

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION IN THE CLASSROOM: The Complete Ethic and the Pacific Way

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It is widely agreed that education systems of the Pacific have been strongly influenced by western curricula and teaching methods. Another kind of influence, less easy to study, is that of the "competitive ethic" implied by the classroom organization and assessment policies used in typical western education systems. The tendency of teachers to encourage interpersonal competition (Who can get the correct answer first?) and to rank pupils in classroom tests (Who will be top of the class? Only the top 50% will pass) illustrate how this competitive ethic is fostered. Although many 'humanistic' educators have moved away from some of the more extreme forms of competitiveness in the classroom, the shift has tended to be towards individualism — the development of teaching techniques which cater to the 'needs' of the individual student.

In analysing the impact of 'western' education systems on non-western countries,¹ the emphasis given to individualistic and competitive orientations to education is an important feature to note, both because of the pervasiveness of these two value orientations in western education, and because of the relative lack of awareness that these two orientations are part of the cultural baggage western educators bring to the development of non-western education systems. However, it is necessary to demonstrate that these value orientations affect the behaviour of students if the foregoing analysis is to be given some support.

STUDIES ON CO-OPERATION AND COMPETITION IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS AND NEW ZEALAND

Several studies have been conducted, using the Madsen co-operation board, on the extent to which Pacific Island and New Zealand children show co-operative or competitive behaviour. The co-operation board is structured in such a way that the four children participating can only achieve their goal, of collecting as many 2-cent coins as they can, if they co-operate with one another (see Thomas, 1975)² for a detailed description of the co-operation board. The co-operation board was administered to groups of 11 — 13 year old

children in the Cook Islands, Fiji, Western Samoa and New Zealand, during 1977 and it was clear that all the children were highly motivated to work for the 2-cent coins. However, as shown in Table 1, it was also clear that the New Zealand European children and the Cook Islands children were much less successful in achieving co-operation, and earning coins, than the Fijian and Samoan children.

TABLE 1
Proportion of Co-operative Groups

Samoa	75%
Fiji	71%
Cook Islands	13%
New Zealand	12%

These results appear to indicate that the New Zealand and Cook Islands children were maladaptively competitive in that they were unable to co-operate even though it would have paid them to. Earlier research, using the co-operation board, in the Cook Islands in 1974 showed co-operation rates of 63% (Rarotonga) and 45% (Aitutaki). It appears that Cook Islands children have become much less co-operative during the last few years.

Another measurement technique which has been used in the Pacific Islands and New Zealand is a reward allocation task or "coin game" (Graves and Graves). In this task one child in each pair of children allocates 1-cent coins between the 2 of them. Over a series of 9 trials it is possible to determine the extent to which each child shows one of four strategies. These are equalization (sharing equally), self-maximization (getting the most for oneself), generosity (giving more to the other child) and rivalry (giving oneself more than the other child). The choices were structured so it was not possible to show both rivalry and self-maximization, that is, the rivalrous strategy resulted in receiving fewer coins in order to beat the other child. The outcomes for the same 4 groups which used the co-operation board are shown in Table 2. As can be seen from the table, the Samoan children clearly showed

TABLE 2
Proportion of Rivalrous and Generous
'Choices on the Coin Game'

	Rivalrous	Equalization and Self-Maximization	Generous
Samoa	34%	26%	40%
Fiji	50%	36%	14%
Cook Islands	64%	26%	10%
New Zealand	58%	31%	11%

the least rivalrous and most generous choices, while the Cook Islands and New Zealand children showed the most rivalrous and least generous choices. The choices of the Fijian children on rivalry and generosity were in between those of the other groups. These results indicate that most of the New Zealand and Cook Islands children were prepared to take fewer coins in order to beat the other child, even though it was clear that all the children were keen to get the coins. Thus their rivalrous or competitive motivation had a greater influence than self-interest or sharing when distributing the coins. It is possible that some of the children interpreted the task as being a situation where competition was appropriate, but as there was no suggestion of any competitive orientation in the instructions, the children would have brought this interpretation to the situation.

The behaviour of the children on the two tasks indicates that the European children were predominantly individualistic and competitive, which prevented them from being successful on the tasks. In contrast, most of the Pacific Island children showed sharing, co-operative behaviour which led to higher rates of success in terms of the number of coins received.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

A number of studies have compared the social behaviours and communication patterns of Polynesian and European groups. If teachers are to communicate with children effectively, it is necessary for teachers to learn the ways in which children may communicate in the classroom, particularly if the children have a different cultural background from the teacher. The following studies outline a few of the possible differences in communication patterns among Polynesian and European children. Green, in a study of Hawaiian-American children found that patterns of seeking help from an adult were different from Anglo-American children.³ Specifically she found that Hawaiian-American preschoolers showed a relatively high frequency of non-verbal help-seeking behaviours such as: looking at the teacher, alternately looking at the teacher and the work on the child's desk, and silently approaching a teacher and standing close by. Green also noted that verbal help-seeking attempts were more frequently rewarded by the teacher than non-verbal attempts, and that the teachers perceived the more verbally fluent children as being brighter. A similar set of studies reported by McKessar and Thomas indicated that New Zealand Maori children (11-13 years old) were less likely to show direct or verbal help-seeking, such as putting up their hand or calling out, compared to European children in a classroom situation.⁴ However, Maori children were more likely to show non-verbal behaviours which could be interpreted as help-seeking, such as changes in facial expressions, making various noises such as sighing, looking away from the task and head scratching.

