behaviour or sorcery of some kind. This happens even if the sick person is really old. The term *baubau* is used to mean that the 'physical' sickness was conjointly affecting the sick person together with some supernatural power which was evil or bad. Increasingly today, Christian beliefs are replacing these beliefs in the supernatural. So when someone dies, people say that it was God's will, *lewa ni Kalou*. In fact with today's almost extremist rightist versions of Fijian Christianity, everything is supposedly God's will, wrath, blessing or plan; there is strong belief in spiritual causation. This is replacing the 'old' notions of the supernatural and Fijians who still advocate traditional or old beliefs in their native gods are said to be *vakatevoro*, ie engaging with the devil. This

paradigmatic shift in belief systems is one of the main forces affecting the life of the Fijian in transition today, but the belief in the supernatural has not lessened.

The world of the school, on the other hand, is about empiricism, about nurturing the child to analyse, measure, observe, weigh, ie use the five senses to verify truth. Scientific observation is promoted. This is a big step in the opposite direction from the Fijian child's familiar world. These western processes allow a great deal of control over the physical world through science and technology. The scientific/positivistic outlook involves 'imagined situations of no personal or immediate relevance to the student and include: extensive verbal comparing and contrasting; extensive generalising; hypothesising unrelated to a practical task; evaluating objectively other people's or culture's beliefs and extensive summarising, enquiring, justifying, clarifying, interpreting and challenging' (Harris 1990: 6).

### **The holistic vs the compartmentalised**

It is not possible to talk about Fijian land, kinship, or beliefs as distinct entities. They belong to a whole; they are inter-related. Similarly, a person does not exist alone; one's existence is explained in relation to other people. If someone has drawn public attention to himself or herself, Fijians will not single out that person alone, they will explain the person in terms of his/her father, mother, family, village, tribe, etc.

Kinship ties are important and so too are a person's place of residence and origin. A Fijian will say, "I am Pita from Kadavu." This is said not only for the purpose of giving information. This statement comes with Pita's feelings of belonging, of relatedness both to his land and to other members of his clan.

When in modern economic thinking, therefore, big areas of land are referred to as vacant, lying idle and useless, needing to be leased to those that can put the land to good use; the Fijian is astounded. 'Empty' land in the European eye is 'filled' in the native eye; for land is a source of identity,

of strength, it is insurance, it is alive. According to Fijians who still believe in 'old' beliefs, land houses the spirits. Very often one can hear Fijians referring to a block of land, or forest area as *tawa*, meaning it contains spirits. The word *tawa* implies to potential users, or those that tread or trespass on it, that the land needs to be respected, in terms of not abusing the trees by extreme cutting or by being relatively quiet when one is on the land.

The Fijian world then is filled with inter-related parts. So in modern economic activities such as borrowing money to start a business, Fijians do not compartmentalise things. Often one hears that so and so is treating his company or the bank of which he is manager like a village. To a large extent it is to do with this holistic relationship; Fijians cannot separate work from kinsmen or kinsmen from clients. The school is the same. Pupils may not be able to separate play from studies, or their attitude at home from that needed at school. The school compartmentalizes everything: time, subjects, teachers, departments and so forth, while the Fijian thrives in 'relatedness'.

### **Time orientations**

In school, there is rigid scheduling of activities. Certain activities are done at certain times. This strict structuring of activities is new to children and is directly contradictory to values learnt in the community where time is not adhered to in this way. The Tubuians of French Polynesia, for instance, organise activities around the 'natural day'. The family wakes up at dawn and activities begin and slow down after sunset. Meal times are not rigidly scheduled. Children are not sent to bed; they sleep when they are ready (Levin 1978). This loose structuring of activities and the importance of waiting for participant readiness is the same both with Fijians and the I-Kiribati. With Fijians, seasonal time indicators are used. For example a particular month is marked by the arrival, in big numbers, of particular fish. Time is also vaguely explained in terms of events like the birth of a person. For example, a person will say, "We went to Nadi last when so and so

was born". Fijians are not an exacting people when it comes to time. Ceremonies or events take place when participants are ready. It is not uncommon, for instance, for a village meeting that was supposed to begin 'after lunch' to actually start at 4 pm or even later. Events will begin when the necessary attendants arrive. This is also because of the importance of keeping good interpersonal relations. Not to wait for some people before a ceremony begins is to be saying in effect that they weren't important enough to be waited for. Ninnes (1991) has noted similar treatment of time in the Western Province in Solomon Islands.

