School-Community Relations:
The Principal's Role

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Introduction

Considerable attention has been devoted to the understanding of leadership in school settings. Historically, studies of leadership first concentrated on identifying leadership qualities then shifted to an exploration of various identified leadership styles. More recently the focus has been on the study of leadership styles within specific areas or situations, for example educational leadership in small island states. Evidently, such research is potentially of enormous value, but there has been a narrowing of emphasis towards the role of principals in relation to their subordinates and pupils within a school. There has been a general lack of integrated theory development and model building in terms of the differentiated functional roles of the principal, especially vis-a-vis school-community relations. In this paper, I will briefly examine the socio-economic and political trends within the school community in Fiji and indicate how these influence definition and performance of the principal's role. In particular, I will discuss how an extended professional leadership role of the principal may contribute towards improving school-community relations.

School community relations

"Community" in this paper is defined as that section of the population who have some kind of common interest in what is going on in the school. Watson goes further, and convincingly argues that the term "school community" is appropriate only when there is a two-way school-community

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2 A paper presented at the 7th Regional Conference of CCEA held at the University of Hong Kong on 20 August, 1992.
relationship in which the latter participates to a large degree in schools. School-community relations adopt different styles or stances, including manipulation. In brief, the justifications for establishing good school-community relations are as follows:

(a) the improvement of the overall student-learning;
(b) the use of untapped community resources to enrich school work;
(c) an increase in the sensitivity and relevance of schools to the people they serve;
(d) greater respect of rights of citizens in democratic contexts;
(e) a sharing of responsibility for student behaviour and learning.

However, as Matheson emphasises, the most important argument for school-community relations rests on social considerations which involve the concept of democracy. Participation in itself is a form of education. By taking part in discussion, and by sharing in the process of decision-making on social and educational policies, members of a community learn important social skills and partake meaningfully in significant political processes. In Fiji, contemporary political life does not offer the basic experience of participating in grass-roots democracy. The only form of democracy we have known is a large elective one, devoid of sustained personal involvement for most of the citizens. Community involvement provides the opportunity to put democratic practices into our schools and into the community at large. In the process, we have the chance to enrich the quality of community life.

It is becoming increasingly clear to the schools that the "secret garden" or the "closed academy" era is coming to an end as we progress into a new world of "parent-power". The community education movement is spreading rapidly; parents are pressing for more radical changes in the school government; schools are becoming more accountable; and the present "consumerist
relationship" between the school and the community is being questioned and undermined.

It is argued here that community participation in schooling allows the formulation of school policies and practices which are more responsive and sensitive to the needs of the community they serve. The nature and quality of educational services can also be improved not only for the student, but also for the community members. In so far as students are concerned, they are motivated by parent-interest in their school work. This support is often reflected in higher levels of academic achievement, lower rates of truancy, and reduction in dropping out, vandalism and other problems. Better student-behaviour and attitudes and even better post-secondary education could be achieved. Further, the capacity of the school to understand and solve problems will itself increase if parents are part of the decision-making and problem-solving processes.

The literature on community schooling also suggests that effective school-community relations can also contribute towards the development of individuals from both the school and the community in areas of education, training, job-advancement, personal status and social enhancement. This depends on school resources being accessible and gainfully used by community members.

Development of education in Fiji

Unlike schooling, non-formal and informal educational activities were carried out in villages by older members of the community long before the introduction of education by missionaries in the early 19th century. Several studies have shown some of the ways in which members of the community in the islands ensured that their values, skills, and attitudes were passed on to the next generation.

This type of education (often referred to as traditional) was considered relevant then by the community. Basically, it was concerned with the continuity and maintenance of the community in which adults, as facilitators or teachers, passed on to the young people what they acquired from their elders and through years of experience. Much of this learning took place in
practical situations where learner-participation, discovery learning, learning through inquiry, on the job-training and like approaches prevailed. With observation, imitation, practice and adult facilitation, the younger members of a community developed appropriate skills and the appropriate technologies of the time in various settings. In a similar way, desired attitudes towards the community elders were acquired. Through legends, stories, observation and practice, the younger generation gained knowledge of the regularities underlying various natural phenomena, with which learning they might predict and anticipate natural disasters, the best way of exploiting fishing and hunting seasons, and which were the appropriate periods for planting and gathering food and the like.

A notable feature of this traditional education had been the maximum community participation in education where the community decided "what to learn and how to learn it". Learning was naturally learner-centred, acquired through learner-participation, discovery learning, problem-solving and so on. The knowledge itself was community-based, with the adult members charged with the responsibility of teaching playing a facilitative role.

In his work "Let's Do It Our Way", Joseph Veramu, my colleague in the USP's School of Humanities, describes how he employed some of the participatory approaches in a rural Fijian school and its community setting. In contrast, the present education system in Fiji is still largely dependent on western models, being essentially academic rather than practical in orientation and elitist in content. However, Veramu's work clearly indicated that students taught through participatory approaches achieved higher levels of academic achievement in the Fiji Junior Certificate Examination, an external examination taken after ten years of schooling. Veramu gainfully used 'community talents' and other community resources in schooling. The community in return used the school resources (including teachers) and gained from their participation.