Communication patterns among mothers and their pre-school children were investigated by the author⁵ in a study which compared Cook Islands and European mother-child pairs in a situation where the mothers were teaching their child how to do 2 simple tasks. Three distinct patterns of communication were evident. High socio-economic status (SES) European mothers tended to: smile at their children frequently, look at the faces of their children frequently, and talk to their children regularly throughout the duration of the task. The children of these mothers tended to reciprocate the smiling but not the looking. It appeared that the children did not need to look at their mothers very much for information about how well they were doing the task as the mothers were providing sufficient verbal feedback.

The low SES European mothers rarely smiled at their children and looked at their faces only occasionally. The children of these mothers did not smile much, but looked at their mothers occasionally. The mothers talked to the children to a moderate extent during the task.

Cook Islands mothers who were living in Rarotonga smiled frequently at their children and looked at their faces frequently. The children smiled at their mothers frequently and looked at the faces of their mothers frequently. However the pattern of talking was different from the European mothers, in that the mothers tended to give directions at the beginning of the task but not to talk much to the children during the task. It appeared that the children sought and received information about how they were doing on the task through the non-verbal behaviours of smiling and looking.

Thus the differences in communication patterns appeared to be related to social class and cultural differences among the three groups.

The cultural characteristics evident among the Polynesian groups in these studies are consistent with observational accounts of socialization and social relationships in Polynesian communities. Levy has noted the relatively high degree of sensitivity to social cues and the emotional tone of an interaction, particularly in non-verbal behaviour, and low intensity of communication between parents and children in Tahitian families.⁶ These characteristics appear to be related to the relatively low degree of parental supervision of children and the extent to which other family members, besides the mother and father, are involved in looking after young children in Polynesian communities.⁷

Although many teachers who have grown up in the Pacific Islands would be aware of differences in communication styles between Pacific Islanders and Europeans, many European teachers are not aware of such differences and often interpret the behaviour of children differently from the way it is interpreted in the local community. A good example of this was provided by Forman (reported in Gallimore et al, 1974, p.219) who filmed the behaviour of Filipino children in Hawaiian schools. The American teachers described the

behaviour of these children in generally negative terms such as "hanging around", "uninvolved", "withdrawn". However, Filipino mothers described the same behaviours more positively as "observing", "watching", "learning".

It was clear that the teachers' expectations of appropriate classroom behaviour were different from, and inconsistent with, the behaviour that the children had learned in their homes. Assuming that teachers are able to organize the social structure of their classrooms to suit the cultural background of the children, finding a classroom structure which is effective for learning, but which does not directly conflict with expectations of children's behaviour in non-school settings, will be easier than attempting massive changes in social behaviour in the school, or only teaching effectively those children who are able to adapt to the different expectations in the school system. Of course a cynic might argue that if what is taught in the school will only help the children adapt to a lifestyle in a country other than their own, perhaps it is better that teaching is relatively ineffective and that large numbers of children leave school without the opportunity to experience further dramatic changes in life-style.

CLASSROOM ORGANISATION AND EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

Several research programmes in the United States have initiated innovative teaching strategies which involve the use of co-operation between children in the classroom⁸ and interdependent learning groups.⁹ These research programmes have shown positive outcomes, for group-oriented classroom organization, compared to individualistic or competitive organization.¹⁰ These outcomes include improvement in school achievement, attitudes to school, attitudes to the teacher, and attitudes to other children in the classroom. Several of the research reports suggest that under-achieving children show the most dramatic gains in performance.¹¹

If group-oriented teaching techniques can lead to higher educational achievement among European children, the possibility arises that Polynesian and other Pacific Island children might show even greater gains in an education system which allowed them to learn in a social context which was compatible with their preferred styles of social behaviour. If education is seen as developing behaviour which allows an individual to adapt to a variety of situations¹², then presumably the New Zealand European children lacked the ability to co-operate even when it was in their interest to do so. It can be argued that European children learn to be maladaptively competitive in non-school situations, as well as in school. However, even if this is plausible, schools could still broaden the range of behaviours children are able to use by providing situations in which children could work together co-operatively and

not be penalised for doing so. Most people, when they leave school, will be working in situations which require some degree of co-operative social behaviour with other people, as well as individual work. Those children who are able to work alone, work with others or compete as is appropriate for the situation will presumably be at an advantage, compared to children who can only work alone or compete against others.

In many of the Pacific Islands, sharing, co-operation and generosity are positively valued social qualities in a variety of situations. Although competition is also frequent, it is usually intergroup competition, involving co-operation within groups, rather than interpersonal competition. In this case many of the negative social effects of intense interpersonal competition are avoided, such as trying to stop one's opponent succeeding, or withholding scarce resources such as books, so that other students cannot get access to them. If the concept of "The Pacific Way" (the term used by Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara to describe patterns of behaviour common to many of the Pacific Islands) is to be taken seriously there could well be a reorientation in the social organization of classrooms in the Pacific Islands. Learning can be just as effective (and probably more effective) if it is done in situations where sharing and helping are allowed and encouraged rather than just working alone and trying to beat other students. It may well be that competitive and individualistic education systems, which train individuals for future leadership roles, will tend to produce people who are not likely to want to use their skills for the benefit of the community as a whole, but rather to migrate to urban and industrial areas in search of greater opportunity for individual economic advancement.¹³ This presents a dilemma for educationalists in developing nations. How can the successfully educated elite be encouraged to use their skills for the benefit of the community as a whole if the major emphasis in their education has been on individual achievement and a competitive orientation to interpersonal relationships? Removing the extreme emphasis on individualistic and competitive orientations from imported education systems, retaining the knowledge necessary for any Pacific community to remain viable and internally-controlled, and developing "The Pacific Way" as an effective technique for the transmission of knowledge might be one possible answer to this dilemma.

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