

Solomon Island Students' Perceptions of Appropriate Behaviours for Success in Schooling³

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1 Introduction: Culture and Learning in Melanesia

In some traditional Melanesian societies, knowledge is not something which results from an individual's own experiences, but is a commodity which is passed on from one individual to another. Rubinstein (1981) referring to Maloese society (northern Vanuatu) notes that the legitimacy of knowledge was directly related to the standing in the community of the individual imparting the knowledge. Knowledge could be divided, shared and transferred by the most powerful men to their successors.

Traditionally, education is a holistic process, not confined to a narrow range of academic subjects. Kemelfield (1980) reports that in Upe, North Solomons, education was the responsibility of all members of the community and combined basic knowledge, practical skills, and moral training, with an emphasis on interdependence and cooperation. Some knowledge was passed on in a ritualised process which closely parallels formal western schooling. For example, in the Astrolabe Bay area of Madang Province, Papua New Guinea, knowledge related to transcendent and cosmological matters was imparted by authority figures only to certain individuals in a process which was heavily ritualised, removed from everyday village life, and which involved physical and cognitive tests (McLaren, 1975).

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Opinions about the aims of schooling in Melanesia vary. Teachers have viewed education as a means of imparting literacy and vocational skills and of evangelisation, and they have seen themselves as agents of cultural change. Pupils and parents have been motivated by a desire to learn European ways in order to obtain some of the Europeans' apparent wealth through paid employment, or by a desire simply to please or appease mission, plantation or government authorities (Smith, 1973 and McLaren, 1975).

Christie (1985), in a comparison of Aboriginal and Euraustralian children in north Australia, found that Aboriginal children considered conformity, passivity and independence to be suitable behaviours for success in schooling, whereas the Euraustralian children emphasised hard work, trying hard, asking questions and obedience.

The aim of the research reported on in this paper was to study and make some preliminary investigations into Solomon Island students' perceptions of appropriate or desirable behaviours for successful classroom learning, and to determine if there was any difference in these perceptions in students at different levels in the school.

The research was conducted at Goldie College, a National Secondary School in the Western Province, Solomon Islands, during July and August, 1987. At that time, the school had 197 students, all boarders, of whom approximately 88% were Melanesians and 12% Gilbertese. Students were drawn predominantly from the Western Province, although some were from parts of the province which are four or five days' journey by ship from the school. The staff consisted of a headmaster and a deputy headmaster, both of whom were Solomon Islanders, and 13 full time teachers, made up of 6 Solomon Islanders, 4 British, 1 Gilbertese, 1 Papua New Guinean, and 1 Australian. There were also 8 ancillary staff, all of whom were Solomon Islanders.

2 Methodology

Student perceptions of appropriate or desirable behaviours for classroom success were elucidated by means of an admonition test. The admonition test was modelled after Christie (1984: 168-9). Whereas Christie's test student responses were oral and tape recorded, in this study the students were asked

to write a letter to their younger sibling, and the letters were collected for analysis.

The instructions to the students were as follows:

"Write a letter to your younger brother or sister. Pretend that they have already passed their Hicks (i.e. secondary school selection) test and will be coming to Goldie College next year. In your letter tell your brother or sister the important things that he or she should know about high school, so that his or her schooling will be successful. Also tell him or her what important things he or she should do so that he or she will learn a lot."

It was emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers, that it was important to write down what they really thought, their opinions and ideas. Students were told that they could write their letters in any language in which they felt that they could clearly express their ideas. Confidentiality of individuals' responses was emphasised. All instructions and information were given orally in both English and Pijin to Form 1 and Form 3 students, and orally in English to the Form 5 students.

The test was administered to 25 Form 1 students, 19 Form 3 students, and 18 Form 5 students. Of these, responses from 4 Form 1 students were discarded as they had misunderstood the instructions, and one Form 3 response was discarded as no one could be found to translate it. This resulted in a total sample size of 57.

The Form 1 test was conducted in an evening study room after evening study. The novelty of the task brought some giggles and whispers, and some students had trouble doing the task without consulting their neighbours. The Form 3 test was conducted at the same time and these students approached the task with enthusiasm. While most students completed the task by themselves, one or two felt the need to consult others, and they were gently discouraged from doing so. The Form 5 test was conducted at 4 p.m. after their afternoon study session. These students approached the task seriously and with interest.

3 Results

The results of the admonition test are summarised in Tables 1 and 2. For reasons explained in the discussion below, the results have been divided into two sets of admonitions: those pertaining to school life in general and those more particularly applicable to classroom work. Comparison of responses from each of the forms was facilitated by calculating Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (S) for the ranked incidence of responses for each form.

4 Discussion

The first significant point about the results of the admonition test vis-a-vis Christie's (1984) results is that in this study the students interpreted the two parts of the instructions in two different ways, which had been intended to be two ways of saying the same thing. The phrase "the important things he or she should know about high school" was almost always interpreted as referring to behaviours required inside and outside the classroom. On the other hand, the phrase "what important things he or she should do so that he or she will learn a lot", seemed to be interpreted to mean classroom behaviour only. Whereas the school at Milingimbi at which Christie conducted his research is a day school, Goldie College is a boarding school. Thus the students' responses reflected their concern with day to day survival in an initially strange environment, where classroom work only occupies about 8 hours in every day, and it is also necessary to cope adequately with the demands of the other 16 hours.

