

Constraints To Effective Learning and Teaching in an Urban School in Fiji¹

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Introduction

The type of funding for a school and the socio-cultural background of the students are important factors that must be considered in any discussion of the students' rate of success in public examinations. This is the focus of a research project undertaken at the Namoto High School (not its real name), a government-run secondary school in Fiji. This school has, for want of a better term, a "bad reputation", both because of its relatively low pass rate in external examinations and its disciplinary problems. Many of the students come from the lower socio-economic groups in the nearby low-cost housing areas and squatter settlements.

The school's low pass rate was confirmed by a telephone conversation with a Principal Education Officer in the Ministry of Education who told me that it was very low (though the exact figure was confidential) and that the Ministry was quite concerned about this. From my conversations with the Namoto High School (NHS) principal and teachers, I gathered that the main cause of the low pass rate, especially for the indigenous Fijian students who are in the majority, seems to be socio-cultural factors. These include lack of financial and motivational support from the students' families, overcrowded conditions in their homes which are not conducive to study, and a general ambivalence of Fijians towards academic achievement along with a "tomorrow will take care of itself" attitude. However, this analysis seems too simplistic, too one-sided. These are probably factors but not the only ones. From my observations

¹ The research project reported on in this article was undertaken in 1994.

at this school, as well as from conversations with two of the teachers, there seem to be several other factors that contribute to the situation. It is these I shall attempt to analyse in this paper.

The urban/rural factor

Since NHS is a government school, theoretically it should not be under the funding constraints which the schools that are managed by non-governmental organisations are. These rely heavily on fund-raising projects, and hence on community participation for both capital projects and salaries. The fact that NHS is an urban school also, theoretically, gives it an advantage. According to Baba (1979:8), "less experienced and qualified teachers tend to be sent to rural high schools and this may contribute further to the lower quality of rural high schools". Examination results show that, overall, students in urban schools get higher marks than do those in rural schools. The government recognises this quality bias towards urban schools by putting, as the priority in education, the improvement in quality and scope of the rural schools (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning 1993:143).

School facilities

Classrooms

I did not see the facilities of the entire school, but the classrooms I saw were over-crowded, with a large number of students in a relatively small room. This certainly makes it more difficult for teachers and students alike to have meaningful communication. There were also no resource materials in the rooms I saw, neither for teachers nor for students, and the atmosphere was very spartan with no pictures, posters or information of any kind to stimulate the interest and curiosity of the students or to liven up the place. Without statistics on the amount of money spent on this school by the government or on the pass rate in comparison to other schools, I cannot come to any

objective and concrete conclusions, but perhaps more research would reveal if this urban government school shows this urban bias or is an exception.

Library

The library is a large room with large, sturdy tables and chairs. I did not investigate it fully but there were quite a number of books, although they were perhaps geared more for the younger students. There also seemed to be a lack of good reference books and materials that students could use for further research or for their general interest and stimulation. The library is only open one hour a week and the students are not encouraged to take books out for further reading. I was told that often the conditions in the students' homes were not conducive to studying, so perhaps the library could be used as a study room for them.

Textbooks

With rare exceptions, in the classes I observed, students did not have their own textbooks, although these books can be purchased in bookstores. Textbooks were passed out at the beginning of the class and collected again at the end. Students were not trusted to take the books outside the classroom as they would either lose them or sell them (or so I was told). Consequently, all reading was done during class time, in some classes silently and in others out loud on an individual basis; but as one teacher said, at least she was sure they were reading, or being read, the material. This cuts down on the time that could perhaps be better used in meaningful classroom interactions and dialogue, both teacher/student and student/student. Such interaction could improve their verbal communication and also listening comprehension of English, the language of instruction and also a second language for most students. Without the textbooks, it is also quite difficult or even impossible for the students to reread the texts at home for better comprehension and to explore more closely

the way the English language is used – and of course, to study for their exams. To me this seems a major problem, but perhaps there have been changes in this system since I was there.

Ethnicity

In Fiji there seems to be constant attention paid to the “inadequacies” and “deficiencies” of the indigenous Fijians, be it in business enterprises or in educational performance. “Indigenous Fijian students have continued to under-perform, especially in the commercial and science subjects” (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning 1993: 128). Fiji is a racially conscious society: stereotypes and assumptions abound which affect every facet of life. The “Fijian education problem” (referring to indigenous Fijians) has been regularly written and talked about (Whitehead 1986:22). It has been shown that Fijians consistently perform less well than Indo-Fijians in examinations and that the passes by grade (A, B, and C) are lower for Fijians (Tavola 1992:34). What are some of the factors that contribute to this and how relevant are they in NHS?