### Verbalising

In most indigenous Pacific societies, children are not encouraged to talk a lot. Verbalising is not seen as a positive point with growing children. Ritchie and Ritchie (1979), writing on Polynesian childhood, stated that, generally, learning occurs by observation, imitation and participation, and that verbal interactions primarily instigated for the purpose of learning are rare.

With Fijians, adults would normally not expect children to take part in conversations and when a child does, they are told, *kua ni silima na gau ni dali* (don't interrupt) or *tikolo* (shut up) or *siosio* (to be cheeky and endeavour to say/do something inappropriate). On the other hand, children who are quiet, listen passively, follow instructions and advice with very few or no questions are favoured. They are praised and made to feel worthy of being born and a pleasure to have around. A child is said to be *dauvakarorogo* (good listener), *dau galu tu ga* (always quiet) and *vinaka* (good). These are seen as valuable assets of a child.

Teaero (1998), speaking of the case of the I-Kiribati, said that a learner learns to accept what is given by the *te-boto* (guardian of knowledge, or teacher). The *te-boto* is not questioned by the learner, as to ask questions is to be seen as challenging the authority of the *te-boto*; this is not acceptable.

Levin (1978), wrote of the same among the Tubuai people. He noted that among the

Tubuians, parents hardly used verbal explanations in the socialisation of their children. These cultural values have implications on classroom learning as the whole world of school is about verbalising.

### Conclusion

Despite the many differences in cultural values of indigenous Pacific islanders, the few mentioned in the paper seem to be shared by a number of them. These include the importance of maintaining good interpersonal relationships, the encouraging of the communal good as opposed to individualism or individual achievement, the importance of cooperation rather than competition, time and people's readiness, and lack of verbalising.

Clearly there are major differences between the culture of the classroom and that of the indigenous Pacific children. These major differences need to be understood by teachers and other interested parties involved in schooling in the Pacific, because these differences may unnecessarily cause difficulties in teaching and learning, and may actually adversely affect the achievement of pupils. However, an understanding of this antithetical relationship may assist teachers to use strategies of teaching and learning that are most suited to particular contexts. They may enhance student learning and achievement.

Schooling and classroom practices must acknowledge and be made to adjust to and reflect the cultural contexts within which they exist. Thaman (1997) reiterates the goal of the 1991 Rarotonga Conference on Education and Culture saying:

Participants reaffirmed their wish to ensure that schooling in general and the school curriculum in particular, must seriously acknowledge and value the cultural milieu in which Pacific children are socialised, as disregard for this would further hinder their ability to benefit from schooling or develop positive cultural identities (1997: 3).

## Bibliography

- Harris, Stephen** (1990). *Two-way Aboriginal Schooling: Education and Cultural Survival*. Canberra. Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Kaye, T.** (1984). The Use of Autonomous Discussion Groups in the University of the South Pacific. In *International Journal of Education Development*, Vol. 4 (1): 85-90.
- Levin, P.F.** (1978). Students and Teachers on Tubuai: A Cultural Analysis of Polynesian Classroom Interaction. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of California, San Diego.
- Ninnes, P.** (1991). Culture and Learning in Western Province, Solomon Islands. MA thesis, Flinders University, South Australia.
- Ravuvu, A.** (1983) *The Fijian Way of Life*. Suva Institute of Pacific Studies.
- Ritchie, J. and J. Ritchie** (1979). *Growing up in Polynesia*. Auckland. Allen and Unwin.
- Singh, G.** (1992) An Ethnographic Study of Curriculum Implementation in Two Primary Schools in Fiji. PhD thesis. The University of Auckland.
- Teaero, T.** (1998) Lecture to ED451: Education and Culture Students, USP, Suva. 21 September, 1998.
- Thaman, K.** (1997) Kakala: a Pacific Concept of Teaching and Learning. Keynote address, Australian College of Education National Conference, Cairns.
- Tierney, M.P.** (1971). A Study of Factors Affecting the Academic Performance of the Rural Fijian Students. MA thesis, San Francisco State College.
- Veramu, J.** (1992) Solevu School and Community: A Case Study in Non-Formal Education. M Phil thesis, The University of the South Pacific, Suva.