For the children at Goldie College, being a student involves much more than studying. The separation of the results in Table 1 into two parts shows the prevalence of admonitions which are not applicable solely to the classroom (under the heading "School Life"). These admonitions may constitute urgings to the younger siblings to conform to the "institutionalised expectations" or "hidden curriculum" (phrases used by Christie, 1984: 155) of the school. Alternatively, these admonitions may reflect parental views of the nature of schooling and culturally acceptable ways of behaving towards elders. Obedience, good behaviour, respect, punctuality and attendance at church, are all behaviours which may promote the smooth functioning of the institution

and the maintenance of good relationships, but may or may not promote growth in cognitive ability.

Those admonitions which refer specifically to life in the classroom are grouped in Table 1 under the heading "Study and Learning". Again there is a significant number of admonitions which reflect concern with the hidden curriculum. Some examples are "don't play around", "please your teacher", and "obey and respect your teacher". The desire to please the teacher is not a new one, having been reported as one of the goals of students at Astrolabe Bay in Papua New Guinea (McLaren, 1975, see section 1.2 above).

The admonition to "study hard" (and similar ideas) has the highest incidence in this group of admonitions. However, the students gave few clues as to what this involves. Some specific strategies were suggested, mainly by Form 5 students (see Table 2), about timetabling, keeping up to date, asking for help, listening to explanations, and being self-motivated and having self-discipline. However no references were made to, for example, the importance of "thinking". Some students used the word "concentrate", but solely in the context of "concentrate on your studies and avoid distractions". No reference was made to the use of the library, although personal observation reveals that some students do borrow books from the library which are related to the topics which they are currently studying.

The emphasis on obedience, attendance, and the role of the teacher may suggest that, at least in the lower forms, knowledge is viewed as a commodity which is transmitted from teacher to student, rather than as an entity which can be constructed through personal endeavour and cognition.

Statistical analysis suggested that there is higher correlation between incidence of responses for Forms 1 and 3 ($S = 0.519$) and Forms 3 and 5 ($S = 0.580$) than between Forms 1 and 5 ($S = 0.337$). This suggests that there may be some shift in attitudes to learning during the five years of secondary school. Some particular admonitions which stand out in this regard are "pray for help/guidance", "make a plan/timetable", "use spare time", "do homework/keep up to date", "have an aim/motivate yourself", and "ask the teacher for help". The first of these showed a marked decrease between Form 1 and Form 5 responses, while the others showed marked increases.

In summary, then, this exploratory study shows that students at Goldie College have a holistic view of schooling in which events both inside and outside the classroom contribute to success in schooling. In terms of success inside the classroom, most students recognise as important the need to try hard and take notice of the teacher, although detailed understanding of what it means to "try hard" is not well developed, particularly in younger students.

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Table 1. Incidence of behaviours deemed suitable for success at school

Category	Behaviour	Total Incidence (n = 57)
School life	Obey/follow school rules	42
	Behave properly/have good manners/be good	20
	Avoid bad influences/choose good friends	19
	Attend classes/study	15
	Attend church activities	12
	Warning of expulsion/suspension	11
	Less freedom/not like home, primary school	8
	Be friendly	8
	Pray for help/guidance	7
	Difficulty of school life	6
	Be humble/patient	6
	Be helpful/kind/loving, please others	6
	Respect/obey older students	5
	Be on time	5
	Bring personal requirements/school fees	3
	Listen to advice	2
	Don't use bad words/get angry/tell lies	2
	Be able to speak English	2
	Others	5
	Study and Learning	Work hard/well, do your best, concentrate
Obey/respect the teacher(s)		28
Don't play/be lazy/walk about/waste time		18
Ask teacher for help		13
Use spare time		12
Do homework/keep up to date		9
Listen to/follow advice of the teacher		9
Make a plan/timetable		8
Please/keep the teacher happy		7
Have an aim/motivate yourself		3
Discipline yourself		2
Don't be shy		2
Others		1

Table 2. Incidence of behaviours deemed suitable for success in school, by Form

Category	Behaviour	Incidence		
		F1 (n=21)	F3 (n=18)	F5 (n=18)
School Life	Obey/follow school rules	11	16	15
	Behave properly/have good manners/be good	6	5	9
	Avoid bad influences/choose good friends	5	8	6
	Attend classes/study	2	8	5
	Attend church activities	3	8	1
	Warning of expulsion/suspension	3	6	2
	Less freedom/not like home, primary school	2	2	4
	Be friendly	0	6	2
	Pray for help/guidance	6	0	1
	Difficulty of school life	0	1	5
	Be humble/patient	0	3	3
	Be helpful/kind/loving, please others	2	4	0
	Respect/obey older students	3	2	0
	Be on time	1	3	1
	Bring personal requirements/school fees	1	0	2
	Listen to advice	2	0	0
	Don't use bad words/get angry/tell lies	0	2	0
	Be able to speak English	0	1	1
	Others	2	1	
	Study and Learning	Work hard/well, do your best, concentrate	19	10
Make a plan/timetable		0	1	7
Use spare time		0	4	8
Don't play/be lazy/walk about/waste time		9	4	5
Do homework/keep up to date		1	3	5
Have an aim/motivate yourself		0	1	4
Discipline yourself		0	0	2
Ask teacher for help		1	4	8
Obey/respect the teacher(s)		2	2	3
Listen to/follow advice of the teacher		7	12	9
Please/keep the teacher happy		1	6	2
Don't give up		0	1	0
Don't be shy		0	1	1