The concept of schooling was introduced to most of the islands in the South Pacific by the Christian missionaries in the early 19th century. The mission schools were primarily concerned with evangelising of the islanders. Wherever they settled, the missionaries translated the Bible into the local languages and their schools taught the local people how to read and write and
understand the scriptures. The missionaries also introduced a kind of "functional literacy" especially in agriculture, house-building and elementary hygiene. Their activities can be seen as an attempt to bring about total societal change, and the schools played an increasingly important role alongside the church in this effort. The islanders were converted to Christianity and were educated to adopt ways of living based on Christian principles. The early schools were conducted in churches or at the residence of the local pastor, who began to assume the teacher's role. Gradually, schools were built and teachers were trained.

This was the beginning of formal education in Fiji - a system of education where the community was excluded from participation in the education of its children. To a large extent, the community responsibility of educating its children was transferred to schools. The pedagogy also changed from learner-centredness to teacher-centredness.

In the early colonial era, the government showed little interest in education. Schooling continued to rest in private hands which included religious organisations and local school communities. The government merely helped the community establish schools by providing common curricula and some teachers. The colonial government-run schools, however, were initially concerned with training of clerks for the public service. Such a perceived training need warranted the teaching of English and Arithmetic with the development of the external curricula held to be essential to meet the requirements of an employment market, but this development was not particularly relevant to the daily lives of the islanders. This became the beginning of a growing divergence between an education that met the requirements of the job market and one which attempted to respond to local needs.

Attracted by the perceived lucrativeness of 'white-collar' employment, community demand for credential-based education increased exponentially. This has led the community further in leaving their children's education to schools and 'experts'. The parents did not see any reason to disturb the teachers while the teachers saw parents as taking up their time unnecessarily. Consequently, a more consumerist-relationship emerged, in which parents paid for the education and demanded the credentials. This was particularly true in
the secondary area where pupils were prepared for British and later New Zealand examinations.

A development strategy rooted in colonialism will emphasise the positive role of education for economic, social and political development, believing that education somehow has the capacity to "unlock the door to modernisation". Formal education was also seen by the providers as a means of inculcating and by the clients as a way of adopting the cultural symbols and values cherished by Western societies.

The divisive colonial policy which allowed the establishment of ethnic-based schools can also be blamed for the erosion of school-community relations. Even in the post-colonial era, Fiji schools have remained ethnic-based and controlled. This colonial legacy of discrimination of one sort or the other continues to exist. Of the gravest concern is the issue of accessibility to education among ethnic groups. There exists a wide racial disparity in educational achievement. To reduce this disparity, the government has introduced a number of "positive discrimination" policies in favour of ethnic Fijians. Little effort has been made, however, to improve the quality of education, which remains foreign in character. In this system of education, where students compete for credentials, community participation in schooling remains marginal, even as ethnic imbalance is unduly emphasised. In these circumstances, the effectiveness of a school tends to be measured by the number of passes it obtains in external examinations, and preparation for examinations becomes the preoccupation of teachers, pupils and parents alike. This "diploma disease" still persists and parents continue to invest in academic education with the hope that it will be conducive to upward social and economic mobility. In these circumstances school is "provider-consumer" to the community rather than its partner.

Unsurprisingly, the expansion of this brand of formal education has been accompanied by a number of serious problems, the important ones of which relate to curriculum, ethnicity, dropout rates, unemployment and the so-called brain drain. The gap between the community and the school has remained large, while community involvement in redressing these problems remains negligible. It is worth mentioning here in passing that this version of schooling successfully "sold" to Fiji and other developing countries has made
them dependent on external aid donors, and has perpetuated pronounced neo-colonial relationships with the West. For example, Dr Tupeni Baba characterises Australian Educational Aid in the Pacific following the Jackson Report as "a policy of selling education on the open markets of Asia and the Pacific". Such aid-driven educational development with strings attached has not succeeded in providing relevant education. However, the entry of the World Bank into the educational scene, with its more "humanitarian" approach, has shamed the policy makers into looking for ways of integrating school and community.

There have been a number of recent developments in Fiji that have had a great impact on schools, and the communities that they serve. Legislative demands for accountability, increased community involvement in education through school committees and parents and ex-student associations, and the abolition of corporal punishment are but a few of the forces that currently seem to be associated with the low morale and job satisfaction of school principals, teachers and the government. Schools, especially in the urban areas, are beginning to be burdened with a multitude of societal pressures, including economic stress, drug abuse, student violence, teenage pregnancies, teacher misconduct, and teacher and student strikes. The high cost of education associated with high school fees and exorbitant book prices, is another problem currently faced by schools and parents. The rights of school managements regarding the choice of principals, growing popularity of teacher-organisations and their demands for worker-participation in decision-making, better educated parents and the changing family organisational structure also have important implications on school-community relations.