Motivation

The NHS Principal gave the students’ lack of intrinsic or self-motivation as one of the main reasons for the high failure rate in this school. This year a program was introduced whereby more practical, hands-on projects would be emphasised to interest the students in their courses, and it is hoped that this stimulation will give the students a reason to do better. Teacher #4 thought the parents or guardians did not supply motivation, that they were “not interested in their school work or performance”, and that very few parents/guardians would bother to show up for Parents’ Interview Day. Teacher #3 said the students got little or no support from their families. These teachers implied that, because the students came from lower socio-economic backgrounds, their families did not

appreciate the importance of academic achievement and their homes were not conducive to school work.

Brown (1987:114-7) notes that motivation, a complex internalised drive, is a “catch-all” term for explaining success or failure at the global, situation and task levels. A person can be motivated from within (intrinsically) or from without (extrinsically) and the intensity of motivation is also environmentally and culturally conditioned. It has been said that the Indo-Fijians have higher motivation to succeed in school, which can be attributed to their greater political insecurity, so that education is their main means for upward social mobility. It is also said that the Indo-Fijian parents have made great sacrifices for their children’s education (Whitehead 1986:24). Whitehead further states that “the Fijian society does not emphasise the importance of educational success to the same degree” and that status, especially in the village setting, is not determined by education but by lineage, age and gender, with the consequence that most Fijians grow up thinking that their own personal effort will have little effect on their adult role in their community. It has also been said that Fijians always have their land, their “vanua”, which gives them their security; they can go back to their village and there will always be enough to eat at someone’s home.

Baba (1979: 5-6) reports that motivation appears to be an important factor in the difference in achievement between Fijian and Indo-Fijian students and can perhaps be traced back to low “independence training” in the early life of the Fijians. He also suggests that research in this area should be done to see to what degree this affects performance. Perhaps this research has been done, and, if so, the results might point out ways in which teachers can provide “extrinsic motivation where intrinsic motivation is lacking” (Brown 1987: 115).

Self-esteem

Veramu (1986: 123-4) writes that low self-esteem “seems to be the great plight of Fijian learners”, and that individual consciousness is of less importance than collective consciousness, that cooperative pursuit takes precedence over individual pursuit because of the cultural background of the Fijians. Self-esteem is a personal evaluation of oneself, an attitude of one’s self worth, and is pervasive in all our behaviour. In a study done using the Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory Scale, Indo-Fijians adolescents were found to have more self-esteem than indigenous Fijians, with the difference being statistically highly significant (Kishor 1984:29).

Both motivation and self-esteem can be enhanced by the teacher. They can have a positive influence on “both the linguistic performance and the emotional well-being of the student” (Brown 1987:102). These attitudes are not set in stone and can, to some extent, be modified by interactions in the classroom. In one class I observed, Form 6SC taught by Teacher #4, students divided into groups to discuss the topic of an assignment. The teacher pointed out that whatever they said was not “right or wrong” and the students in the groups were active and talkative, coming up with some interesting and relevant comments. Perhaps this approach could be used more with small groups, enhancing each individual’s input.

Quality

Whitehead (1986:28) believes that the “constant harping” on alleged educational inadequacies creates an adverse psychological climate among the Fijian students and teachers alike. He cites Baba (1979) who suggests looking at the quality of the individual schools, and states that quality is a “significant factor in stimulating educational achievement”. The schools that are lower in quality have a greater drop-out rate for both ethnic groups. The factors that produce educational institutions of high quality should

be researched so the other schools can benefit from their methods.

A very relevant paper was written by Tavola (1992) who showed, by comparing the mean pass rate in a selection of eleven schools from urban, rural and island locations in Fiji, that “race” was not the only issue which determined these pass rates. School Walu on Kadavu Island had the second highest mean rate, next to Ciwa, an urban Suva school, with very high means for both ethnic groups. Walu school had the worst physical facilities of the three schools on Kadavu – spartan buildings and only the most basic equipment. It did not have a science laboratory yet the students scored highest in Basic Science in comparison to the other two schools on that island. This school had strong management, with a principal who was enthusiastic, organised and had strong control of the school. The classrooms were interesting and comfortable, with pictures of diverse subjects on the walls and notice boards with informative readings on them. The teachers were no better qualified than those at other schools, as this school was quite isolated and had difficulty attracting teachers. Ciwa school in Suva had strong management and leadership that encouraged competition which contributed to its outstanding performance. The author concludes that “the almost obsessive theme of racial difference in studies of educational achievement may obscure other areas of concern” (Tavola 1992: 39) and that weak management structure, frequent changes of principal, and pressing financial matters were the main factors that contributed to low exam scores. Race is only one of the many variables, and the overall quality of the school and its staff is at least as significant and should be stressed.

The self-fulfilling prophecy factor

The first thing I was told by the principal on my initial visit to NHS was about the low pass rate of the students, their lack of

motivation, and their disadvantageded backgrounds. The two teachers with whom I had conversations, Teachers #3 and 4, also expressed similar notions. They told me about the home situations of the students, that often there was no place for them to do their school work, and the parents or guardians (many of the students come from rural areas and live with extended family in Suva) just did not care how the students did. Both teachers said the students did not do any reading outside school as there were no books or even newspapers for them to read, and the textbooks stayed within the school. One teacher said that even if they did have reading materials, she did not think they would use them. I felt a lot of frustration and hopelessness from both teachers and the principal.

The Ministry blamed the teachers for the low pass rate, but both teachers said they did not think the teachers were at fault as most of them had been at other schools and had had a high pass rate there. They attributed the problem to the students, to their background and to cultural factors. In other words, the students seem to be stigmatised with these stereotypes from the day they come to this school.

A Fulbright scholar has been observing mainly Form Three classes at NHS and conducting intensive interviews with some students for nearly a year. In a private conversation, she told me the main problem as she saw it was in the negative attitudes of the administration and teachers. Their attitudes were that these students come from poor backgrounds and therefore would not do well in school. She has observed many hours of classroom time and has detected this in the teachers and called it a "self-fulfilling prophecy".

Children of the underprivileged leave school at an earlier age, are low achievers with behavioural problems and find school not relevant to their lives and a bore (Udagama 1981: 8). One of the remedial approaches this author outlines is "professional". "...[A] teacher with appropriate professional behaviour can do much for the

underprivileged child in the classroom” (Udagama 1981:15). A student’s achievements in school are determined to a great extent by what the teacher thinks of that student. If the teacher thinks the student is of low ability, the student will “oblige” the teacher with low achievement. “Teachers are often the alternative significant adult in the lives of these children” (O’Neill 1978:7 cited in Udagama 1981:15) and, as such, need to foster warmth and respect for the personhood of every child, regardless of background and academic ability (Udagama 1981:15). Attitudes are not easy to change; and perhaps the teachers do not realise that they are treating these students differently from students they had in another school. Perhaps this is one of the places where the Ministry of Education can step in: seminars and papers with this topic as a focus could go far in raising the consciousness of the teachers and administration on this issue, with the students, and country as a whole, reaping the benefits.

Teaching methods

The day I observed Form 5A they had an Oral Communication lesson during which a student makes a presentation. The topic for this day was “The Family”. All of the students read their material, several students reading articles directly from newspapers. The teacher told the students they needed to give the reference for an article if they quoted from it, but she did not explain how to do this and I do not think the students understood. There was no class discussion on any of these presentations. Class time was then used by students to copy down a poem from the textbook into their notebooks. The teacher wrote two questions on the blackboard that the students were to answer for the next day about the content of the poem. The teacher gave instructions, the students read something they had copied, the teacher gave more instructions. End of class. This teacher later told me she had done a course in Australia on Teaching English as a Second Language but was finding it difficult at NHS to apply what she had learned. Of course I only observed this class

on one day, but I did not hear any real communication during that lesson.

In the classes where there was teacher/student interaction, much of the talking was done by the teacher, even though it seemed that many of the students were eager to participate. Often, several students would answer a question at the same time, making it difficult to hear any of them and, instead of asking for clarification from a student, the teacher would answer the question herself or go on to something else. The teacher might rebuff a certain student or ignore someone wanting to talk. Kumaravadivelu (1993) reports on two episodes of classroom interaction, one of which had very little negotiated interaction and the teacher's monologue constituted most of the classroom discourse. He attributes this to non-use of certain macro-strategies, especially lack of facilitating real interaction among the participants, the students. Perhaps a reason in this particular instance might be that the teacher did not believe the student had anything of importance to say. The above type of interaction seemed fairly typical in what I observed. During a lot of class time the students were silent, which does not promote communicative competence.

Conclusion

It is easy to be too judgemental of the teachers. They have large classes and a lot of pressure to get these students to pass their external exams. Much of the evaluation of a teacher is on the pass rate of their students and, in this school with its history of low pass rates, there must be added pressure. There certainly is pressure on the students as well, which could cause the better students, or those who want to continue with their schooling, to be over-anxious.

Many factors contribute to the low pass rate of this school, one of them being the fact that there are external exams, but I shall not delve into that subject here as I think this system will not change for some time. Perhaps the students do have low motivation and low self-

esteem, but there are many Fijian students at other schools that do very well. This raises the question of why this school is different. This question needs to be answered. The students at this school are not trusted even to take out library books. This does nothing to add to their self-esteem or independence training. Veramu (1986: 128) quotes Bole, a former Minister of Education:

... 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...

Negative attitudes are reinforced by both teachers and parents and, I believe, if the parents are not concerned, then the onus lies on the teachers and administrative staff and the Ministry of Education. Effective teaching and learning cannot take place in a negative environment, whatever the reasons may be, and I truly hope answers are being sought for the future of these students and the ones that will be at this school in the future.

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