Many school principals prefer to internalise these problems in the hope that they will be able to resolve them or that they will somehow disappear before they develop into public controversy. Unfortunately, the problems have not only remained but have also grown beyond the capacities of schools to resolve them. The American experience may be instructive here, in that more and more school principals have found it more productive to keep the public informed, to accept community inputs and thus avoid the misunderstandings and accusations that arise from a concerned but ill-informed school community.
It is also necessary to remember that the current dialogue on decentralisation, which is itself a reaction against the shortcomings of a top-down bureaucracy, is gaining momentum. The thrust of decentralisation is for decision making to return to the level of the grassroots where it can better reflect the needs, attitudes and values of the host community. This emphasis on participative management, shared leadership and decision-making necessitates that principals approach their work with a different "psychological set" than at present. One of the critical requirements is that school principals change from a position of unilateral decision makers and directors to actively working with teachers and community groups to reach decisions in a more facilitative fashion. Once the school begins to function in this manner, it is possible to focus on its relations with the community, its power structures, and the strategies that it employs for maximising control. In this respect, a principal’s leadership is critical in ensuring the success of a school’s relationship with its community because he/she is the key linchpin holding together both systems.

An extended professional leadership role

One clear need in this area is that a principal adopts an extended professional leadership role that will allow accommodation of not only the internal but also the external environment of the school. In other words, with his/her staff, a principal assists and educates the community members, helps them (in a facilitating manner) in their community development and cultural activities, encourages them to take a more active role in their children’s education, draws community talents and other community resources to the school and allows community members to use the school resources and the like. A principal also establishes a more cooperative and supportive functional interaction among the various governmental and non-governmental organisations in the school community. Those like Education, Health and Agriculture, currently operate independently. It seems likely that an integrated approach would yield more benefits to the clients.

Since education is a shared responsibility, the school principal becomes the key presenter of this "corporate image," and thus exercises a more extended professional leadership role. In our developmental, social and cultural setting, a principal and the staff should be willing workers in the community and the western tendency to draw around the school is not appropriate in our
circumstances. In particular, two classes of functions are seen to be fulfilled by a principal as an extended professional leader, and both relate to the internal and external environments of the school. The main need in this regard is to set the stage both at school and in the community for a positive school community relationship.

A principal's task is to prepare the staff for the new expectations concerning community participation in education. The teachers should be fully involved in plans and prospects relating to this endeavour. Not surprisingly, however, there will be fears and a certain amount of resistance, as the concepts are foreign to the experience and training of most staff members. The teacher education institutions in Fiji do not provide specific community education courses in their pre-service and in-service programmes.

Attitudes, too, are notoriously difficult to change. Initiatives in this direction require time and patience on the part of the principal. Informal discussion is probably the best medium for facilitating attitudinal change. If the whole staff participates in decision making and planning, appreciates the potential educational value of community participation in schooling, and approaches the community as a team, then success is possible. With school staff and community opinion leaders, a principal can chalk out the school community interaction strategies, such as reporting progress, organising special occasions for parents, employing community talents in the teaching-learning process, involving parents in school based decision-making, forming parent-teacher organisations, establishing networks of community agencies and such others in advance.

It is also necessary for principals to identify and establish community education programmes. Such programmes, however, should be community-based and needs-oriented. The participants could be fully involved in all aspects of these programmes, while the principal and the staff or others knowledgeable in the neighbourhood function as facilitators. The sustainability of community education programmes is necessary. These are but some of the ways of helping the parents to recognise their potential in education and in national development generally.
The information processing function of the principal and staff is useful in establishing and sustaining healthy school-community relations. Effective performance of this function will allow the school to learn about the amount of support it can expect from the community to achieve its goals. Moreover, the school will be able to learn and perform according to changing contingencies in the environment. As a filter and a facilitator, the principal is able to gather, analyse and act on relevant information, determining both who should get information and how it should be transmitted. In other words, good communication skills are necessary.

The external representation function bears mentioning as well. Under this function, the principal is seen as an entrepreneur-selling the needs, values and goals of the school to the community. On the other hand, a principal allows community expectations, attitudes and values to influence the programmes and practices of the school where appropriate. Another important function of the principal is to mediate and negotiate in order to protect the school's reputation. A principal can help maintain the legitimacy of the school by providing information to community groups. Social legitimacy and school-image are enhanced by generally raising the school's profile and visibility. The school's ability to cope with environmental constraints depends, in part, on the ability of the principal to achieve a compromise between community expectations and available resources. The principal must choose strategies to overcome the constraints or create conditions in which the school's autonomy is rarely challenged.

Summary and conclusion

Recent changes within the Fiji education scene require school principals to develop a more extended professional role. The key feature of this role is to link the school and the community into a cohesive group that works effectively towards the achievement of mutually established goals. School principals' behaviour is critical in ensuring the success of this kind of school-community relationship.

A unique feature of our school community is its multi-ethnic composition. Therefore, initiatives in establishing good school-community relations will result in drawing the members of all ethnic groups to the school. It is by
working together that people of different ethnic groups learn to understand and accept one another. The success of this endeavour depends largely on creating a "welcoming-environment" in schools. Further, the principal and the staff must have the knowledge of the traditions, customs and protocols of our plural society before embarking on this sensitive journey. Effective school-community relations can contribute a lot towards the racial harmony upon which Fiji's future depends.

References

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